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# Things can only get better.....?

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Epsom and Ewell 0-5 Guildford City. Combined Counties League – Premier Division South. Saturday 10th August 2024. On Tuesday our club acclaimed a “great” performance in defeating Step Four Phoenix Sports; a club that faced severe budget cuts and a new Manager who started eleven new players against us in the first tie, and who will surely struggle this season at that level. I wrote at the time that it had been a solid performance but nothing more. Fast forward four days and I was proven right as we threw in a shocker to open our League season as Guildford City; one of the few teams to finish below us last season, handed us a five goal lesson at King George’s Field and provided a reminder that no club in this League will give us anything unless we earn it in every single game.

We were missing Carl Oblitey, Callum Wilson and Craig Dundas from Tuesday’s win, with Kenny Antony coming back in to the starting line up and at the back Reece Tierney made his first start of the season, alongside new signing Axel Kodjo. Just 93 were present, despite the sunshine, to witness this display which was probably just as well! It was also disappointing to note that our club have now increased adult prices to £9 and as a result we now charge as much as anyone in this division and more than most, which I wish they had been open and honest about, instead of sneaking it under the radar and hoping no one would notice. When considering our finishing position of 16th last season, it’s hard to see the justification for this increase at a time when they should be trying to attract supporters. A lazy “double-issue” programme priced at £2.50 didn’t help either. In fifteen years as programme editor, I only ever did that over Bank Holidays when printers were closed and can confirm from much experience in this area that the excuses provided within the programme for doing this were bogus. If our new Editor wants some help or advice, he only has to drop me a line.

We had an opening warning as early as the sixth minute when Manny Acheampong was left in a lot of space on the right, requiring Faebian Witter to make a really good low save to deny him from only twelve yards. However, we didn’t heed the warning and five minutes later they worked their way down the left, dragging our players across and leaving Darnell Jon-Peter with an easy finish when the ball was sent over to him on the right.

This was frustrating, but there was plenty of time left to rectify matters if we could improve, and to be fair things did get better for a while. Luke Miller combined well with Thompson Adeyemi to set up Antony, only for our striker to miss his kick completely from the edge of the area. Antony redeemed himself by hitting the target with his next effort after some really clever skill from Ethan Nelson-Roberts, but visiting keeper Jacob Terry made a good block at the near post. Then Miller sent in a good delivery that was flicked on and punched out off a defender for a corner, from which the ball was half cleared to Will Kendall at an angle and on the edge of the area, but his powerful strike cleared the bar by about a foot.

It was looking as though we were quite likely to get back into this match, but in the 34th minute the game took a fatal turn as a cross in from the left was met with a close range header that Adam Green did really well to tip over the bar. The only problem was that Green was not our keeper and his inevitable red card, followed by Jake Brown’s penalty conversion, left us in a mess. Some might say that his actions were instinctive and I’d agree with that if he were our keeper! In fact, I’d say it was a worthwhile thing to do, had we been defending a narrow lead towards the end of the game, but at 1-0 down, the handball was inexcusable. Green will also now have to serve a one match suspension, which I believe will be our next F.A. Cup tie on Saturday.

In difficult situations like this, you often find out how your players will react, but nothing really happened by way attacking threat, with our only chance coming in the third minute of first half injury time when a great pass from Nelson-Roberts was chested down by Miller and he was through on goal from a slight angle, but Terry stood firm between the City posts and Miller uncharacteristically put his shot into the side netting from ten yards. Had it gone in, maybe it would have given us a chance of second half redemption, but instead we went in completely deflated.

Our Manager understandably made changes at the interval with Carlos Polo-Infante and Stefan Aiwone (called Hiwone by the club) coming on for Antony and Thompson Adeyemi respectively, but the visitors came out in confident mood against the ten men and extended their lead in the 50th minute with a strike that was at least twenty-five yards out and swerved viciously away from Witter who had no chance as it flew into the top corner. Even their keeper Terry said “he’ll never score another one like that again!” It was a wonderful strike, and nine minutes later there was another one of high quality, as Malachi Cole made it 4-0 when we were caught cold by a short free kick; the Guildford man cutting back and striking across Witter into the far corner from a narrow angle. It clearly wasn’t going to be our day today!

Things got worse still in the 67th minute after we again failed to react to a deep free kick to the far post that was put back across by Tobi Falodi with Young being unable to clear the ball off the line before it had crossed. However, the visitors X feed advised this as an own goal, so clearly it wasn’t quite as straightforward as I described. Either way though it was 0-5.

With fifteen minutes remaining Polo-Infante sent in a good cross from the right that was met by a bullet header from Kendall from just inside the penalty area that Terry reacted superbly to tip over the bar. This was a superb passage of football from both teams and we then saw Young’s header from the subsequent corner aim goalwards, only to hit

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teammate and debutant substitute Sean Omoigiade-Agun and rebound to safety!

Witter made two more good saves and we finished with nine men after Tierney suffered a head injury and had to leave the field in the 85th minute. Although the visitors then hit the post with a low shot in the 92nd minute, they were unable to breach our defences again and the referee helped us out here by only playing four minutes of injury time, despite there being closer to ten minutes expected in my opinion.

So what positives can we take from this defeat? As you might expect, not many. Witter did as well as he could and from where I was, I don't believe he could have done any more with the goals. Kendall provided a threat on occasions, but the whole task was rendered impossible after Green's unnecessary red card. With very difficult looking home matches coming up against Jersey Bulls and Hayes & Yeading United in the next seven days, it will take a monumentally better performance than this one if we are to get anything out of either of those contests. If we do, then they truly will be "great" performances.

Epsom & Ewell: Faebian Witter, Toby Young, Reece Tierney, Adam Green ©, Axel Kodjo, Fabio Nunes, Luke Miller, Thompson Adeyemi, Will Kendall, Kenny Antony, Ethan Nelson-Roberts

Subs: Carlos Polo-Infante for Antony (HT), Stefan Aiwone for Adeyemi (HT), Sean Omoigiade-Agun for Nelson-Roberts (62), Sirak Negassi for Miller (70)

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