

CRAY VALLEY (PAPER MILLS) 3-3 MERSTHAM
(after extra time – Cray Valley win 4-1 on penalties)
The Emirates FA Cup First Qualifying Round Replay
Wednesday 12 September 2018
Stephen McCartney reports from Middle Park Avenue

CRAY VALLEY (Paper Mills) manager Kevin Watson praised the character from his players after pulling off a FA Cup giant-killing act by beating Merstham on penalties to reach the Second Qualifying Round for the first time.

The Millers came away from Weldon Way with a goal-less draw on Saturday and found themselves 2-0 down to Hayden Bird's side after Merstham striker Calum Davies scored a brace inside 34 minutes tonight.

Anthony Edgar, who plays at the top of the Cray Valley midfield diamond, embarrassed Merstham keeper Chris Haigh by beating him at his near post with a 30-yard free-kick a minute before the half-time whistle to score his fourth goal of the season.

Francis Babalola tapped in an equaliser with 17 minutes remaining to score his fifth goal of the season and Cray Valley led for the first time in the tie when star striker Kevin Lisbie kept composed to convert a penalty, 11 seconds into injury time to net his tenth goal of the campaign.

But Merstham grabbed a dramatic late equaliser as Cray Valley's lead lasted only 134 seconds when super-sub Josh Antonio scored with his first touch.

Neither side could find a winner during extra-time so the tie was to be settled by a penalty shoot-out and Millers keeper Andy Walker, 36, was to be the hero by saving a couple of penalties as Cray Valley progressed 4-1 after seven penalties.

"Tough game! They're a good team. They're two levels above us and play good football," said Watson.

"It was always going to be hard. I thought we made it quite hard at times but the character, it does show something special. I think the way the game went to come back from 2-0 down, to then lead 3-2 and they score and we go into extra-time and it's tough. All of those players on the pitch have been working all day and they then play 90 minutes, extra-time and it goes to penalties.

"We were confident if it went to penalties. We had a very good chance, we've got a great goalkeeper. No, we didn't practice the penalties. Certain players are always going to take penalties if they're on the pitch, a couple of others volunteered. I think you have to let it be a natural cause as such, if they want to take penalties they can take them.

"I'm delighted because I think they put a lot into it and it's something that's been achieved already this season, so you've achieved something quite early into the season and I think that's quite important."

Cray Valley went into the game sitting in sixth-place in the Southern Counties East Football League Premier Division with 10 points from five games and thrashed Bostik South Central side Ashford Town (Middlesex) 4-1 here in the last round and are now nine games unbeaten following tonight's game.

Merstham arrived in Eltham on a five match unbeaten run and in 12th place in the Bostik Premier Division – two levels higher than Cray Valley – having collected eight points from their opening six league outings.

The game started with a frenetic pace and Merstham opened the scoring with the first chance of the night, the goal coming with 18 minutes and 52 seconds on the clock.

Edgar swung in the home side's second corner of the game, which was cleared out and Cray Valley's holding midfielder Josh James committed a foul and a quickly-taken free-kick caught them cold. Daniel Bennett's pass

ricochet off Danny Smith inside the Millers half and fell kindly into Davies' path and his right-footed drive flashed under Walker and into the centre of the goal from 15-yards.

Watson said: "Frustrating because it was our corner and it's broke and we've got two-v-one and they've taken advantage and we've given away a foul. A quick free-kick that they've taken, a ricochet. We were a bit unlucky to be fair. It was a good finish by the lad, just maybe think it's not going to go our way when you concede a goal like that."

Merstham's right-back Michael Abnett linked up well with winger Kershane Samuels and Abnett lashed his volley harmlessly wide from 22-yards, before visiting keeper Chris Haigh pulled off a world-class save in the 27th minute.

Edgar put the ball on a plate with an inside pass to Lisbie who from within the D drilled a stunning right-footed shot on the turn screaming towards the top right-hand corner but Haigh got both hands to the ball, high to his left, to push the ball over the crossbar.

"Great strike, great save, not much more can be said about that really. It was going in," added Watson.

Edgar swung in the resulting corner from the left and Ashley Sains knocked the ball down for Jack White to flick his shot over the crossbar from six-yards.

The quiet Ryan Flack floated in a corner from the right and Lisbie rose inside the six-yard box to nod wide but Cray Valley were staring down the barrel of defeat when Merstham doubled their lead with 33 minutes and 12 seconds on the clock.

Bennett swung in a free-kick just in front of the corner flag on the right and the ball deflected towards the bottom near corner from within a packed goal-mouth. Walker got down low to his left to parry but Davies stabbed the ball into the bottom right-hand corner from a couple of yards out.

"Frustrating because I think we were a bit more physical than them tonight from set-pieces so to concede from that was quite a bit frustrating for us," said Watson.

"Walks parried it, I'm not sure, I think it dropped quite low. We have to deal with them. They had quite a lot of set-pieces, we had a lot of set-pieces. We dealt with most of them tonight."

Cray Valley found a way back into the game and pulled a goal back with 43 minutes and 31 seconds on the clock and visiting keeper Haigh was at fault.

