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“Is it promotion you’re looking for?”

23 April 2023

Back to back away victories for Epsom and Ewell FC win 2nd place in the league and home front play-offs for promotion. Richard Lambert reports on both matches:

Chessington & Hook United 1-2 Epsom & Ewell -Southern Combination League – Division One – Thursday 20th April 2023.

For the second match in a row we let a lead slip, but fought back to take all three points with a late winner, this time a close range 83rd minute header from Nick Wilson as we maintained our grip on the top playoff spot with a 2-1 victory over Chessington & Hook United at Chalky Lane.

The win maintained an extremely odd sequence of results between the clubs. At home we have only won one of our last eight matches against Chessington & Hook United, but at Chalky Lane it is a different story as we have only lost once in sixteen visits there! And in the end I felt we were worth the points, although there were times when I worried that it wasn’t going to be our night as we spurned a number of good chances to make the game comfortable.

We made four changes from our win against Selsey with Athan Smith-Joseph rested after tweaking his hamstring on Saturday, while Alex Penfold and Rory Edwards came back into the starting line up at the expense of Steve Springett and Gavin Quintyne. Finally, further forward, Thompson Adeyemi came in for Jaan Stanley as we rotated our squad with one eye on another match coming up at Billingshurst in less than 48 hours.

We got off to a flying start with our first attack down the right wing where Adeyemi sent a low ball across goal and it was swept home clinically at the far post from twelve yards by Lewis Pearch in the 3rd minute to give us an early lead. Adeyemi then saw his shot blocked and also a follow up from Edwards as we tried to double our lead from a corner.

In the 13th minute it was Adeyemi again who tried his luck from twenty yards but found Chessington and Hook keeper Andrew Osei equal to the strike. The home side responded by forcing a couple of corners but we dealt with the deliveries into the box well enough and were soon on the attack again with Jamie Byatt seeing his shot tipped wide by Osei and then Dylan Merchant sending a header back across goal from a deep corner, only to see the ball cleared.

We had an excellent chance in the 41st minute when a defender’s error let Pearch through on the right and his ball across goal was perfect for Adeyemi, but his left foot contact wasn’t as secure as his right and a defender was able to clear the ball away from the goal line. Then Byatt had another try just before half time but his shot was straight at Osei and the last chance of the half also fell to Byatt whose twenty yard strike was far stronger than the one he netted with against Selsey on Saturday, but as a result it just didn’t come down in time, clearing the bar by about three inches!

We should have been further ahead by the half and it is always a concern when chances aren’t taken. Tom Theobald made a good block with his feet after a defensive slip, but we were back on the attack soon and a foul on Jaevon Dyer allowed us to float a free kick into the box, only for Osei to punch clear. The game was starting to get a little niggly, as is so often the case when these two teams meet and just after a bit of a scuffle the home side equalised with a ball in from the right that was collected by Joe Avery who cut inside Gideon Acheampong before firing the ball past Theobald at his near post from ten yards for the equaliser in the 55th minute.

This was ever so disappointing and we would have to go again. But we did. A Dyer run and pass to Wilson was hacked clear by Osei just ahead of our man who was then adjudged to have fouled the keeper. Stanley came on for Adeyemi and as we entered the final quarter of the match Dyer set up Pearch for a similar chance to the one he had scored from earlier, but this time he scuffed his shot wide of the post and then it was Dyer’s chance to miss a good chance after great interplay between Stanley and Byatt had left him in space, but his touch let him down and Osei’s leg was able to dispossess him.

Five minutes later Dyer robbed a defender and broke through on goal, drawing the keeper before flicking the ball on to Byatt, but instead of rolling the ball into the empty net from the edge of the area, he hesitated and a defender closed down the chance which then rebounded into Osei’s arms! We made a couple of substitutions in the 77th minute with Springett and Quintyne entering the fray for Penfold and Byatt before we then had the second multi-player scuffle of the day, following a foul by Johnny Akoto, who was then kicked while on the deck. The refereeing could have been stronger in this match and although a card was issued to both sides here, it looked like the home team maybe ought to have seen red.

However, the main event occurred in the 83rd minute. Stanley was released down the right, although his ball across goal was just ahead of Wilson and just behind Dyer, by now operating on the left wing. He retrieved the ball though and sent a superb deep cross to the back post where Wilson met it with a solid downwards header just a couple of yards out from goal, giving Osei no chance to save it.

We played five minutes over the ninety which was about fair and managed the game well in that period with much of the time being spent near the corner flag and there were large celebrations from the away support and the players when the whistle blew for full time and the points were well deserved, even if we had required the late intervention to get all three of them.

So where does this leave us? Well, barring a seven goal swing in our final matches we will now finish in the top playoff spot, ensuring home matches throughout our participation in them. We are now level on points with second place Dorking Wanderers B whose goal difference is three goals better than ours. It is not impossible to catch them and if we could do that it would be the first time we had finished in the top two since 1984. As it is, third place is our highest finish since 2014 and represents a decent campaign, but concerns remain about our consistency as we approach the real business end of the season. A good showing against Billingshurst on Saturday is important to keep building any momentum before we return to Fetcham Grove to close out our season over hopefully the next two weekends.

