
Canterbury City 0 – 2 Cray Valley (Paper Mills)

Location Salters Lane, Faversham, Kent ME13 8ND

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CANTERBURY CITY 0-2 CRAY VALLEY (PAPER MILLS)
Southern Counties East Football League Premier Division
Saturday 27 April 2019
Stephen McCartney reports from Salters Lane

CRAY VALLEY (Paper Mills) manager Kevin Watson says he has achieved the objective that he was set at the start of the season by winning the Southern Counties East Football League Premier Division title.

The Millers only reached the summit after thrashing basement side Croydon 5-0 at home and Corinthian slipped up in a 2-0 defeat at third-placed Fisher last Monday and they sealed promotion into the Isthmian (Bostik) League by collecting 91 points from 38 games, finishing a point clear of Corinthian in what was an enthralling title race.



Cray Valley celebrate winning the Southern Counties East Football League Premier Division title for the first time after beating Canterbury City at Salters Lane.

Photo: Alan Coomes

Cray Valley had to wait until the last 14 minutes to make the breakthrough through Francis Babalola's 24th goal of the season, before his strike partner Gavin Tomlin notched his sixteenth goal for the club to ensure their goalkeeper captain Andy Walker celebrated winning his first league title at the age of 37.

"I'm really pleased for everybody at the club who puts so much effort in, not just today, there's been effort throughout the season," said Watson, who took over from James Collins on 21 August 2017 and has gone through this entire season without having a man sent-off and his side have now won six games on the spin.

"It's years of hard work for people at the club. To have that moment, the players as well, the players' have been magnificent! What a group of boys, honestly.

"It was such a tough game. We knew it would be today, but I'm just so pleased for everybody. Enjoy the moment because not many teams win leagues.

"First half I do think everyone's a bit nervy. We didn't play necessarily the way we've played for the majority of the season. Fair play to Canterbury, they made it extremely difficult for us.

"Second half, I think we came out and we were much improved and we were better in the second half and we deserved to win."

Canterbury City manager Ben Smith, who fielded a very strong side and said **last night that losing 2-1 on aggregate to Cray Valley in The Buildbase FA Vase Semi-Finals has given him plenty of sleepless nights**, said: "Really disappointed actually. There's not a lot riding on it for us but again we've gone toe-to-toe with them and not got anything out of it.

"Second half they threw bodies forward they'd probably not have thrown forward had it been two months ago in the league and that sort of turned the screw for them really but we had them on the racks, I think, first half especially.

"As you can hear through the dressing room walls they were getting a rollicking in there (at half-time) and I stopped my team talk and said to the players 'that's what you've just done out there, you've made them look ordinary,' and we did make them look ordinary.

"It's like the Vase, we had to force it a little bit to try to get a goal and second half we lacked that belief to create the chances really and fair play to them, they've shown why they are champions. They're very good going forward and rock solid at the back and you've got to give

them credit.”

Canterbury City, who travel to bottom-six side Bearsted next Tuesday night, sitting in ninth-place in the table with 55 points, started the game on the front foot against a Cray Valley side that were feeling nervous and making mistakes that they don't usually suffer from.

Canterbury City created an opening when Rob Lawrence broke through the heart of the pitch on a 30-yard run before rolling the ball into striker Mobalaji Dawodu but his shot was weak and rolled into Walker's gloves for a routine collection inside the opening seven minutes.

Cray Valley weathered the Canterbury City storm during the opening 20 minutes and Anthony Edgar floated in a deep free-kick from the left which was met by Liam Hickey's towering header at the far post, which bounced into Jack Delo's gloves.

The Millers started to stamp their authority on the game and the first real opening came halfway through the first half.

Left-wing-back Danny Smith linked up well with Tomlin down the left-channel and Smith cut the ball back to Hickey, who cracked a left-footed drive from 25-yards, which was screaming towards the top left-hand corner, only for Delo to flick the ball over his own crossbar.

Watson said: “It took us a little while. The way they set up with their 4-4-2 with their wide players tucking in, it took us a little while to adapt to that but we re-grouped at half-time.