The Millers won a free-kick down the left channel some 30-yards from goal and Edgar whipped a right-footed dipping free-kick bouncing once into the bottom near corner, underneath the embarrassed keeper who reacted when it was too late.

"I think it came at a good time for us that goal," admitted Watson.

"He's got good quality the lad, he's done the right thing. It's not the most glamorous free-kick you'll see but he's hit it on target, low with pace and it's going to cause problems.

"There was one goal in it. The longer it went with one goal in it, I felt we had a chance. We just had to stay focused and not lose our heads, even if they went and scored another one. That's the danger sometimes, people can try and do too much, they have to know their job and stick to it because sometimes the intention might be right to go and do something, it's unnatural to the team and it may not help."

Merstham enjoyed tons of possession and they produced a slick three-man move inside the opening six minutes of the second half but failed to score.

Tom Kavanagh ran at the Millers defence before playing the ball inside to Bennett, who played the ball on the outside to Samuels, who cut inside and flashed a low angled drive harmlessly wide of the far post.

Watson said: "Very similar to Saturday, they had quite a lot of possession but we had the better chances on Saturday, more clear cut chances and they probably had more possession and I think that was similar tonight."

Merstham won their first corner in the 59th minute and Bennett played it short to Samuels, who cut the ball back for Bennett to make a 30-yard run inside before trying to curl his shot into the bottom far corner from 30-yards, only for the ball to stay straight and flash wide.

Cray Valley's first opening of the second half arrived with 20 minutes remaining when Jack White launched his second and last long throw into the box, the ball was cleared out to White who looped his right-footed volley wide from 30-yards.

Cray Valley grabbed an equaliser with 27 minutes and 4 seconds on the clock.

Flack swung in a free-kick from the right and the ball bounced off somebody's knee inside a crowded penalty area and Babalola tucked the ball home into the bottom right-hand corner from three-yards out at the far post.

"Look, we've spoken about set-pieces. We felt we'd be able to fill the box from set-pieces if the delivery was right," said Watson.

"You just have to put it in an area and we've got people who attack the ball well and Francis has read it and made that run. He hasn't tried to compete for the first one. He's scored some important goals for us this season and he's improved that part of his game in that position."

Cray Valley substitute Nathan Palmer delivered two balls into the Merstham box but Babalola's two efforts (a header and a deflected drive) were comfortably gathered by Haigh.

"We were sort of on the break a little bit but we've got some good pace and energy when we're going forward and we can cause teams problems," said Watson, who was without attackers Denzel Gayle (back) and Joe N'Guessan (calf).

Merstham could have won it too, but Hall's right-footed free-kick from 25-yards went straight at Walker, who caught the ball comfortably in his midriff.

"It was a bit of a concern when we gave that away, that's something we tried to emphasise don't give silly things away and give teams a chance but look it's got to be a very good free-kick from there to beat him," said Watson.

There was drama at the end of the game as both sides scored inside injury-time.

Cray Valley thought they had snatched the victory when Edgar drove into the Merstham box and was brought down by Merstham left-back Ben Harrison and referee David Harrison pointed to the spot.

There was gamesmanship from Merstham manager Bird as he substituted Bennett before the penalty was taken.

Lisbie kept his composure and sent the keeper the wrong way by emphatically placing his right-footed penalty into the bottom right-hand corner. The goal was timed at 45:11 on the clock.

Watson said: "It's great play, that's Anthony at his best. He gets the ball, gives it to someone like Lisbie, Lis knows when to set it off. Lisbie scores the penalty and I asked the ref, we have four minutes left at that point.

"It's frustrating that we couldn't hold out for those four minutes, similar to Punjab in the league earlier in the season, it's frustrating. That's what we were trying to get out of the players, don't panic. We can play 70 minutes without conceding so it was frustrating. Going into extra-time you feel a little bit for them."

Merstham forced extra-time when they notched a last-gasp equaliser, timed at 47:25, courtesy of Antonio's first touch.

The quiet Reece Hall played the ball into the overlapping Kenny Beaney, who drilled his left-footed drive smacking against the underside of the crossbar and the ball flashed across the face of goal for centre-half Antonio to slot his first time shot into the bottom right-hand corner.

"I think too many players were watching the ball a little bit and he's had a decent strike the lad and then the rebound but frustrating going into extra-time," added Watson.

Both sides still had time to win it. Flack's left-footed curler was caught by Haigh and with the last kick of normal time (50:08), Davies turned his man and Beaney drilled his shot towards goal and with Walker going down low to his left the ball bounced off White and dropped over the crossbar.

"If we had enough energy about us and we were patient enough it would be ok," admitted Watson.

"I was confident if we could get to penalties we'll be ok, not that you go into extra-time like just trying to see it out. We couldn't see it out for four minutes so we're not going to see it out for half-an-hour. It's trying to do the right things, control the tempo of the game and when we needed to slow it down or speed it up."

Cray Valley created a couple of chances during the first period of extra-time.

Edgar swung in the home side's seventh corner of the night and was met by Sains' downward header at the far post, which forced Haigh into making a smart save, diving to his right to smother the ball behind.

