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Late Seaford rally too late to knock Epsom out

23 September 2024

Epsom and Ewell FC 3-2 Seaford Town FC. Combined Counties League – Premier Division South. Saturday 21st September 2024.

Although ultimately irrelevant, two Seaford Town goals in the 86th and 88th minutes would be the memory of this match that most supporters will have taken as they headed home, which was a pity as this was the most dominant performance I had seen from an Epsom and Ewell team since we returned to Step Five in 2023. We won this F.A. Vase contest by three goals to two in the end, although 5-0 wouldn't have been a score line that the visitors could complain about. When considering that they brought a supporters coach to this match, and that we had around a dozen children in the ground as mascots, together with a number of parents, the attendance of 78 on a hot sunny afternoon was an extremely disappointing one for such a prestigious match.

Two changes were made to our starting eleven after Tuesday's defeat to high-flying Knaphill, with Ethan Nelson-Roberts and fit again Fabio Nunes coming in for Luke Taylor and the absent Sean Anderson. Jason Bloor put in a fine appearance from the bench in that match and may have started here, had he not been on holiday! Taylor dropped to the bench where he was alongside a pair of debutants in Niall Stillwell and Anthony Nazareth. Stillwell spent much of last season at Guildford City, where he stood out despite their disappointing season. He is also my boy's P.E. teacher! Nazareth played for us briefly in pre-season but has now joined after spending time at Cobham. Both would make their debuts later in the match.

We went into this match in fairly good form with three wins from our last four matches, but Seaford Town were top of the Southern Combination Division One and were expected to put up a decent fight, even if their main priority is probably a run at promotion. We also carried a strange statistic into this encounter, as we had not scored in the first half of the twelve competitive matches we had played so far, which equalled a record set way back in 1982, starting with our famous F.A. Trophy match at home to Altrincham and concluding with a 2-1 win at St Albans City in our thirteenth match. What we would give to be playing those sort of teams again!

We nearly consigned that stat to the history books as early as the fourth minute as Nunes set up Carl Oblitey for a good strike from close range, but he sent the ball flying into the car park at the Tolworth end. Adam Green then struck a tapped free kick from Nunes wide from twenty yards. The next chance came when Oblitey did well on the right and his delivery was met by a brave low dive from Nelson-Roberts whose header went just wide.

We were completely dominant at this stage and a Green corner was met by a header from Stefan Aiwone that keeper Wester Young did well to keep out before Nunes sent the loose ball wide from only a few yards out. Young is advancing in years now but was part of the strong Molesey line up that used to play us around fifteen years ago before moving to East Sussex and playing for Hailsham Town against us in recent seasons. Young punched away another good delivery from Green before Oblitey finally got the ball past him from Nelson-Roberts' low left wing delivery, only to see the Assistant's flag raised against him.

Nelson-Roberts then hit the crossbar from twenty yards out with a curling strike from out wide and Oblitey then cushioned a header back for Green to strike at goal, but Young parried the ball away to safety. We were half an hour into the match before the visitors even had a half chance when a deep cross had Dan O'Donovan scrambling and he just clawed the ball away just when it looked like it might drop over him, although was relieved to see the incoming striker send the loose ball way over the bar from not that far out.

Aiwone couldn't get his header on target from a Green corner and Luke Miller was sending in some dangerous deliveries, but it was becoming apparent that we were approaching the half time mark with another blank. Just as I was preparing my half time tweet to the masses, I had to re-write it as Miller's ball in was sliced into the far top corner of his own net by the Seaford Captain Ryan Knight from about eight yards in the 47th minute and there was no time to restart the first half. Technically, we did still set a new club record in terms of 619 minutes without scoring in the first half, even if we didn't quite register that thirteenth consecutive half time duck!

