

Sunday 24th July 2005

Risden Wood Pre-Season Tournament (Group D) Match at the U.G. Sports Ground, Harlow

EDMONTON ROVERS	1	VENTEGA SPORTS	1	HT 0-1
<i>S.Cokell (54 mins.)</i>		<i>Matt Richardson (17 mins.)</i>		

EDMONTON ROVERS LINE-UP (with Marks out of 10): Darryl JOHNSON (GK) (6); Colin BESTER (6), Terry MOORE (6½), Paul WOOLSTON (7), Ritchie COPUES (6); Laurence HUGHES ! (6), Tony SPELLER (6½), Stuart DORWARD (6½), Eric IBEKWEM (6); Conor McGOVERN (6½), Steve COKELL (6½) **Subs.:** None

VENTEGA SPORTS' LINE-UP: No Team Details

Referee: Warren HARVEY **Weather Conditions:** Cool with light rain **Attendance:** 12

Report (by Laurence Hughes): In the knowledge that we needed to win this match by a convincing scoreline to have any chance of staying in the Tournament, we named a squad of 20 quality First Team-standard players at the start of the week with only promising new defender Chris Akinrele declaring himself unavailable. That should have seen us easily cope with the inevitable withdrawal of maybe two or three players from that squad during the week, as happened for our first match against Europa the week before, but instead we had no less than eleven players drop out and ended up with just a bare eleven, including 46-year-old Secretary Laurence Hughes and Reserve Team player Ritchie Copues, who was only coming along to watch (and act as Club Linesman) initially.

It all started with Simon Jackson, Andrew Warmerdam, Derek Dorward, Chris 'Nugget' Beeden and John Beasley all dropping out in midweek due to work, family & social commitments, then Paul Ellerker dropped out on Friday because he had still not found his missing dog. That still left us with 14 good players though, so nobody else was called up at that stage, but then the real problems began late on Saturday when Nick Vertigans, Gary Cokell, Chris Morrish and Ant Roberts all declared themselves unavailable, leaving us down to just 10 (not including myself and Ritchie). With numerous Reserve Team players having advised us that they would play at short notice if we phoned/texted them on a Saturday night (or even first thing on a Sunday morning), we therefore tried that on Saturday evening with five of them, but all of them either said it was 'too short notice' and in some cases didn't even bother to phone/text back...no doubt because some of them wanted to watch Spurs beat Lyon 3-1 in the Peace Cup Final Live on Eurosport on Sunday morning rather than play in what they assumed would be 90-degree heat again !? To top it all off, we then had Vernon 'Kizza' Nxumalo send a text message on Sunday morning at 9.15.a.m. saying that he was at Stratford Station and had run out of petrol (again !) and which train would he have to catch to get to where we were playing 'at Chigwell !'. I then advised him that we were actually playing in *Harlow* for this match and that he would have to get a tube or bus to Liverpool Street and then a train from there to Harlow Mill, which was then a full mile and a half walk to the ground...and that was if any trains were actually running to Harlow Mill on a Sunday, which they probably weren't knowing 'Kizza's luck so far this season. Obviously that meant he would not have arrived at the venue until Half-Time at the earliest, so that left us down to nine...hence myself and Ritchie having to play to make it a bare eleven, and Steve Cokell being denied yet another chance to find out exactly who 'Kizza' is and play alongside him in attack ! Undoubtedly this whole 'debacle' was yet another case of players thinking to themselves that it wouldn't matter too much if they dropped out because we had plenty of other players available to take their place...only everybody else was thinking exactly the same thing !

Of course the weather was ideal this time to enable any unfit players (like myself) to last a full match (if that was what some of them were worried about after their 'social commitments' the night before), although the constant rain on a bone-hard and bumpy pitch made it extremely difficult for anyone to control the ball properly, and with the pitch being very tight and narrow, it really favoured our opponents Ventega Sports, who were all fit and fast youngsters who gave us very little time on the ball and relished the 'chance' to use the slippery conditions to slide into dangerous, late and illegal 'man and ball' challenges at every opportunity with scant regard for the fact that most of our players work in 'important highly-paid jobs in City financial institutions' and cannot afford to take time off at home wearing a plaster cast instead !?

Referee Warren Harvey did book a couple of their players for the ridiculous amounts of dissent they were giving when penalised for such obvious fouls, but he seemed a bit lenient compared to referees we are used to in the Mercury Waltham Sunday League...as if all matches in the Harlow

Sunday League involve players kicking the crap out of each other ? In fact it was probably a good job that all eleven of our players in this match were those who were sensible enough to keep their heads, as the likes of Dan George, Paul Rebairo and Scott Robertson (to name but a few, and who were all asked to play) would definitely have steamed into silly challenges themselves because of the playing surface and it probably would have all 'gone off' if they had been there to take part. In fairness though, Ventega Sports, who finished near the top of Division Three in the Harlow League last season, did have some reasonable players and were quite well-organised, and they took the lead after 17 minutes when a quick break out of defence ended with a good cross and header with us outnumbered at the back. However, they had lost their first Tournament match 7-1 the previous week to Ridsen Wood's First Team, and it was clear that we could have also notched up a scoreline like that if we had fielded a full-strength First Team ourselves, as Ventega were a similar side to most of those our Reserves had to play against in Division Four of the Mercury Waltham Sunday League last season.

Instead, after finding ourselves 1-0 down at Half-Time in an evenly-contested First Half, we firstly had to rely on keeping things tight at the back, which we did with the help of myself dropping in as more of a right wing-back to make it a back five (because Ventega were playing 4-3-3), while the vastly experienced Terry Moore had a predictably solid debut in the centre of defence alongside the even more experienced Paul Woolston. With our first-choice front two of Conor McGovern and Steve Cokell in tandem and skipper Stuart Dorward playing an attacking midfield role, it therefore meant that we were more than capable of scoring, even if all three of them had little support and had to work openings for themselves...which they managed to do on numerous occasions. However, we were only able to take one of at least six clear-cut chances, with Steve Cokell scoring in the 54th minute with a good shot into the bottom corner from the edge of the area after some good battling for the ball.

Ventega also got into some good positions as the game became really stretched with both sides needing to win to stay in the Tournament, but most of their chances were shots from outside the area which Darryl Johnson did not have to dive for.

We therefore had to settle for a 1-1 draw in the end, and our only chance of progressing in the Tournament now is for us to beat Ridsen Wood's First Team and for Europa to fail to beat Ventega Sports. It would then go down to goal difference, but even then, it is unlikely that we would be one of the three best second-placed teams from the five groups, this being the qualification criteria.

Although some of our players stated afterwards that they would be glad not to play any more games in this Tournament if all the Harlow-based teams were as physical as Ventega Sports, it would still be a waste of a chance to see what new players are like and to get others match-fit if we do not progress through to the Quarter-Finals and beyond...that's if they bother to put themselves out and play in Pre-Season instead of doing 'other things' on a Sunday. There is already a danger that more players will leave if we continue to field weakened sides such as this, and those who didn't want to/'couldn't' play in this match really need to make a decision whether they really want to play Sunday football at all. Playing for us 'if they are not doing anything else' is just not good enough.

[Click Here to visit Ventega Sports' website.](#)