Watson said: "Like we said, if we get a set-piece, let's set them up and put them under pressure, which I'll be honest, we don't work loads on set-pieces because we don't see it as a side of the game. We like to put it down and try to play but actually we saw it as an area that we could score."

Substitute Palmer then swept his shot past the right-post after centre-half Sains recycled the ball back into the penalty area.

Merstham's Simon Cooper produced a centre-halves finish inside the opening three minutes of the second period, dragging his shot past the near post.

Edgar produced a mazy run as he cut in from the left and stung Haigh's fingers with a powerfully struck right-footed drive from 25-yards, the keeper grabbing hold of the ball at the second attempt.

"I think if it's a yard either side of him, it's in. It's a good strike, good feet around the box," said Watson.

Merstham could have won it with only 64 seconds of extra-time remaining when Kavanagh played the ball inside to Samuels, who drilled a right-footed shot towards top bins from 30-yards, which was palmed around the post by Walker, going to his right.

Watson said: "They had one as well that Andy Walker saved. It was at him but they're hard for goalkeeper's to deal with sometimes. I think people think it's a given with that much pace."

So onto the dreaded penalty-shoot-out. The referee had to tell both goalkeepers to retreat to their goal-line as they both attempted gamesmanship to try to put off the penalty taker.

Cray Valley went first and centre-half Liam Hickey sent keeper Haigh the wrong way, by slotting his right-footed penalty to the keeper's right.

Walker copied Haigh and advanced off his line in an attempt to distract Kavanagh, who drove his right-footed

penalty straight down the middle as the keeper dived to his left.

Cray Valley substitute Palmer held his nerve, sending Haigh the wrong way as his right-footed penalty nestled nicely into the bottom right-hand corner.

Walker dived low to his left and used his legs to deny Merstham's 100th minute substitute Tom Bird, who tried to place his left-footed penalty into the bottom right-hand corner. Walker got lucky as the ball looked like it was going under his legs.

Edgar lashed his right-footed penalty into top bins (top-left) to give Cray Valley a commanding 3-1 lead.

Walker dived to his right to deny Beaney scoring with a right-footed penalty and Lisbie drilled his right-footed penalty into the bottom left-hand corner to earn his club a trip to Vanarama National League South side Oxford City on 22 September.

Watson revealed he didn't watch any of the penalties tonight.

"I didn't watch them! I decided who was going to take them and that was me done - I had every confidence in Walks."

Watson will travel to Oxford on Saturday to watch their league game against Bath City before returning for Sunday's FA Vase Second Qualifying Round home tie against Hailsham Town.

"I've got to go to Oxford and watch them play, that's frustrating but look it's something we'll embrace and look forward to," said Watson, who has won a total of £11,140 in prize money for the club.

"I'm pleased for the club. There's people behind the scenes who put a lot into it and this is a nice reward for them more than anything else.

"It's not just about the financial side of things, it's a little bit deeper than that. It's important for them to get something out of and have that day out. It's lovely for the players. It's not so much about us as managers. We're judged by leagues and things like that. The Cup, I always say, its moments in a players career. If you have a good Cup run then you always remember the players you played with in the Cups so it's about creating memories for players."

On the visit of Sussex side Hailsham Town, Watson said: "We have to regroup. It's been hard on them physically, we have to prepare. It feels like we haven't played a league game for nearly a month maybe but we have to perform consistently, that's the challenge.

"You saw the celebrations tonight because we're maybe not expected to win that game. We win games and don't celebrate like that because there's an expectation against teams at our level that we should be winning it but tonight was a great game, I'm really pleased for the boys, great bit of character.

"This group of players have created history for the club and they'll be remembered for that until someone tops it. We'll try to go another round now and make it even harder for someone else."

Cray Valley (Paper Mills): Andy Walker, Cem Tumkaya (Nathan Palmer 65), Danny Smith, Josh James, Ashley Sains, Liam Hickey, Ryan Flack (Devontae Irving-Young 93), Anthony Edgar, Francis Babalola, Kevin Lisbie, Jack White.

Subs: Joe N'Guessan, George Palmer, Tommy Osborne

Goals: Anthony Edgar 44, Francis Babalola 73, Kevin Lisbie 90 (penalty)

Booked: Anthony Edgar 60, Devontae Irving-Young 117

Merstham: Chris Haigh, Michael Abnett (Ghassimu Sow 72), Ben Harrison (Josh Antonio 90), Tom Kavangah, Oliver Cook, Simon Cooper, Kershanev Samuels, Kenny Beaney, Calum Davies, Daniel Bennett (Alberto Lubango 90), Reece Hall (Tom Bird 100).

Sub: Tutu Henriques

Goals: Calum Davies 19, 34, Josh Antonio 90

Booked: Ben Harrison 29, Kenny Beaney 31, Kershanev Samuels 47, Tom Kavanagh 69, Oliver Cook 89

Attendance: 138

Referee: Mr David Harrison (Wickford, Essex)

Assistants: Mr Dan Doyle (Maidstone) & Mr Michael Butcher (Eastchurch, Isle of Sheppey)