But 1-0 was the least we deserved, and it arguably could have been much more. We had to change things around almost immediately after the restart when Aiwone hurt his knee and had to be replaced by Nazareth in the 48th minute. It didn't stop the flow of traffic though and we extended our lead in the 52nd minute with a superb defence splitting pass from Green that Miller ran onto in the right wing channel. He drew the keeper and struck at goal, only to find a defender had just extended a foot to block the shot, but it fell kindly for him and with Young committed to blocking the previous effort, our tricky winger had the simple job of sliding the ball at an angle into the empty net from eight yards. Miller has now scored thirty-four goals for our club and is one away from joining the club Hall of Fame which shows the top fifty goal scorers in our history and contains some names that regular supporters will know well, like Jamie Byatt, Kyle Hough, Robbie Burns, Daryl Cooper-Smith and Dale Marvell, not to mention the top man himself Tommy Tuite. It is quite an elite group!

Toby Young had a chance from a corner, but the ball hit his back as he jumped and the ball just looped over the bar, before Green saw his strong shot cleared for a corner. Craig Dundas then sent his header wide from that Miller corner as

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we continued to boss the game completely.

We had a scare in the 62nd minute when O'Donovan, who was probably a bit bored by his lack of action to this point, started to make a number of incursions outside his penalty area and from one of these, his headed clearance just went up in the air behind him and Young had to react quickly to head the ball clear of our goal under pressure from a visiting striker.

But this was an isolated foray into our half and we scored a third goal in the 65th minute when a deep Green corner was reached at full stretch by Nelson-Roberts at the far post. His shot struck the foot of Young's left hand post, but rebounded kindly across goal, where Nazareth reacted first to poke the ball over the line from a couple of yards out.

Frustration boiled over for the visitors and Lewis Hallett picked up a yellow card for going straight through the back of Oblitey, although our centre-forward then picked up a card of his own just a few minutes later, although it wasn't clear what for, and even Oblitey seemed perplexed by the decision. Nazareth then sent a header wide as we continued to do most of the work.

However, in the 86th minute the visitors received a lifeline when a long ball out of defence was reached by Josh Wright ahead of O'Donovan who had come a long way out of his goal, leaving their man with the simple job of putting the ball into the empty net. Although it might look as though O'Donovan was at fault here, it is important to question why he felt the need to come so far out of his goal so often in this match. It's worth noting that Dundas had by this time left the field and we just didn't seem to be so organised after that point. Two minutes later, a right wing cross was turned in unmarked at the far post by Matt Holland to make the score 3-2.

We still had chances as a couple of substitutes got involved. Taylor sent a header back across Young, only to see the ball drop inches beyond the Seaford crossbar, while Felipe De Lima was booked for an unconvincing fall just outside the penalty area that the referee correctly saw as simulation. In fact, De Lima was probably a little lucky to stay on the field as he clattered into a visiting player in the 96th minute and could easily have picked up a second yellow card. Although the whistle blew as the Seaford player landed, fortunately it was to signify full time!

So it's now four wins in five matches for our boys and we remain in good form ahead of our League Cup First Round tie at home to Hilltop on Tuesday. It's also good to report that discipline was much better, following the issues from last Tuesday and now we have to focus a little better on concentration for the full ninety minutes, or it may cost us next time. Overall though, this was a strong performance against a team that I thought would push us far more than they did and obviously credit goes to our boys for restricting them as well as we did.

Monday's F.A. Vase First Round draw will be released around lunchtime and, as always, we'll have full details available within minutes of the draw being released on Twitter / X at @EEFCOnline and soon after that at the Epsom and Ewell FC Archive website at: www.eefconline.co.uk That match will take place on Saturday 19th October, unless we are drawn at home, in which case it will probably be the Friday evening as our landlords are at home that day in a League match. That means our next Vase match will take place just one week before the fifty year anniversary of our first ever F.A. Vase match in 1974/75, which ended with an appearance at Wembley Stadium in the first ever Final. Wouldn't it be nice to have a Vase run to match that!

Epsom & Ewell: Dan O'Donovan, Ethan Brazier, Kionte Gillfillian-Waul, Adam Green (c), Toby Young, Stefan Aiwone, Luke Miller, Craig Dundas, Carl Oblitey, Fabio Nunes, Ethan Nelson-Roberts

Subs: Anthony Nazareth for Aiwone (48), Felipe De Lima for Nunes (63), Niall Stillwell for Young (76), Luke Taylor for Dundas (83)

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