

Spirit and chaos in equal measure

Balham 2-2 Epsom and Ewell FC. Combined Counties League – Premier Division South. Wednesday 2nd October 2024.

We secured a 2-2 draw against lowly placed Balham on Wednesday evening after coming from behind twice with a pair of goals from Captain Adam Green. This result was more notable when you realise that we played with ten men from the 27th minute.

Our club somewhat naively advertised this match as “thrilling” even before it took place, in some rather strange, almost desperate attempt to get supporters to come and watch, but they were coming anyway and 81 were present, many of which had made the journey over to Tooting & Mitcham United’s Imperial Fields, where Balham currently ground share, to watch this contest on a pitch that had dealt comfortably with all the recent rain and a match just twenty four hours previously.

However, this match was definitely not “thrilling”. It was intriguing and even eventful at times with plenty of cards issued to both teams, but it was also bitty, stop-start, niggly and lacking in quality as a clearly low on confidence “home” team were given the one man advantage and took the lead twice, but couldn’t hold on in either case, and over the ninety minutes, I felt that we were the better team and would have won this match, had we retained a full complement of players.

This match was our second consecutive away League match played at the same venue, following our win over Tooting & Mitcham United three weeks previously, which was only the ninth time that this has happened in club history, and the first since 1998. We only made one change with David Romer keeping his place after he had come on for Reece Tierney midway through the second half of Saturday’s match against Horley Town. Tierney was on the bench but would not be involved in this contest.

An early Green free kick was punched away by John Ross in the Balham goal before our opponents sent an early volley over our crossbar that they probably should have scored. However, on the quarter hour mark we did the same after Ethan Nelson-Roberts set up Anthony Nazareth but he blazed over from just ten yards with just the keeper to beat.

The game took a serious turn in the 27th minute when Fabian Nunes won a free kick in the middle of the park, but despite having won this he inexplicably chose to kick out at his opponent in front of the referee, who had no choice but to issue the red card. This will keep him out for the next three matches from next Monday, meaning he will be ineligible for both the League Cup tie and our F.A. Vase tie in addition to the League match against Fleet Town on Saturday week.

Eventually the free kick was taken and although Nelson-Roberts was somewhat harshly pulled up for a foul, it’s still worth reporting as his header produced a world class save from Ross, who somehow guided the downward header back up and over the bar despite being on the ground. A truly incredible save, even if the goal wouldn’t have counted. Ross wouldn’t have known that at the time.

Inevitably, Balham were then spurred on by the present of the extra man and a long range strike from an angle by Idir Kermoud was tipped away from the top corner by Dan O’Donovan. The corner was half cleared, only for Carl Oblitey to concede a foul out wide and from this in the 36th minute, the delivery to the near post was headed powerfully past our keeper by Maxwell Emmery from just ten yards out to give them the lead.

Things looked grim at this point. Balham had only one League win all season and that had come way back on opening day 10th August against the other team in the bottom two in Spelthorne Sports. Fortunately, and maybe crucially, we were back on terms soon after. There was a coming together between Rayjon Moore for Balham and our own Ethan Brazier, both of whom picked up yellow cards, but from the long O’Donovan free kick, Oblitey headed the ball on and a defender missed his clearance, leaving Green through and he slotted the ball with his weaker left foot beyond the exposed Ross into the far corner from just eight yards out in the 39th minute.

Romer held a player back and picked up a yellow card just before the break and we nearly started the second half with a bang as Luke Miller broke through with just thirty seconds on the clock, but from 18 yards out he guided his shot about a foot wide of the Balham keeper’s left hand post. Balham then seized on this to grab the lead once again in the 52nd minute and whilst Moore was the scorer, this goal came about mostly as a result of a superb free kick from the Balham Captain Luke Hedges, who curled the ball towards the top corner from twenty yards, striking the underside of the crossbar and leaving Moore the simplest of jobs to tap the ball across the line from a few feet out with O’Donovan still on the ground. Some marking would have been nice, but it’s the old adage of following the ball in, because you never know if the ball will come back to you!

Again though, the home side weren’t able to hold on for long and just ten minutes after conceding, we were level. Nelson-Roberts did well, while positioned out on the right wing for a change and his pinpoint cross was headed in from close range by Green who



outjumped his defender and gave Ross no chance.

The remaining half an hour contained very little to write about, although Hedges picked up a pair of yellow cards in quick succession to reduce Balham to ten men in the final minute of normal time. Ross made another fine save to keep our substitute Jason Bloor out with an outstretched leg in the closing minutes after another substitute Ali Fofahan had set him up, and in the final seconds of the match an O'Donovan free kick from the half way line was met by the head of Green just six yards out but unchallenged, although Ross was down well to prevent our Captain claiming a hat trick.

And maybe we would have deserved the win too. Make no mistake, if Balham continue at this rate, they will go down. An indication of their ambition came after the final whistle when Ross commented to some supporters standing near to us that "at least we didn't lose". I'm not sure how they expect to escape the drop if they are unable to take three points from one of the teams in the bottom half, when they are at home, leading twice and with a player advantage!

From our perspective, we showed plenty of work rate and the draw moved us up to twelfth place, which equals the best position we have been in the League since the opening day of last season. We have now lost just one match in our last eight and this was also the first point we had ever gained against Balham who had beaten us in all four previous meetings. However, discipline needs to be improved amid a flurry of cards late in the match, that if I counted correctly, will leave both clubs on a charge of failing to control their players, with the obligatory heavy Surrey FA fine. For sure the referee appeared to lose a some control of the game, but the players weren't helping him and the game became quite attritional.

Sometimes "attritional" is a good thing. Our players certainly needed to battle across every inch of the field, having lost the man so early and we showed lots of spirit in fighting back to equalise twice. However, in that final half hour the football suffered as a result at a time when I felt Balham were there for the taking. Our next two encounters against the high-flying Redhill and Fleet Town will give us a better idea of where our final position in the table will be, but based on this match, and whilst more points are obviously required still, there are currently no dangers of relegation for our boys, even if it was only a point claimed on the night.

Epsom & Ewell: Dan O'Donovan, Ethan Brazier, Kionte Gillfillian-Waul, Adam Green (c), David Romer, Anthony Nazareth, Luke Miller, Craig Dundas, Carl Oblitey, Fabio Nunes, Ethan Nelson-Roberts

Subs: Ali Fofahan for Oblitey (82), Jason Bloor for Nelson-Roberts (86)

Report Source: www.eefconline.co.uk