

Sunday 4th May 2003

Mercury Waltham Sunday League Premier Division Match at Enfield Playing Fields (Pitch 16)

EDMONTON ROVERS	1	SPORTING	4	HT 1-2
<i>C.Beeden (32 mins.),</i>		<i>Moore (6 mins.), Awofedeju (38 mins.), Fraser (66 mins.), Smith (80 mins.)</i>		

Edmonton Rovers Line-Up (with Marks out of 10): Darryl JOHNSON (GK) (6); Steve BEASLEY (5), Tony SPELLER (5½), Robin PRYKE (6), Eric IBEKWEM (6½); Derek DORWARD (5½), Marco ELLERKER (6), Paul ELLERKER (5), Chris 'Nugget' BEEDEN (6½), Peter SUTTON (6); Steve COKELL (5½) **Subs.:** Lexton HARRISON (6)

Sporting's Line-Up: Paul MITCHELL (GK); Brian HAWTHORNE, Jean-Luc DaSILVA, Richard DILL, Mason RANDERWALLA; Chris Mc,NEILL, Alex BENJAMIN, Michael MOORE, Mark FRASER; Robert AWOFEDEJU, Jermaine SMITH **Subs.:** John DILL, Russell Mc, PHERSON

Referee: Nishan DEGNARAIN **Weather Conditions:** Gale-Force Wind, Sunny **Attendance:** 16

Report: Throughout our club history (and certainly since we joined the Mercury Waltham Sunday League back in 1988) we have invariably messed things up 'big-time' whenever we have played a match that would result in our players picking up medals of some sort if we won, whether it be on the very rare occasions that we reached a Cup Semi-Final (1996 was the *last* time...when we lost 5-0 to Wormley Rovers !) or just by winning a game to clinch a Divisional Runners-Up spot...as was the case on *this* occasion !

Perhaps we could have guessed it was not going to be our day when referee Nishan Degnarain attempted to pump up our £50.00 Nike Match Ball 'like a rock' before the kick-off and inadvertently snapped the needle off inside it, the ball then rapidly deflating to the extent that it was only in a fit condition for 'Bumble', 'Tyson' and 'Henry' (*pronounced the French way !*) to play with...these being the respective dogs of Derek Dorward, Lexton Harrison (a Pit-Bull Terrier ?) and Manager Trevor Hughes (some sort of French Poodle ?) who had been brought along to yap their support for us in competition with about five other dogs brought along by Cheshunt (Sunday)'s numerous noisy female supporters for their own crucial Division Four match on the next pitch. With some scaffolding being brought along to film the game from the touchline as well (so that I didn't have to keep shouting 'Oi, out the way' non-stop), it was therefore ridiculously crowded on the sidelines with there being only a two-yard gap between the pitches and the conditions for watching the game were made even more uncomfortable by a fierce gale-force wind blowing across the ground which brought back memories of another nightmare performance at the same venue back in 1997 when we lost 4-0 to Walton Athletic in a similar situation in our Division Two days.

Of course we had come into this match boasting a 12-game unbeaten record in the Premier Division and assuming that Sporting would turn up with only 9 men or even not at *all* judging by the reports we had received from *other* clubs who had played (and thrashed) them recently. However, after reading that 'Big Match Preview' on this website, Sporting decided to show us that they *can* be a well-organised and bone-fide Premier Division side when they *want* to be (as indeed they showed against us back in February when we were lucky to scrape a 2-1 win against them, while they then went on to beat Brimsdown Rovers the *following* week). That saw them really fired up from the start and they caught us cold after just six minutes when nippy forward Jermaine Smith sent over a perfectly-drilled cross to the far post for midfielder Michael Moore to head them in front. Sporting then also had a couple of other chances early on, but the wind blew the ball away at the last minute for at least one of them and certainly did us a favour defensively, even if it was making our usual passing game virtually impossible. However, we were given a fortunate lifeline in the 32nd minute when referee Degnarain harshly penalised Sporting midfielder Alex Benjamin for handball in the area even though the ball was blasted at him from about a yard, Chris 'Nugget' Beeden eventually making it 1-1 from the rebound after his poor attempt at the spot-kick was blocked by the ample stomach of keeper Paul Mitchell. In fact we should have been awarded another penalty just a minute later when Peter Sutton was clearly brought down in the box by defender Brian Hawthorne, but Referee Degnarain waved play on for that one and it turned out to be more or less our last clear-cut chance of the match ! That was because Sporting were so much quicker, sharper and fitter all round as the strain of playing Upshire Coach & Horses just four days earlier and then having a 7-a-side League match the evening after started taking it's toll on some of our players, many of whom were having to play through niggling injuries...although Lee Osborn's decision to celebrate his birthday by having a 'Club Outing' to Newmarket for the Races the day before this match didn't help either, especially as most of our intended substitutes (and supporters) for this match were still in bed asleep as a result, including Osborn himself. It was therefore no real surprise when Sporting went 2-1 up in the 38th minute, although the *manner* of the goal was certainly unusual for *us* as our zonal marking from a corner failed for once to allow Robert Awofedeju to somehow bundle the ball in at the near post with Darryl Johnson's claims that he had his shirt pulled in the confusion being waved aside by referee Degnarain.

