



March puts spring in Salt's steps

Epsom & Ewell FC 6-2 Sandhurst Town. Combined Counties League – Premier Division. Saturday 2nd March 2024.

Cast your mind back just four days to our heaviest defeat of the season, when we fell away badly to lose 6-1 at Knaphill. This weekend Sandhurst Town were the visitors and we registered our heaviest win of the season with a 6-2 score line. This was also our first home win of 2024 and for those who like their stats, it was our first home win on this date since 1957 when Uxbridge were defeated 2-0 in a Corinthian League fixture!

In case you were wondering, this sort of thing has happened before. In October 2018 we lost a Vase match 6-1 at Lingfield, only to bounce back in our next match with a 6-0 win at AC London, but it could be argued this was a far more important win.

Having played some very difficult matches recently, I had written previously about how the fixture list was a little kinder to us in March and April, but that doesn't guarantee us anything; we still had to go and get the points, and although we had a very friendly helping hand (or foot!) to see us on our way in this contest, we were good value for the win against a Sandhurst team that never really recovered from their awful start.

With Nick Wilson suspended after an accumulation of yellow cards, Ethan Nelson-Roberts was handed the Captain's armband and Wilson was replaced by Carl Oblitey. The return of the big man up front certainly gave us some added balance, particularly up front, but the star of the show this time was the little man, Luke Miller who had a fine game, although a few others also deserve mentions. We also appeared to learn a lesson from the Knaphill defeat as we pressed more and made it much more difficult for our opponents to play throughout the ninety minutes.

This match was a pivotal one for us and arguably for our Management team, who went into this game with one win and nine defeats from their ten matches in charge, well aware that our Committee have been extremely trigger-happy in the last three seasons. We all needed a change of fortune and in the fourth minute we got some. A harmless looking back pass went straight under the visiting keeper Harry White's foot and he was unable to reach the ball before it crossed the line and nestled in the back of the net to give us a rather fortuitous lead!

Sandhurst were clearly rattled by this and White then had to make a good save to his right to deny Miller before our tricky winger got the ball back after we intercepted it in midfield. He drew White out, only to put his shot wide from the edge of the area. A second goal would really have been a great start, but as it turned out, it was just around the corner anyway. In the tenth minute Thompson Adeyemi set up Miller on the right with a nice pass and he simply squared the ball over for Jaevon Dyer to tap it into the net from three yards. However, it didn't quite work out like that as despite the artificial surface, Dyer somehow got under the ball and spooned it up onto the crossbar! The ball bounced down and then up onto the bar a second time before he was finally able to nod the ball over the line from about an inch, getting bundled into the net with the ball by a defender for his troubles!

From this point the match became more even, with the visitors holding the balance of possession for a while, but not really being allowed to do much with it. A long shot gave Shay Honey some trouble and he parried the ball wide, where he then had to make a second save from an angle from a low shot. Next to feature was Tijani Eshilokun who appeared to be knocked over in an off the ball challenge. The referee had a few words with Callum Wright for Sandhurst, but felt that no card was required, or maybe he felt sorry for Wright who was already being given a proper run around by Miller!

Unfortunately in the 34th minute Sandhurst found a way back into the match with a long shot that appeared to bounce just in front of Honey and although he kept the shot out, he couldn't hold onto the ball and it was knocked back past him from close range to make the score 2-1.

Ayran Kugathas picked up a yellow for us as the visitors threatened to level the scores, but we were still dangerous on the attack and Oblitey set up Miller on the right to strike powerfully at goal, where White made a good block for a corner. Moments later we thought we had a third goal after Eshilokun sent the ball across into the danger area where Oblitey clipped the ball into the net. However, on its way into the net, the ball went close to Dyer who was standing in an offside position according to the Assistant and although he didn't touch the ball, I could understand why the official would think he might have been in the keeper's line of sight, even if I could see from my position that he wasn't! Either way, the referee took his time, consulted with his Assistant and then explained the matter fully to Nelson-Roberts as he disallowed the goal.

Regrettably this wasn't good enough for Eshilokun who remarked about having been cheated before and maybe understandably the referee took this comment to heart, ensuring that our man then had to make his fourth visit of the season to the sin-bin as a



result. This was our team's eleventh dissent offence of the season and remains a concern. I should also point out at this stage that I felt the referee had a really good game and even if this was probably the wrong decision, he communicated with our Captain and explained his reasoning. Quick word to our Committee. The referee will not change his mind, just because one of you shouts out from the sidelines that "we've got it on video". He really won't, so why do we keep using this line that I've heard three or four times over the last two seasons now. It's an embarrassing look for our club!

The half time whistle blew shortly afterwards, but the second half started with a bang! There were just 19 ticks on the clock when a great pass out to Miller was taken in stride and as he left Wright for dead he then sent the ball across the face of goal where Oblitey was waiting to tap the ball in from close range to make it 3-1 to the ten men. Clearly this was unacceptable to the visiting Manager who then made a triple substitution and followed it up with a fourth moments later. This sparked a response and a long shot was cleared off the line by an Epsom defender, but once our "sin-binner" was back on the field we started to get back on top and it was Eshilokun that then applied the tap in finish on the hour after a corner had been half cleared to Oblitey who delivered the ball in from the right.

At 4-1 up you could be forgiven for thinking it might be comfortable from this point, but it had to be remembered that we had been 4-1 up in the return fixture after an hour, only to draw 4-4. This time there would be no such concerns as Oblitey got away on the left and pulled the ball back for Dyer to strike into the far top corner from the edge of the area to make it 5-1 in the 67th minute, grazing White's glove on the way.

The visitors showed a bit of life for a while after this and a long ball was chested down by a striker only for the ball to get away from him and run through to Honey. Then our keeper did well to parry away a free kick that was aiming for the far post. However, they reduced the arrears in the 83rd minute after a long range effort came back off our post and was knocked in by Amari Fushanu from a few yards out, but we produced another excellent goal in the second minute of injury time when both substitute Nick Inwugwu and Eshilokun produced some skilful interplay, including a clever back heel from the former to the latter who then drilled the ball in to the net from six yards, via a defender.

It was a fantastic way to finish the match and whilst these three points were important, the four goal boost to our goal difference could also prove relevant at the end of the season. For what it's worth though, a couple more performances and results like this in our remaining seven matches and we'll be fine anyway!

Epsom & Ewell: Shay Honey, Ayran Kugathas, Ethan Nelson-Roberts (c), Adam Green, Reece Tierney, Callum Wilson, Luke Miller, Thompson Adeyemi, Carl Oblitey, Tijani Eshilokun, Jaevon Dyer

Subs: Zach Wright for Oblitey (74), Nick Inwugwu for Kugathas (75), Matt McGillivray for Wilson (80), Sirak Negassi for Miller (83)

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