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Generous in defeat

24 March 2024

Epsom & Ewell FC 1-4 Horley Town. Combined Counties League – Premier Division. Saturday 23rd March 2024

A strange contest took place at the Madgwick on Saturday as we hosted Horley Town in our latest League match. We created most of the chances over the ninety minutes, yet didn't take them and our opponents took full advantage of our generosity to win the match 4-1.

We fielded our sixth goalkeeper in just ten matches as Faebian Witter had been injured recently and with former keeper Shay Honey already departed for Staines & Lammas, Dan O'Donovan came in between the posts, although he was advertised as David! It never fails to amaze me how our club continues to get our player names wrong so often and wonder what sort of message this sends out to them. In other changes it was good to see the return of Carl Oblitey up front, as he provides us with a greater attacking threat; something we were sorely lacking at Balham in our last match. At the back, we also saw the return of Reece Tierney and Callum Wilson, although the absence of Ayran Kugathas meant that Nick Wilson had to play in the right back position, although he was restored to the Captain's position once again, while Matt McGillivray moved into midfield. Zach Ingham-Wright and Tijani Eshilokun moved to the bench, although the latter would join the action in the second half.

There was a minute's silence before the match for former Banstead Athletic Chairman Terry Molloy, who passed away this week. Our club had an awkward relationship in our time there as tenants from 1993-2010, so it was a little surprising to see us hold a tribute, particularly when our club elected not to do so for recently departed prolific strikers Gerry O'Rourke and Ben Forey. Not that anyone knew at the time exactly who the silence was for, as it wasn't announced by the club and I had to ask an official.

We opened up fairly brightly and an early Luke Miller ball into the danger area was just ahead of Thompson Adeyemi, before a similar cross from Ethan Nelson-Roberts also just missed the incoming strikers. McGillivray was the first to pull a decent save from George Hyde the long-serving Horley keeper, with a low shot from the edge of the area with Adam Green seeing his own shot deflected for a corner shortly afterwards.

It then came as a bit of a shock when Horley took the lead in the 15th minute with their first real attack. Adeyemi appeared to be brought down in midfield, but play was allowed to continue and a pass forward reached former Salt Lewis Pearch who cut inside Wilson and drilled a low shot beyond O'Donovan from 15 yards.

We almost responded immediately after Oblitey robbed Hyde out wide in the area, although he then chose to go for goal from an extremely narrow angle and was only able to hit the post. We were then denied by an excellent save after Wilson had made progress on the right, sending a shot in from about eight yards that took a wicked deflection off a defender, yet despite Hyde going to his right by this point, he somehow stuck out an arm in the opposite direction to claw the deflected ball away from the goal.

We continued to push forward and Nelson-Roberts sent in a left wing cross that Oblitey headed just wide from around twelve yards out. Moments later Horley midfielder Lewis Taylor found himself in the sin-bin for comments to the referee, but we weren't able to take advantage of the extra man. We had chances during that period though, with Adeyemi somehow getting a Miller delivery stuck under his feet just three yards out and Oblitey striking wide from 15 yards. Jaevon Dyer also struck at goal, but Hyde was equal to it, and to add insult to injury Horley went straight up the other end once they were back to eleven men and scored again with Scott Walker putting the hosts 2-0 up from close range in the 43rd minute.

Hyde tipped an Oblitey piledriver over the bar from twenty yards and the question at the break was how we had managed to go in with a two goal deficit after a decent enough attacking showing in that first half.

However, the second half was a very disappointing one and we appeared to be completely flat, as if we already knew we wouldn't be able to retrieve anything from the position we had found ourselves in. This became apparent to me as early as the 47th minute when Tierney got his foot to the ball before being brought down in the Horley area by Rylan John, yet there wasn't even an appeal for a penalty from an Epsom player. I was questioning my own eyes and even had to check with people around me that I had actually seen the incident correctly and was assured that I had, yet it wasn't until there was a break in play while Tierney received treatment before the question even asked of the referee, who understandably hadn't given anything! If we had appealed for this, maybe the game would have turned in our favour, but of course that is just conjecture on my part!

It was unclear how many matches O'Donovan has played recently, but of course he was a virtual stranger to our defenders, and maybe unimpressed with the standard of defending he had seen to this point, he chose to come out of goal to chase a clearance himself, yet found himself almost 40 yards out from his goal. Fortunately the long range attempt from the visitors went over the bar or it might have proved to be a rather embarrassing afternoon for him! Regrettably he would be picking the ball out of the net shortly anyway as a near post corner was headed past him from close range by Matt Rapson on the hour to make the score 0-3.

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Dyer took advantage of John misjudging the bounce of the ball to break through, but drove his shot wide from 18 yards and he was replaced not long afterwards. Our flying winger was superb last season, but looks to be lacking confidence since he has returned to our club and there appeared to be a lack of belief across the playing ranks as this match petered out. Even when Green sent in a lovely flat free kick which was met by an Adeyemi bullet header just inside the far post from twelve yards to pull a goal back in the 83rd minute, there was little by way of celebration of any kind and the remainder of the match was equally disappointing with Green, Callum Wilson and then substitute Jerry Antwi all receiving yellow cards for lunges at Horley players. Fortunately, none of the challenges were severe enough for red cards, but we then conceded a fourth goal in the sixth minute of injury time despite O'Donovan standing up well to make a good save, but no one reacted to the loose ball that was then knocked in from close range. A 4-1 defeat was only marginally better than our 4-0 defeat there, exactly three months previously.

I believe that our players are good enough to get us out of trouble this season, but we really need to pick up a few more points before we can be assured of safety and aren't playing very well right now. On paper our fixtures are favourable, particularly when compared to those around us, but as we know football isn't played on paper and a home match against a team that started the day just three places above us, should have been enough motivation. Instead, we fell away in the second half again, and whilst we did make a lot of chances in this match, which was a notable improvement on the previous Saturday, we are going to need to take some of these if we are not to get caught by the clubs below us. We now have a ten day break before we reconvene at the Madgwick for the visit of Spelthorne Sports; one of the clubs in the bottom five. We absolutely cannot afford to be flat for that one.

Epsom & Ewell: Dan O'Donovan, Nick Wilson (c), Ethan Nelson-Roberts, Adam Green, Reece Tierney, Callum Wilson, Luke Miller, Matt McGillivray, Carl Oblitey, Thompson Adeyemi, Jaevon Dyer

Subs: Tijani Eshilokun for Oblitey (63), Jerry Antwi for N.Wilson (77), Sirak Negassi for Dyer (77)

Report Source: www.eefconline.co.uk

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