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26 February 2025

Epsom and Ewell 0-1 Balham. Southern Combination Cup – Quarter-Final. Tuesday 25th February 2025

So it’s all over! A long and fairly successful 2024/25 cup campaign, covering fourteen matches in total, has now come to an end following our disjointed exit from the Southern Combination Cup at home to relegation threatened Balham by a goal to nil at the KGF on Tuesday evening.

As always, there was plenty of commitment from our boys, but this was arguably our worst cup display of the season as we struggled to put together anything of real danger against a Balham side, fresh from securing a rare League win on Saturday, who battled for everything, won almost every header and in the end could have won by more, as we registered just one decent shot on target in the entire match.

Kevin Kardel returned from injury to reclaim his spot in goal ahead of Sami Nabbad, while Craig Dundas came back into the starting eleven for the injured Callum Wilson from our spirited defeat to AFC Whyteleafe on Saturday, leading to Adam Green taking Wilson’s place in the back four for this match, but it is quite clear that our boys like to play on artificial surfaces and the KGF was the complete opposite! If I’m honest, I didn’t expect the match to pass the afternoon inspection, and whilst play was deemed possible, it was very heavy and cut up quite badly.

We kicked off six minutes late on a chilly evening in front of a crowd counted at 48 and it was the visitors who showed first, sending an early corner straight through our six yard box. They took the lead in the tenth minute from a free kick deep out on the left which was met towards the far post by a solid header that sent the ball back across Kardel and into the far corner of the net. It was an unstoppable header, although it would have been preferable to have actually seen some marking and from their response it was clear that our bench felt the same! But it was still early and there was plenty of time to fight back. Ethan Brazier combined well with Niall Stillwell who set up Ali Fofahan who then saw his shot blocked by a defender and a few minutes later Ethan Nelson-Roberts and Carl Oblitey did well before a delivery went straight across goal. Fofahan reached the ball just inside the touchline before a sliding challenge appeared to take him out, earning his opponent an early yellow card, although, whisper it quietly, but I don’t actually think any contact was made and that was certainly the opinion of some of the other nearby Balham players.

However, we created little and had an escape of our own when a Balham corner was met by a decent half volley that hit the full face of our crossbar and rebounded to safety. It was a niggly, scrappy match that normally suits us, but instead, players were shouting at each other, while our bench also hurled a couple of insults that I can’t print! As we approached the half Brazier pulled down his man as he threatened to break away, earning a yellow card for his challenge and in the third minute of injury time Marlon Galivanes reached a low ball in from the left wing, but Kardel kept the shot out from close range. We went in at the break maybe fortunate to be trailing by just the one goal.

It has been documented here previously that we have only won one match all season from a trailing position, which came way back in August at Phoenix Sports. We also had never beaten Balham in our previous five meetings, so the omens weren’t looking great. Still, Balham’s league position was enough to tell you that we were almost certain to get chances in this second half.

The half started with a foul on Green, or at least, that’s what everyone else thought, while the referee chose to play on. In his defence, he had been trying to keep the play flowing where possible, but he got this one wrong! Then Green popped up at the other end but couldn’t keep his header from a Luke Miller corner on target. As we neared the hour the visitors had another good opportunity; the first shot being blocked by Stefan Aiwone and as they reached the loose ball first, the shot was parried away by Kardel for a corner. There was no denying that our keeper was the busier of the two and when Kionte-Gillfillian-Waul limped off we reverted to a back three in an attempt to get players forward. Ironically our next chance came a few minutes later from Niall Stillwell who had been playing in midfield before moving into the back three. He struck the shot well from just over twenty yards, but it went straight at Theo Lloyd in the Balham goal.

Time was running out and we weren’t helped by an incident in the 85th minute when Miller was harshly pulled up for a foul. His frustrations were understandable, but even after the referee had warned him, he wouldn’t let it go and was sent to the sin-bin for what would prove to be the remainder of the match. During this time Noah Bartram should have scored a second goal as he latched on to a ball over the top, but Kardel again did well to deny him keep our hopes alive. But not for long as the final whistle went after four minutes of injury time to signify our exit from the competition.

Or was it? Rumours abounded at the end of the match that the referee had erred in applying a sin-bin in a competition that didn’t allow it. I have no idea whether this is a fact, as I do not have a copy of the rules to hand, but if this actually is the case, then it’s fair to say that we might have a case for a replay. We’ll no doubt find out soon enough, but in the meantime it is Balham that will visit South Park Reigate in the Semi-Final and it has to be said that they thoroughly deserved the win. They may be seven points adrift in the League, but if they play like this for the rest of the season there is every possibility that they could close the gap on the pack above them and this last few days may well kick start and even define their season.

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For us it was a disappointing way to go out of a cup we must have fancied our chances in; instead all we now face are eleven jeopardy free League matches, starting at Knaphill on Saturday where we have conceded six times on our previous two visits. A performance like this one could see us in serious trouble at Redding Way once again!

Epsom & Ewell: Kevin Kardel, Ethan Brazier, Kionte-Gillfillian-Waul, Adam Green (c), Stefan Aiwone, Niall Stillwell, Luke Miller, Craig Dundas, Carl Oblitey, Ali Fofahan, Ethan Nelson-Roberts

Subs: Conrad Essilfie-Conduah for Fofahan (64), Sean-Michael Anderson for Brazier (64), Jack Torbett for Gillfillian-Waul (74)

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