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30 April 2023



Epsom and Ewell win 6-5 on penalties. Southern Combination League – Division One Playoff Semi-Final. Saturday 29th April 2023.

Two good saves from Tom Theobald added to some well struck penalties were enough for us to edge past Selsey and into a home playoff final against Wick next Saturday after a goalless ninety minutes at Fetcham Grove was followed by the lottery of a penalty shootout.

On a sunny and thankfully dry day a crowd of just over 200, our largest for many years were present and it was good to see a large contingent of former Epsom players watching the match. Of the ones I saw, from the 80s we had Mark Norman, the 90s Paul Meredith and Jimmy Dack, while from more recent seasons we had Daryl Cooper-Smith and Rob Hendry along with Dale Hanson-Byatt, Louis Chin and Jerry Antwi. In addition both of our former Managers from earlier in the season Anthony Jupp and Liam Giles were also present. We almost had more players on the sideline than we had on the pitch!

It’s only fair to say that it was a very nervous and underwhelming contest at times. The match seemed to follow a regular pattern for much of the game with our boys holding most of the possession but failing to really threaten Syd Davies in the visitors goal. Selsey attacked from time to time, but not with the same frequency and the decision to give Johnny “Sonic” Akoto the job of marking their danger man Shane Brazil out of the game was the main reason the visitors carried so little threat, switching over with Gideon Acheampong whenever he switched wings. In fact, he’s probably still marking him now!

As with most weeks we rotated the squad once again; at the back Sonic and Dylan Merchant came in for Lewis Pearch and Alex Penfold, both of whom dropped to the bench. Nick Wilson came in for Rory Edwards, while Jaevon Dyer also returned to the starting eleven at the expense of George Owusu and Jaan Stanley also started ahead of Thompson Adeyemi. It was a strong looking line-up, but it was also a strong looking bench too and they would be needed as the match went on.

We started brightly with Stanley putting Athan Smith-Joseph through in the seventh minute, but his attempt to score against the same opponents for the fifth successive game was well blocked for a corner. Next to try was Jamie Byatt whose shot was also deflected wide. We won a lot of corners in this match, but we were lacking a bit of height in the penalty area and we very rarely looked like having success from the set pieces against a well-marshalled Selsey defence. In fact we only really had one opportunity when Stanley met a Steve Springett corner with a downwards header that was cleared by a defender standing on the goal line right by the post.

Both Smith-Joseph and Dyer were asking a lot of questions of the visiting full backs, but there was very little in the way of real service for Byatt to take advantage of. To be fair though, we were looking equally solid ourselves and when Akoto broke down the left wing Brazil brought him down, earning the first yellow card of the match, although we would eventually see two issued to each side.

Just after the half hour a lovely crossfield ball was taken in stride by Smith-Joseph, although his attempt to nick the ball over Davies was blocked out for a corner and the closest we came in the half was when Akoto’s deep cross caught everyone out and bounced out for a goal kick off the Selsey crossbar.

The pattern of the first half continued into the second and Dyer sent a header over the bar before Smith-Joseph sent a shot goalwards for Davies to gather. But these were only half-chances really. In the 65th minute we had our first really good opening after Stanley broke down the left and put in a superb cross. Davies had anticipated this and came out of goal to cut out the cross, but it was so good that he was out of the picture, although the incoming Dyer then missed his kick from eight yards with the goal gaping!

Selsey sent a reminder that they were still in this match with a low shot from Rocco Gamblin that went into our side netting, but at this stage it was becoming a question of whether we would score or would have to go to penalties. With just two minutes of normal time we should have rendered penalties redundant as substitute Lewis Pearch beat a man on the right wing before running at goal and pulling the ball back nicely for Smith-Joseph, but he too then missed his kick from just ten yards out! Five minutes of additional time couldn’t separate the teams and so we went straight to penalties.

This was our eleventh shoot out in club history (with just four wins from the previous ten) although it was our first since the Covid affected season of 2020/21 when we had two in three days. This one was to be held at the Leisure Centre end, which caused people a little surprise and led to a number of us having to get to the other end of the ground in rapid time! We went first in the shootout, but it looked like that advantage wouldn’t count for much as Rory Edwards’ kick was saved comfortably by Davies. Fortunately, Dillon North also produced an average penalty and Theobald went to his left and kept it out.

Stanley was the second man up and if I’m honest, his spot kick wasn’t the greatest either. Davies went down to his right to save, which he did, sending the ball flying up into the air. However, it hadn’t finished yet and it came down and spun over the goal line just out of reach of the frustrated keeper! We took full advantage of this piece of fortune and wouldn’t

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let that lead slip. Superb penalties from Gavin Quintyne, who had an excellent game, Kevin Moreno Gomez and Wilson meant that we had scored four of our first five. However, Selsey also scored all of their remaining penalties so we were locked at 4-4 and went to sudden death. At number six Dyer stepped up as the only member of the sixteen players on show to have scored a penalty for us this season and his strike was unstoppable, although this was then answered equally emphatically by Dale Hayes.

Captain Acheampong stepped up to put us 6-5 ahead with a solid penalty, leaving the pressure all on James Henton to follow suit, and in truth his wasn't a bad penalty, straight down the middle, Theobald originally went to his left but reacted brilliantly to stick out a right leg, diverting the ball up onto the bar and away. We were through to the Playoff Final!

In summary, over the course of the match we were the better side and we deserved the win, even if it had to go to penalties before we could achieve it! Our final opponents this season will be Wick, who, like Selsey were beaten twice by us in the regular season and were on the end of a 6-1 hiding at Fetcham Grove back in September. Something tells me this next encounter will be a little closer!

So on Saturday 6th May we will say farewell to Fetcham Grove and hopefully also to Step Six football after five seasons at this level. I know some important chap is getting a crown put on his head the same day and good luck to him, but seriously, where would you rather be next weekend, the Abbey or the Grove?

Epsom & Ewell: Tom Theobald, Gideon Acheampong, Johnny "Sonic" Akoto, Nick Wilson, Steve Springett, Dylan Merchant, Jaevon Dyer, Gavin Quintyne, Jamie Byatt, Jaan Stanley, Athan Smith-Joseph

Subs: Lewis Pearch for Byatt (68), Kevin Moreno-Gomez for Akoto (79), Alex Penfold for Springett (80), Rory Edwards for Penfold (86)

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