“It was a bit of a mis-hit from Liam but I thought some people in the crowd thought it was in at one point.”

Smith said: “A good save from Delo. I think it was poor defending, we didn't get out to him quickly enough but a good strike, a good save and at that stage really if they're taking pop shots, you're kind of happy.”

Edgar swung in the resulting corner from the left and Lea Dawson found space inside the penalty area to see his header sail across the goal and past the far post.

Cray Valley striker Babalola snatched a chance when it came his way on the half-hour mark.

He latched onto Chris Edwards' pass and once a yard inside the Canterbury City penalty area, Babalola lashed his right-footed shot over the crossbar after running into the pocket of space that opened up in front of him.

“We were a little bit nervy. It was rushed decision making in and around the box. We got into some ok places in the first half, we didn't really have much composure,” admitted Watson.

Canterbury goalkeeper Delo almost gifted Cray Valley the lead in the 34th minute.

Danny Smith threw the ball to Hickey, who took a touch before whipping in a cross from the left, which should have been meat and drink for the goalkeeper. Delo lifted both of his arms high above his head and allowed the ball to slip through his fingers and was relieved when the ball dropped just over his crossbar and behind for a corner.

Canterbury City squandered a glorious chance to gate-crash the Millers' title winning party when Dan Lawrence hit a ball over the top of the defence and neither Walker, Ashley Sains nor Cem Tumkaya dealt with it and Dean Grant, who works the channels well but lacks clinical sharpness in front of goal when it really matters, swept his shot on the turn past all three only to see the ball flash past the foot of the near post of an open goal.

Smith said: “He was unlucky there. He put himself about today Deano. I think he was in between three of them and the keeper there. The angle wasn't quite there for him but unlucky, I will say.”

Watson said: “They did have a few chances in the first half but they are going to have chances, they're a good team.

“We didn't come here expecting it to be one-sided but they have come to spoil the party and I would have done the same thing if I was them.”

Rob Lawrence played the ball out to right-back Ryan Cooper, who put the ball back in to the centre of the pitch but Rob Lawrence sliced his volley harmlessly wide of the target.

Canterbury City created an even better chance to stun the champions-elect on the stroke of half-time.

Dawodu released Renford Tenyue down the left and his pace took him past Tumkaya to reach the by-line and he wrapped his foot around the ball to cross towards the near post but Dawodu flicked his shot across the keeper and trickling towards the wrong wide of the foot of the far post from six-yards.

Smith said: “We had a couple of half-chances in the first half. You've got to make your own luck haven't you and sometimes it doesn't fall to us in that box and that's something we've got to look at next season really.

“It's just that little bit of extra quality in the final third (that's missing), whether that comes from wide, from the middle or up top. We've got some good players in those areas but its that extra bit of quality that helps us dominate a side for 30-40 minutes. We've relied on breaking on teams and set-pieces, which is all well and good but at times we need to dominate a game and we dominate spells in games but we don't dominate games.”

Both managers were asked their thoughts at the break.

Smith said: “Well done! Everything that we asked them to do, they did. Defensively I thought we were exceptional in the first half and limited them and also we carried a threat going forward against them. That's always the question, can you get the balance right between being defensively strong and actually imposing an attacking threat and we did that to a tee in the first half.”

Watson added: “We just said ‘this isn't us, what we've shown in the first half,’ and we needed to not get rattled. The game was a bit slow at

times in the first half and we just need to stay confident in our own ability and don't get frustrated with each other."

Cray Valley raised their game during the entire second half and snuffed out Canterbury City's attacking threat.

The Millers enjoyed a spell of retaining possession and Edgar floated in a cross towards the far post for Edwards to ghost in only to see his fingertipped saved header crash back down off the underside of the crossbar inside the opening seven minutes.

Watson said: "It's a great ball, great vision, good execution. It was a difficult header. The goalkeeper has done well though hasn't he. It was a good header because it's difficult to head down as you usually would in that position.

"There was still time left. We were aware of the other score (Corinthian ended up thrashing Bearsted 5-0 at Gay Dawn Farm) but I was confident we would win anyway.