However, although our First Half performance was bad, our Second Half display was a lot worse and was almost a throwback to the bad old days of the early-90's with defenders looking extremely leaden-footed (even though the worst culprit Steve Beasley had come off at Half-Time due to a knee injury) while even midfielders of the quality of Marco Ellerker and Chris 'Nugget' Beeden were unable to string more than two passes together and were frequently being caught in possession or guilty of slicing/over-hitting the ball out of play because of the wind and the constant pressure they were being put under by Sporting's comparatively 'super-fit' players. Despite forward Lexton Harrison coming on at Half-Time and Manager Trevor Hughes switching to a 4-4-2 formation though (with Paul Ellerker moving to right-back), we failed to really test keeper Mitchell at all as Steve Cokell and Derek Dorward in particular were guilty of some woeful shooting from reasonable positions, although that was invariably because they were being challenged so quickly by Sporting's fired-up defenders that they didn't have time to steady themselves. In fact stand-in left-back Eric Ibekwem was the only one of our players to do himself justice in this match, probably because he was keen to do well against his old club, but even *he* couldn't stop Sporting increasing their lead in the 66th minute when Mark Fraser fired in a low shot through a crowd of players from the edge of the area following another corner to make it 3-1 and we were then really killed off in the 80th minute when Jermaine Smith capitalised on a bad mistake by the seriously out-of-sorts Paul Ellerker to make it 4-1. The last 10 minutes were then really embarrassing for us as we just totally gave up when, with no other substitutes being available, Tony Speller limped off to leave us down to 10 men and that could easily have seen Sporting score two or three more if they hadn't over-elaborated so much in front of goal, this being the first time that the continued absence of key players such as Stuart Dorward, Paul Woolston, Conor Mc,Govern & John Beasley (amongst others) had really been a factor. Meanwhile, on the next pitch., Cheshunt (Sunday) were romping to a 5-0 win over P.T. Rangers in *their* Division Four Runners-Up decider and *their* supporters (and dogs) were going 'bonkers' (as Kenneth Wolstenholme once said) on the touchline right next to us, which made us feel even worse !

To round a bad day off, we then found out that third-placed Brimsdown Rovers would 'definitely' be awarded the point they needed to leap-frog above us and finish in second place thanks to League Referees' Secretary Len Wilcock (a Brimsdown Rovers F.C. member) 'forgetting' to give them a referee for their last game of the season at Home to Champions Percival (which was supposed to have been played at the same time as this particular match and will now have to be written off as a 0-0 draw !). However, whether there was any 'skulduggery' going on there or not, we didn't deserve to finish as Premier Division Runners-Up on the basis of *this* performance anyway, while we were also lucky to get the three points from our 6-6 draw with Rangers, so maybe we can't complain too much and a third-place finish is still an excellent achievement in our first season at the highest level and certainly more than we expected at the beginning of the campaign. In fact there was even relief amongst some players that they would *not* now be 'forced' into paying £22.50 each for a League Presentation Dinner/Dance ticket in order to receive their Runners-Up medals !

Despite this demoralising defeat though, it was great to see virtually every player down the pub after the match (including Robin Pryke !), so the team spirit is excellent and there is no doubt that we are capable of progressing even further next season.