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Salts defeated in presence of legend

11 February 2024

AFC Croydon Athletic 5-2 Epsom & EwellFC. Combined Counties League – Premier Division. Saturday 10th February.

Despite scoring seven times in matches against AFC Croydon Athletic this season, we only have three defeats to show for our efforts and without sounding like a broken record, I felt we have been unlucky in all three of them! In this match, and despite the introduction of four new debutants, we gave as good as we got, only to be punished by some clinical finishing that gave the scoreline of 5-2 a hugely flattering look.

Fortunately, from a personal point of view, the disappointment on the field was eased by the presence behind the goal of our Club legend and record goal scorer **Tommy Tuite**, who scored the huge total of 391 goals for our club between 1973 and 1987. How we could do with that sort of loyalty and production right now. His attendance enabled us to talk about the good old days when we were one of the better teams in Surrey and had a ground with a welcoming atmosphere. Those days are sadly gone for now at least.

Our four new starters were Conor Beattie, Alex Green and Mekhi Savage, whose father Reggie would also make his debut later on. However, any chance of us having a father and son combination on the pitch for what would be only the second time in club history would have to wait until next week, as one replaced the other! Some of you may not be aware that a large number of players have departed in the last week, hence the replacements, although it was interesting to note that the opposition Manager stated in the match programme that we had let some players go, which couldn't be further from the truth!

Either way though, the new Management Team were going to have to add some players and Savage and Green look like being useful additions to the squad, while we may have to wait a little longer to analyse Beattie's performance as he injured himself very early in the second half and was unable to continue.

Despite the bare facts that showed AFC Croydon Athletic had won their last four League matches while we had lost our last four, we started confidently and had the early share of possession. Until the fifth minute that is, when Oalekan Osideko broke away on the right and drilled a shot low at goal. Beattie was down to make the save but could only parry it back into the danger area where the Croydon goal machine Louis Theophanous was waiting to drill the shot past our by now horizontal keeper from a few yards out. It didn't seem to dent confidence too much though and Savage Junior struck low from twenty yards, requiring Toby Fisher to turn the shot wide. From the corner Thompson Adeyemi was there first, but was unable to keep the header down.

The home side headed another good chance over, although the offside flag would have cancelled any goal out, and we were back on the attack soon after. Carl Oblitey, playing against one of his former clubs, nearly scored when he was denied by a good block, with the loose ball being sent back in with interest by Green who saw the ball deflected wide. Oblitey then headed just over from the resultant corner. However, fortune was not going to be on our side today and on the half hour mark Osideko's shot was well saved by Beattie, only for the rebound to strike the incoming Nick Wilson, who was only able to clear the ball once it had gone over our goal line. A really unlucky way to concede, although we scored twice last season in similar circumstances. Swings and roundabouts!

Again though we responded well to the set back and within a minute we had a goal back. Ethan Nelson-Roberts fired the ball towards goal, only for his somewhat wayward strike to reach Oblitey, who controlled the ball on the edge of the area and drilled the ball low into Fisher's right hand corner. Savage then produced a good run, only for the final product to be straight at Fisher. As we went in at the half, we were very unfortunate to be 2-1 down.

The half had been in progress for a few seconds when Beattie came out to clear a long ball, but missed his kick and injured his leg in the process, requiring his replacement. Toby Colwell came on and the game continued in a similar style with Green next to have a try after some good pressure, only for his shot to go just beyond the far post from an angle. In response, the hosts struck the bar with a powerful shot from an angle, but we were asking as many of the questions, if not more than our opponents and Sirak Negassi made a good run, only to be fouled just outside the area. Regrettably though, the free kick was cleared and on the break it took two simple passes to cut our whole team out and leave Andre Coker the easiest of tap ins at the far post in the 68th minute.

With that two goal lead the home team began to grow in confidence and seven minutes later they extended their lead with a fantastic strike from Theophanous who volleyed the ball in from thirty yards with Colwell completely unable to do anything about it. Things got worse as it became 5-1 in the final minute of normal time as Theophanous drilled the ball low past Colwell from the edge of the area.

We had time to pull a goal back when substitute Rory Edwards made a good run on the right and his early low cross was guided past Fisher from six yards by Nelson-Roberts in the 94th minute, but it was barely a consolation and the final whistle blew a few minutes later with the home side victorious by five goals to two.

It wasn't all bad though; there were glimmers of hope as we performed fairly well against one of the form teams in the

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League who will surely make the playoffs if they continue to stay fit and healthy, in particular their striker Theophanous who was almost unstoppable. We have brought in some new players, but no defenders yet, and it is fair to say that we are going to need to strengthen in that area if we are to avoid further defeats, even if we manage to score more. Up front Oblitey looks a handful and if only we could have had a young Tuite playing alongside him, we could go into the next matches with more confidence, but up next is the Farnham juggernaut, chasing a world record, and that match looks rather daunting right now.

Epsom & Ewell: Conor Beattie, Ethan Brazier, Ethan Nelson-Roberts, Adam Green, Reece Tierney, Nick Wilson (c), Mekhi Savage, Thompson Adeyemi, Carl Oblitey, Tijani Eshilokun, Sirak Negassi

Subs: Toby Colwell for Beattie (50), Reggie Savage for M.Savage (75), Rory Edwards for Adeyemi (75), Ayran Kugathas for Negassi (83)

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