"But I thought second half we were on top of the game and we didn't panic. We still tried to pass it, which is good. We're not a team that can just put the ball in the box from distance, so I was pleased at the response and I think it took them until half-time for them to realise it's just a game of football, it's 11-versus-11, regardless of what's at stake. We still need to play."

Smith said: "They were going to throw bodies forward. Both wing-backs were staying high up the pitch and they were causing more of a problem.

"I think Edwards is their most influential player because I know they've got the likes of Edgar but Edwards makes them tick. I think he adds them a different dimension. First half we stopped the ball coming out his way but second half they've pushed him on and forced those chances.

"He was unlucky not to score but it was a good save from Delo. He clawed it away and reacted well."

Edgar played a short corner to Tomlin and his cross within the left-channel was met by Hickey's far-post header, which was blocked and the ball fell to Dawson, who lashed his left-footed volley higher over the crossbar from the edge of the box.

Edwards – who sits out at Wembley Stadium as he is cup-tied having played for Sheppey United earlier in the competition – was keen to play his part to win the League title here today.

He whipped in a cross from the right and Delo's poor punch gave Babalola a headed chance which bounced off his forehead and dropped just over the crossbar from within the six-yard box.

Canterbury City's centre-half Gary Sayer fouled Tomlin and almost paid the price in the 63rd minute but Edwards' right-footed free-kick flew just over the crossbar from 26-yards out in a central position.

"Not a bad strike that was it? Just dip a little bit and it's in," added Watson.

A mistake from Sayer let in Babalola down the right and was denied by a the fingertips of Delo, who flicked the ball off course and it dropped just past the foot of the far post.

Cray Valley were starting to become desperate as the stopwatch ticked towards the final 15 minutes.

Danny Smith clipped a ball over the head of Canterbury centre-half Will Hadler to put Babalola in the clear and he cut the ball back to Edwards, who lost his composure and lashed his shot towards the corner flag than the top bins.

Cray Valley ditched their trademark passing game and twice went long to score their goals.

The Millers had one hand on the trophy after taking the lead with 30 minutes and 37 seconds on the clock. Canterbury City just didn't look like scoring in the second half.

Hickey, who plays on the left-hand side of a three-man defence, hit a long ball over the top of Hadler and Sayer and Delo failed to clear his lines and as the ball dropped from the sky Babalola stuck out a leg to shin the ball, bouncing into an empty goal from 12-yards.



Cray Valley took 76 minutes to make the breakthrough when striker Francis Babalola held his nerve to score.

Photo: Alan Coomes

"It's a good ball in there to start with and it's a good run. Some people will say the finish had an element of luck about it. If you're at the right place at the right time, look over the course of the season. This isn't luck. We've won 29 league games so I've always said if another team had won the league they would be the best team in the league.

"I've not said this because I've got no right to say it. People have told me it but I think we're the best team in the league. I've had absolutely no right to say that until today."

Smith added: "It's disappointing not to get something out of today really. I thought over the 90 minutes we were good enough for a point, that's for sure."

"Horrible mix-up. I think there's three or four players who can be culpable in that and it's just on a plate for them. It's really disappointing especially after the hard work of the first half getting ourselves set-up and organised and defending well."

"It's a hopeful punt over the top which to be honest with you they were going long. It was great to see Cray Valley having to play long ball football! When did that happen? But that happened because everything we set up to do we were doing it right. Yes, it was disappointing to get caught out from that, one ball over the top, really poor."

Cray Valley sealed the title by scoring their second goal with 40 minutes and 6 seconds on the clock.

This time it was Danny Smith who hit the ball over the top of Canterbury's defence, that neither Sayer or Starkey (who by this stage had slotted in the centre of defence) could cut out and Tomlin's right-footed chip sailed over Delo's head and dropped into the far corner.



Former Dulwich Hamlet striker Gavin Tomlin scores the second goal that clinches the league title for Kevin Watson's men.

Photo: Alan Coomes

"A great finish, a great finish from Gav, then you'd like to think the games done then. That settled us a little bit with that amount of time left," said Watson.

"I thought that was a hard game for the officials today. I know officials get criticised quite a lot but it is tough isn't it. They knew what was at stake for us."

