

Shaky start to season for Epsom and Ewell

Sandhurst Town 4-1 Epsom and Ewell. Combined Counties League – Premier Division South. Tuesday 20th August 2024.

We crashed to a 4-1 defeat in our latest League match at Sandhurst Town on Tuesday evening at Bottom Meadow in front of 86 spectators on a chillier than anticipated August evening.

Let's get one thing straight here though. We did not deserve to lose this match, particularly by such a heavy margin. In fact, some of our passing was the best I've seen all season. However, we didn't help ourselves either by failing to take chances and then by collecting a couple of sin-bins that really hurt us, just when we looked like we were about to take control of this contest.

We made four changes following our F.A. Cup loss to Hayes and Yeading United (who now travel to Margate in the next round by the way). Faebian Witter was absent and replaced by Dan O'Donovan, while Ethan Brazier replaced the suspended Toby Young. Further forward, Kenny Antony and Axel Kodjo dropped to the bench, with their places taken by Adam Green following his suspension and debutant Ali Fofahan, who started out on the left wing.

We made a bright start and Ethan Nelson-Roberts, making his fiftieth appearance for the Salts, was just over the bar with an early strike, before a Green corner led to a shot from Fabian Nunes that was dragged wide from the edge of the area. We had a scare at the other end after the Sandhurst right winger got past Nelson-Roberts and O'Donovan too, but could only find the side netting with his shot. They then attacked down the left and Shane Qoloni got past Ethan Brazier, only to then go down after a collision, with the referee deciding to award a penalty. We've seen them given before, and no doubt will do again, but it was definitely in the soft category. Regrettably, Elliott Miles then dispatched the penalty in the 24th minute, although O'Donovan did manage to get something on the shot on its way in.

This was harsh. We had been doing most of the work to this point and we nearly equalised on the half hour when a Nelson-Roberts cross caused panic in the Sandhurst penalty area and Luke Miller and then Fofahan saw their shots blocked by defenders in quick succession. Our next corner was met at the far post by Callum Wilson, but his header back towards goal took a touch off a defender and fell kindly for the keeper to fall onto.

By this time Fabian Nunes had been replaced after suffering a groin injury, but his replacement Felipe de Lima had only been on for about a quarter of an hour when his ill-advised back pass was intercepted by Tshin Kumuaru who ran in and beat O'Donovan with a clinical strike in the 39th minute. Nelson-Roberts then had to be alert to block a shot for a corner as did Stefan Aiwone on the other side of the goal as Sandhurst threatened a third goal before the half which fortunately did not come.

At half time it was hard to comprehend how we could be behind, although to this point we hadn't forced the keeper into a save, so we could hardly complain just because the other side had taken their chances. Fortunately, we got a goal back quickly and it was Craig Dundas who got on the end of a Green free kick to knock the ball in from eight yards for his first goal for our club, just six minutes into the second period. Both myself and a supporter next to me were certain that it had been knocked in by Dundas's hand, but no one complained and the referee seemed happy too, so we were back at 2-1 with a long time left to play.

And play we did. We took the game to Sandhurst for a while with wave after wave of attacks. Corner after corner followed as we pushed for an equaliser and it seemed like a matter of time before we would be level. Dundas set up Kendall with a great tackle, but our striker shot straight at the home keeper from just inside the penalty area, while moments later De Lima missed a good opportunity to head at goal from another Green free kick, but in the 65th minute Wilson said something to the referee and was promptly sin-binned in the 65th minute. In that moment all of our momentum was lost.

The pattern of the match changed and we stopped creating opportunities, while the home side tried to take advantage of the extra man and a cross was well cut out by O'Donovan before Nelson-Roberts was adjudged to have brought his man down in the corner of the penalty area. It was a long way away from us, so it was hard to see whether this one was equally soft. Strangely, even with their first penalty taker still on the field, their number 16 chose to take this one in the 77th minute and O'Donovan produced a good low save to his right to keep the ball out, and although the loose ball was turned in by another player, he was deemed to have encroached and the free kick went our way. Wilson returned to the field of play and maybe we could start to press again.

Not this time though. We let the ball go out of play carelessly and from a throw in, allowed to be taken further up the field than it should have been, the home side broke away and Maurice Black smashed the ball past O'Donovan just two minutes after the penalty to make it 3-1. Things got worse a few minutes later when Nelson-Roberts was sin-binned too and as the wheels came off the ten man cart, O'Donovan was alert to make a good save from a one on one situation as we parted at the back. Debutant



substitute Joel Onu had a smart shot on the turn in the 90th minute that was well saved, but from the keeper's clearance they broke straight through and whilst O'Donovan again did well to keep the first shot out, he could do nothing about the loose ball which was fired in from close range to leave the final score looking extremely harsh.

As it turned out, Spelthorne's 5-0 loss at Cobham ensured that we actually climbed a place in the League table after this defeat, but this was a harsh loss to take. We played really well at times, and yes, a couple of rather odd refereeing decisions didn't help us, but there were still self-inflicted incidents that let us down and we really need to learn that being reduced to ten men for a throwaway comment is such a severe penalty that it must be avoided at all costs. I am absolutely certain that we would have scored an equaliser in this match had we kept eleven men on the field midway through the second half and may well have gone on to win from there, but the harsh reality is three matches, three defeats, two red cards and two sin-bins. We need to keep working harder, but also work smarter too, if we are to avoid another serious relegation battle.

Epsom & Ewell: Dan O'Donovan, Ethan Brazier, Ethan Nelson-Roberts, Stefan Aiwone, Callum Wilson, Craig Dundas, Luke Miller, Adam Green (c), Will Kendall, Fabio Nunes, Ali Fofahan

Subs: Felipe de Lima for Nunes (25), Joel Onu for Brazier (78)

Report Source: www.eefconline.co.uk