

Sunday 1st December 2002

Mercury Waltham Sunday League Senior Cup, Second Round Match at Town Mead, Waltham Abbey

ASTRAL UNITED **4** **EDMONTON ROVERS** **0** HT 2-0

Humphries (5 (pen.), 66 mins.),
Bacon (27 mins.),
Dean (85 mins)

Astral United's Line-Up Dave PENN (GK); Andy LATHAM, Richard BARNES, James VIRGO, Adam BECKWITH; Warren HAWKES, Jamie BAMFORD, Dean BARNETT, Justin DEAN; Matt BACON, Scott HUMPHRIES **Subs.:** Lee SIMMONDS, Shondell HOLMES

Edmonton Rovers Line-Up (with Marks out of 10): Shaun O'NEILL (GK) (7); Chidi IBEKWEM (6), Paul WOOLSTON (6½), Tony SPELLER (6), Steve BEASLEY (6); Derek DORWARD (6), Stuart DORWARD (6), Chris 'Nugget' BEEDEN (6), Marco ELLERKER (6), John BEASLEY (6); Conor McGOVERN (6) **Subs:** Steve COKELL (6), Eric IBEKWEM (6), Lee OSBORN (6)

Referee: Trevor IRVING

Weather Conditions: Constant Rain (Heavy at times)

Attendance: 14

Report: Coming into this match we knew that mid-table Division One side Astral United had a big advantage over us in that they had been playing every week for the past month or so whereas we had only played *once* in the last *six* weeks. However, we didn't expect to end up on the receiving end of a scoreline such as this, especially as we had beaten Astral 6-0 in our last meeting (in Division One last season). Of course Astral had a much stronger side out on this occasion with no sign of 'Buster Bloodvessel' playing up front for them *this* time, but then we were fielding more or less a full-strength side ourselves with only long-term injury victim Robin Pryke missing from Manager Trevor Hughes's probable first-choice starting line-up, so we were confident of gaining a reasonably comfortable victory.

Unfortunately though, the atrocious weather was a hindrance to us once again (as it has been virtually all season), but it was so wet on *this* occasion that we almost had the rare sight of a League referee deeming a pitch to be unplayable at Town Mead (a ground that *never* gets called off by a Council groundsman...in stark contrast to what goes on at Hazelwood Sports Ground) ! In fact Mr. Irving had already appeared to have made a decision to call the game off before he realised that the players of both sides had already got changed and were just running onto the pitch as he was walking off it ! He therefore soon changed his mind and allowed the game to go ahead after quite a few heated protests and in the end it proved to be the right decision as the ball only really started sticking in the mud in the last 10 or 15 minutes...by which time the game was already dead thanks to our own inadequacies at dealing with such conditions.

The nightmare started for us as early as the 5th minute though, when John Beasley instinctively stuck out a hand to stop a through ball going into our six yard box...even though it was heading straight into Shaun O'Neill's arms anyway (according to our cold, wet & half-injured Linesman Trevor Hughes...whose glasses needed a pair of windscreen wipers at the time). Astral skipper Scott Humphries then sensibly despatched the resulting penalty low and hard into the bottom corner to put his side ahead, but we shrugged that off and played reasonably well for most of the First Half, creating several good chances which were either brilliantly saved by keeper Dave Penn or scuffed straight at him...invariably by Conor McGovern, who was continuing where he left off about a month ago ! However, Astral then went and punished us again in the 27th minute when Humphries easily got past our stand-in right-back Chidi Ibekwem to set up forward Matt Bacon for an easy tap-in to make it 2-0. Thankfully, Shaun O'Neill then saved us from further embarrassment before Half-Time with one or two vital saves, but the increasing arguments *on* the pitch became even louder during the break as we had to have a rare 'major inquest' to try and sort things out.

Unfortunately though, it didn't make a lot of difference and if anything we played even worse once the Second Half started with far too many players panicking and pushing forward at the same time (leaving big gaps at the back), while virtually every attempt at a cross just ended up giving keeper Penn some simple catching practice. Astral though, really made their crosses count, none more so than in the 66th minute when left-winger Justin Dean made at least four of our players look like they were treading water (which they probably were quite literally at that stage thanks to a torrential downpour) before producing a perfect ball to the far post for Scott Humphries to score his second and Astral's third with a simple header.

That really killed off the game, despite all three of our substitutes coming on for the last 20 minutes or so to add some 'fresh ?' legs to the proceedings. In fact, although we had two or three good chances after that in which Astral really rode their luck, in general the last quarter of the game was extremely depressing for us as Astral (perhaps not surprisingly) proved to be much fitter and stronger and defended much better as a unit, forcing us into futile attempts to play one-two's through the middle of the pitch in an effort to get through them...which was by now virtually impossible because the ball just kept sticking in the mud. That left us vulnerable to quick counter-attacks whenever that happened and Justin Dean ended up punishing us again in the 85th minute with an easy finish to make it 4-0 as he found himself clean through on goal with three unmarked colleagues beside him and only Lee Osborn being fit enough to chase back (because he had just come on as a substitute !).

After that it was just a case of several of our players pleading with the referee to blow the Final Whistle early to put them out of their misery, which was rather embarrassing really. As usual when a supposedly better and obviously more skilful team (i.e. us !) ends up losing on a muddy pitch, the shout of 'They want it more than us, don't they ?' was heard coming from our players, but the amount of 'bollocking' and arguing going on amongst our players throughout the match showed that they *did* care about the result and *were* trying their best, but they were just too unfit and/or 'technically rusty' (because of a lack of match practice) to do anything about it, and although most of our players *did* make mistakes tactically, the main cause of our defeat was undoubtedly the weather...both during this match and in the three weeks before it !