Smith added: "At that stage we're pushing bodies forward. We took off defensive players and we were pushing forwards on to go for it and there will always be some gaps and again, it's a really soft goal."

"The players in (the dressing room) at the end were gutted. We've come out second best to a side that's not dominated us in four games. That's the frustrating thing, they've not dominated us!"

"It's fair to say they're our nemesis but they didn't want to come down here today to try to win the league here today and second thing I think at half-time they were worried. We certainly caused them a little bit of a scare!"

Canterbury City created their only chance of the second half at the death when Delo's big kick almost caught Walker out and Dawodu flicked his header just past the top of the left-hand post from eight-yards.

"When it's in the air there's always a chance Bola's going to get on the end of it," said Smith.

"His starting jump is ridiculous. If he had a different coloured shirt on that would've gone in. That's the story of our season and it's something that we have to address now."

Looking ahead to Tuesday night's trip to Bearsted, Smith said: "One game to go now. It's been a long end to the season but we go there. We talk about nemesis, we've not beaten Bearsted since they've come up! It's my 200th game as well. The players will want to finish the season off on a high really and take us into next season."

Cray Valley will be playing Isthmian League football and take the place of Greenwich Borough, who lost their league status after finishing bottom of the Bostik South East Division, after losing 3-1 at home to third-placed finishers Hastings United today.

It was confirmed it was Greenwich Borough's last game at Badgers Sports Ground, Middle Park Avenue in Eltham, as they have moved

out as Cray Valley regain the control running of the ground. Greenwich Borough are in talks about groundsharing Phoenix Sports' ground but face competition from at least one other club.

Reflecting on his first title success, Watson said: "I always said when I went into management I didn't feel that management could give you the feelings it would when you was a player but I think today even more so you see what it means to so many other people.



Cray Valley's management team of Tommy Osborne, Craig Gibson, Kevin Watson, Courtney Dobson and Kevin James celebrate winning the Southern Counties East Football League Premier Division title.

Photo: Allen Hollands

"I've got to mention my management team, Tommy Osborne, Kevin James, Craig Gibson and Courtney Dobson. I do the interviews and when things go well I get some praise and when they don't....We're in it together and there's stuff that goes on throughout the week and credit to them really.

"I want to mention (seriously ill Sporting Club Thamesmead manager) Joe Ford as well. We're talking about football and that's boy is fighting a battle. I'm in constant contact with his dad (Martin) and there is stuff bigger than football out there and his winning his biggest battle at the moment than any team or manager or player could."

Cray Valley play one more game – The FA Buildbase Vase Final against Cherry Red Records Combined Counties League Premier Division champions Chertsey Town at Wembley Stadium on Sunday 19 May (12:15).

"We need to win the game. We're not there just for the occasion. Yes, I want people to enjoy it, but we need to go there and win that FA Vase," said Watson.

"The priority was always the league. I've made that absolutely clear from day one, so we've achieved that objective but now we need to move on from that quite quickly."

Canterbury City: Jack Delo, Ryan Cooper, Michael Turner (James Nurden 89), Phil Starkey, Gary Sayer, Will Hadler (Kyron Lightfoot 79), Rob Lawrence (Adam Woollcott 73), Dan Lawrence, Dean Grant, Mobolaji Dawodu, Renford Tenyue.

Sub: Chris Saunders

Booked: Will Hadler 43, Dan Lawrence 78

Cray Valley (Paper Mills): Andy Walker, Chris Edwards, Danny Smith, Ashley Sains, Liam Hickey, Cem Tumkaya (Denzel Gayle 68), Anthony Edgar, Paul Semukula, Gavin Tomlin, Francis Babalola (Josh James 90), Lea Dawson (Ryan Flack 57).

Subs: Calum Willock, Deren Ibrahim

Goals: Francis Babalola 76, Gavin Tomlin 86

Booked: Francis Babalola 81

Attendance: 189

Referee: Mr Toby Enstone (London)

Assistants: Mr Wayne Horsfall (Gillingham) & Mr Chandon Chapman (Rochester)