Epsom & Ewell: Tom Theobald, Gideon Acheampong, Johnny Akoto, Nick Wilson, Dylan Merchant, Alex Penfold, Jaevon Dyer, Rory Edwards, Jamie Byatt, Thompson Adeyemi, Lewis Pearch

Subs: Jaan Stanley for Adeyemi (65), Steve Springett for Penfold (77), Gavin Quintyne for Byatt (77), Kevin Moreno-Gomez for Dyer (86), George Owusu for Pearch (88)

Billingshurst 1-3 Epsom & Ewell Southern Combination League – Division One – Saturday 22nd April 2023

Cast your mind back to 1984. Lionel Richie was Number 1 with Hello, Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister and our boys had just clinched promotion to the Isthmian League Premier Division with a late 2-1 win at Farnborough Town that secured second place as we waited in the clubhouse for our Secretary to get confirmation of other results on the one phone they had there.

How times have changed, but if you are under the age of 40, you’ll just have to trust me on this one. It was the last time we had finished as high as second place in any division. I’ll be honest, I wasn’t expecting it as I thought Dorking Wanderers B would win at Mile Oak and we would fall just behind them on goal difference, but a late equaliser for the Oak enabled us to pinch the runners-up spot (and presumably individual medals for our boys?) against the odds.

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We made four changes to our starting line up following our win at Chessington & Hook United some 42 hours earlier with Steve Springett coming in at the back for Dylan Merchant who was unavailable. Gavin Quintyne and George Owusu came in for Nick Wilson and Jaevon Dyer who dropped to the bench, while Athan Smith-Joseph who came back in up front ahead of Jamie Byatt. Or so we thought! As it turned out Johnny "Sonic" Akoto was injured in the warm up and so Byatt came back in with Lewis Pearch drawing the short straw and finding himself moving from up front to the right back position with Captain Gideon Acheampong moving over to the left.

But despite the rotations, we scored a goal in the opening ten minutes for the third match in a row. Smith-Joseph got away down the left and fired a cross in. The ball was palmed away by Ollie Courtney but fell kindly to George Owusu who guided his volley over everyone and into the far corner for a smart finish in just the fourth minute.

Unfortunately for the third week in a row we let that early lead slip as the hosts drew level just seven minutes later. Pearch tried to clear the ball under pressure in his unfamiliar position and the ball rebounded kindly for Sam Jobbins who had time to guide the ball beyond the reach of Tom Theobald into the far corner from just inside the penalty area.

We continued to make chances, particularly on the left, although the end product from Smith-Joseph was proving more of a threat to the trees behind the goal instead of the Billingshurst keeper. A Pearch chance deflected wide for a corner and then Owusu found Byatt but he was well marshalled and unable to get a powerful shot away.

We had one scare when a deep free kick was sent into our penalty area and no one took responsibility, leaving Robbie Tambling unmarked to volley the ball goalwards, but fortunately he was unable to keep the ball down and we went in at the half ahead on points, but not on the scoreboard.

We thought we had taken the lead early in the second half when Smith-Joseph's cute through ball found Owusu who netted from a narrow angle, but he was denied by the Assistant's flag. Then at the other end we had danger after Alex Penfold lost the ball, but pulled the striker down to take one for the team. It was an obvious yellow card with Acheampong covering so no further penalty would follow and the free kick was easily gathered by Theobald. Our keeper was active again as he had to dive to his left to keep a powerful shot out and another shot went just wide of our goal as we looked a little wobbly at this stage.

However, we made three substitutions in ten minutes and Dyer then restored our lead within seconds of joining the fray; cutting in from the left and striking a shot at goal which took a deflection off a defender's outstretched leg and looped somewhat harshly over Courtney into the net in the 73rd minute.

We then had another chance when Dyer's initial cross was blocked back out to Smith-Joseph whose ball in to the near post was blazed over the bar by Wilson as the ball bobbled on him just four yards out, but fortunately just a couple of minutes later in the 79th minute we gained some breathing space when Smith-Joseph tried his luck with a strike that Courtney had covered, only for the ball to hit him squarely in the hands and just drop apologetically over the line for our third goal!

The hosts were looking visibly tired by now after matches on Tuesday and Thursday and with Dorking Wanderers leading at this stage, I was aware that two more goals would give us second place even if they held on to win. As it happened though, we wouldn't need them as the Mile Oak result went our way. It was all good, although there were a couple of injury concerns as Springett picked up a broken nose and then in the final minutes Penfold went down having pulled his groin, which threatens to put a premature end to his season. The injury gave Jack Porter a rare run out for the final moments, becoming to my knowledge the first person in club history to take the field with a number 21 shirt!

The result and the late drama elsewhere in our favour was reminiscent of that spring evening in 1984 and may well live as long in the memory. Back then of course, second place guaranteed us automatic promotion, while now we have to win two playoff matches to secure it, but unlike last season we go into these contests with as much momentum as anyone after compiling a run of five matches unbeaten with three straight wins. One of those was a 3-2 victory over Selsey who we now host just two weeks after they last visited and the hope is that we can repeat that victory this coming weekend. To paraphrase Lionel Richie, "is it promotion you're looking for?"

Epsom & Ewell: Tom Theobald, Gideon Acheampong, Lewis Pearch, Rory Edwards, Steve Springett, Alex Penfold, George Owusu, Gavin Quintyne, Jamie Byatt, Thompson Adeyemi, Athan Smith-Joseph

Subs: Jaan Stanley for Adeyemi (62), Nick Wilson for Edwards (72), Jaevon Dyer for Byatt (72), Jack Porter for Penfold (92)

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