

Heartbreak for Harefield

Contributed by Gareth Coates
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Ashford Town (Middlesex)6Harefield United2After Extra Time. Score at 90mins: 2-2FA Youth Cup 1st Qualifying Round, Short Lane Stadium

24th September 2008This was a remarkable evening in which a young and hard-working Harefield United side played a full part before the hosts superior fitness and renewed confidence saw them pull away to win in extra time. However, as they had in the previous round, Ashford missed a hatful of chances and had it not been for a wonder goal by Jimmy Stanford, it would have been the Hares who advanced to the next round.

With Manager Mick Snowden sunning himself, Coach Ben Murray led the side out, while First Team Manager Mark Butler was in the crowd. Harefield made the short journey from the other side of Heathrow Airport in a coach which was packed with officials and supporters and set about preventing their hosts from playing. Their well-organised and high tempo football ensured that the two sides initially cancelled each other out and there was no goalmouth action to speak off in the first quarter of the match. However, a Stanford corner almost led to an Ashford goal in the 22nd minute, which in turn led to a strong spell in which George Baldock and Stanford both forced visiting 'keeper Matthew Charman into saves, while a thunderous Guy Hollis strike ht he post from at least 25 yards.

Ashford ended the first half strongly, but failed to test Charman as both Stanford and Baldock fired wide twice, ensuring that the first half ended goalless.

The Tangerines started the second half strongly and George Jennings hit a 25 yard shot just wide before the opening goal arrived in the 54th minute. George Jennings sent in a cross from the left side, and while Charman did make two good saves as the ball bounced around the penalty area, he was powerless to prevent Adam Fearn from finding the net. On the hour, a Jennings run and shot fizzed over the crossbar, but Harefield rallied and Jordon Haynes found Sam Cooke, whose shot took a deflection as it rattled the crossbar.

In the 65th minute, the Hares were level in controversial circumstances. With an Ashford player injured on the ground, an ambiguous signal from referee Ian Skull caused the home side to believe play had been stopped. It hadn't. United declined to put the ball out of play (in marked contrast to Ashford's behaviour later in the match) and the unmarked Cooke raced through to round Ashford 'keeper Dane Buss and score. Ashford immediately replaced George Baldock with Dwayne Lowe-Simms.

The goal gave the visitors fresh impetus and the game returned to the evenly balanced contest it had been in the early stages, but the home side looked more threatening up front. Adam Fearn shot wide from a Stanford cross, while Stanford fired over from 25 yards.

With seven minutes to go, the Tangerines were made to pay for their profligate finishing when Harefield took the lead. The Hares had a slice of luck, as Tristan Ward's shot took a massive deflection off one of his team-mates then looped into the net.

Ashford immediate forced a corner, which was well defended by the impressive Bolanki Salawo and substitute Daryl Loates - on for Jennings - fired in a good cross which Ashford could not capitalise upon. In the second minute of stoppage time, with Ashford pouring forward desperately, Jimmy Stanford ran at the defence before curling a high strike beyond Charman from fully 30 yards. It was a stunning goal, with even the Hon. Sec. seen leaping into the air in celebration. Meanwhile your correspondent's efforts to jump like a demented Jack-In-The-Box while retaining control of his notepad were less than successful!

Harefield had been about a minute from victory and now needed to regroup. It proved a task beyond their very young side as Ashford took full advantage of their late lifeline. Three minutes into extra time, a bullet header from Guy Hollis put Ashford 3-2 ahead. The visitors had played only two league matches - two weeks apart - and as they slipped behind, the adrenaline on which they had been running ebbed away. Ashford looked fitter and more fluent, although the next goal had an element of fortune about it as Daryl Loates lobbed Charman with what was surely meant as a cross in the 98th minute. Three minutes after that, Tom Betts ran at the visiting defence before finishing tidily. Ashford had several chances to add to their tally as the first period of extra time drew to a close, but the visiting goalkeeper remained in impressive form.

Betts was replaced by Byron Watkins at half-time in extra time, but it was another substitute, Loates, who had the next chance, in the 108th minute. As he burst into the penalty area, the Ashford winger was fouled. Shrugging off the challenge, Loates continued his run and attempted to round Charman, who brought him down. Referee Skull saw no penalty, which was in keeping with an inconsistent performance.

Ashford continued to push forward, although the final goal of the evening came in the 113th minute, when Stanford blasted home from 15 yards. To their credit, Harefield continued to play football and had two late chances to pull a goal

back, although neither was on target.

Ashford's reward for this nerve-shredding win is a home tie with Fisher Athletic on the 8th October. The Ash Trees have ridden their luck so far, but remain in the competition, which is all anyone can ask of them.