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Salts open season with FA Cup win

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Epsom & Ewell 2-1 Horsham YMCA. Emirates F.A. Cup – Extra-Preliminary Round. Saturday 5th August 2023.

The James Scott era kicked off on Saturday as we opened up our fifth different ground share at Cobham's Reg Madgwick Stadium with a narrow 2-1 win over Horsham YMCA in what was just the second ever competitive meeting between the clubs.

As is almost always the case with a new Manager, you see some new players on the field. However, today's match also set a club record here as ten players made their debuts. We had nine new faces at the start of the match, equalling the record set in both 1945 and 1982 (if you exclude our first ever match of course!) and a tenth debutant, Sirak Negathas, would join the fray from the bench in the second half to set a new mark.

We have of course spent some time at Step Six in recent years, and as a result this was our first F.A. Cup fixture since losing 3-0 after extra time to Beckenham Town way back in the August of 2018, so it's been a while, but we were fortunate that the game took place at all as a torrential downpour made the new artificial surface waterlogged as the players tried to warm up. It looked like the game would be called off, but the referee chose to wait for a while to see whether conditions would improve and at just around 3.00pm the rain relented. By 3.15 it was clear that the surface was going to be playable shortly and we kicked off at 3.30 on the dot! How nice to see a match official apply a bit of common sense, instead of going by the book, which would have forced us all to congregate there again on the Wednesday!

We finally got going under cloudy and leaden skies, but just like our final friendly on Tuesday against Corinthian Casuals we were a bit slow out of the blocks against a team that had already played two Southern Combination League matches and almost went behind in the third minute after a miscommunication between Zach Powell and our new keeper Harvey Keogh resulting in a back pass that was just creeping inside the post before Keogh recovered to claw the ball away.

Keogh looked like he was going to have a busy day as the visitors threatened again seconds later and he had to make a superb double save; first from a long range strike and then from the follow up from a narrow angle. We hadn't really started and he then had to make a third save to tip a header wide from a Horsham YMCA free kick, all inside the opening ten minutes!

The match was taking place almost exclusively in our half and Keogh had to palm away another shot after one of our defenders Nick Inwugwu had been dispossessed, before the visitors finally took the lead in the 21st minute. A corner wasn't fully cleared by our boys and Sekou Toure swivelled well and struck the ball back across everyone into the far corner from around 18 yards.

It was the least they deserved to this point, but we made some changes to our shape and started to look a little more competitive. Tommy Williams made some progress down the right and set up Jaan Stanley, who laid the ball into the path of Ade Batula, but the side footed strike was a weak one and was straight at Harrison Mott in the YMCA goal. Batula then had another chance from an angle which forced Mott into a more challenging save and from the loose ball Williams sent a deep ball in that was headed away from Ethan Nelson-Roberts at the last second.

Nelson-Roberts then picked up a booking for a reason completely unknown to me and new Club Captain Callum Wilson tried his luck from fully forty yards but the shot dribbled wide of the goal. Just as I was about to send out a half time tweet advising the deficit, we pulled out an equaliser somewhat against the run of play as Batula got away down the left flank, cut in and slotted the ball past Mott from about eight yards in the second minute of injury time with the visiting defence nowhere. This was even more impressive seeing as Batula had just received treatment after being on the wrong end of a solid, crunching but fair challenge from Danny White, following a bit of a hospital pass from Ash Snaddon our Assistant Manager!

In the end we played around five minutes of added time, for this and two other delays caused by injury to visiting players who had to be substituted off and a third YMCA substitution would be required just nine minutes into the second half, leaving them with none left, due to the limit of three in FA Cup ties.

As the second half progressed we found ourselves a little on the defensive and a sliced clearance from Keogh gave the opposition a good chance, but the attack was blocked out excellently by Inwugwu for a corner, although as a result of the challenge he was replaced a couple of minutes later by Ollie Thompson. However, in the 63rd minute we took the lead. Williams made good ground on the right wing and his low ball in was just reached by Tino Carpene who got his toe to the ball ahead of a defensive challenge just inside the box and won the penalty. It can't have looked too clear for others as a couple of people asked for my view on it during and after the match, but I was certain and more importantly, so was the referee!

Stanley stepped up and scored his third penalty in three weeks, but his first official one for the club in the 64th minute to give us a 2-1 advantage that we would not let slip. The visitors pushed for an equaliser but they seemed to have run out of ideas and were restricted to a couple of long range efforts and a shot dragged across goal from twelve yards which really should have hit the target. We rarely looked in danger and might even have made it 3-1 after a great run down the right from substitute Negathas which ended with a pull back for Stanley, but he sent the chance just over the bar from ten yards out.

Fortunately the miss didn't cost us and after nearly nine minutes of injury time the final whistle confirmed the victory which now gives us a home tie against Step Four Met Police in the Preliminary Round. It wasn't the greatest of starts, but we grew into what became quite an enjoyable match and I'm just grateful that the game was played, even if it was the final tie to complete on this FA Cup Saturday!

Epsom & Ewell: Harvey Keogh, Tommy Williams, Ethan Nelson-Roberts, Zach Powell, Nick Inwugwu, Callum Wilson ©, Ade Batula, Ash Snaddon, Jaan Stanley, Chester Clothier, Tino Carpene

Subs: Ollie Thompson for Inwugwu (61), Rory Edwards for Snaddon (78), Sirak Negathas for Carpene (88)

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