

View from the bench: Part 1

Southgate v Brooklands, 13 September 2014

So in a blink of an eye all the fun of last year, the hard work on Saturday mornings and a decent pre-season are all but memories and the league hockey is with us again.

First a look back

Pre-season had seen the first team take on EG, Bromley and Beckenham, Old Loughts, Hampstead & Westminster and finally Canterbury. The early games ended in defeat but showed promise, the OL's game suffered for lighting issues but against H&W and Canterbury the signs were very positive with a victory against Kwan Browne's Canterbury the perfect way to lead us into the league matches.

England Hockey had seen fit to bring the opening weekend forward this year which caused what can be described as "selection issues" with only 18 of the 30 registered (or almost registered) players available. Not that this concerned those within the 1st team setup as we were all confident the 16 man match day squad had all the necessary attributes to face down the challenge of Brooklands away. The Southgate squad therefore had a new look about it compared to the end of last season with new joiners Allan Dick and Danny Sisson joined by 16 year old Duncan Scott as our debutants. Nick Page, Nils Lloyd-Penny, Jonty Robinson and Mike Penny all made their Premier league debuts (apologies if there were others!) and Dave "Jive Turkey" Wilson was given the honour of wearing the captain's armband.

The weekend started with a long drive to a Travelodge off the M6 where Joe Sterlini took charge in organising rooms and breakfast, helpfully emailing everyone photos of his preferred breakfast option. After a quiet night and a (half) decent breakfast at the Little Chef we departed on the second leg of the journey to Brooklands. It was very nice for Deeside Ramblers HC to wave us off and in particular their player/coach ex Southgate player Ali G seemed overjoyed to be briefly reunited with former Landlord Jim Wallington – rumour has it that he is still showing as resident at Jim's gaffe on the EH website.

So on to Brooklands...

We arrived in the midst of a late summer heat-wave and initial forays onto the pitch confirmed that we would be playing on the Brooklands beach with the tide way out. There are plans for a new water based facility at Brooklands but not until next summer at the earliest and let's just say it is a tricky surface to play on and not conducive to top level hockey.

The game started badly for Southgate with the pitch causing chaos for the back 4 leading to significant pressure and a string of opportunities for Brooklands. Penalty corners are Brooklands biggest threat and they had ample opportunity to practice during this period scoring early (4 minutes in) and threatening regularly. Allan Dick may have been wondering what he had let himself in for as time and again he had to come to Southgate's rescue. This herculean effort from our GK seemed to bolster our players and after the initial "dodgy" spell we grew in confidence, got to terms with the pitch and started to find the time and space to play our game.

Now something you must realise from here on in is that the “view from the bench” gets a little hazy during the heat of battle and so what happens next may be in the wrong order and also be factually incorrect.

So 1 goal down and after a very shaky opening period we started to play ourselves into the game and on 9 minutes up steps the man of the moment Andrew Westbrook (fresh from first class rail travel, boutique hotel stay and journey to the pitch in an E Type Jag). The goal was classic Westbrook – maximum of 2 yards out and possibly involved a comment to the Brooklands GK as he let the ball roll underneath his foot to allow Andrew to “rifle” it home. A visible lift for the players and we continued to drag ourselves back into the game as Brooklands deflated.

Half time came and went and the game continued in a similar vein but with Southgate playing a more robust game breaking with greater pace and making great connections through the phases of attack. Nick Page had a perfectly good goal disallowed as the umpire had not seen the last touch of the ball and Duncan Scott had a shot on the turn well saved by the GK. And still we pressed, defending with great heart and working for each other all over the pitch. Finally our second goal came (it may have been on 40 minutes and not the 70minutes as reported) George Scott the scorer – you will have to ask him about the details I simply cannot remember. For the next 30 minutes (or possibly 30 seconds depending on when the goal was actually scored) the team played with hearts on their sleeves and gave everything to ensure the win. Elation followed on the final whistle – a fabulous team effort and one that all players could be rightly proud of.

The team came together, applauded the supporters, regrouped for refreshments and voted Allan Dick the MoM for his outstanding work impersonating Chris Hibbert in goal, honourable mention goes to Duncan Scott in second place! With the post-match formalities duly dispensed with we started the long journey home with a smile and 3 points in the pocket.

I leave you with the words of Joe Sterlini who at 10.45pm on Saturday night sent the below text message to his teammates.

No co e. Not wider he it. Z

Priceless.