

A GAME THAT MEANT ABSOLUTELY NOTHING!

Cray Wanderers and Staines Town played against each other on 13 September 1961 and, to put it mildly, it was a low-key affair.

At the time, Staines played in the Spartan League and Cray were in the Aetolian, a league mainly for teams from Kent who didn't get into the Southern League when it expanded in 1959 (the Kent League itself had temporarily closed down).

How, then, did Cray and Staines come to meet? It wasn't in the F A Cup or its famous cousin, the F A Amateur Cup, but in a little-known competition called the Southern Combination Amateur Cup. This was a very odd affair, which the Wands first entered three years earlier. There seems to have been eight clubs involved in a straight knock-out cup, with the games played in the lighter evenings at the beginning and end of the season (no floodlights then, of course). Most of the entries came from teams to the south and west of London, in the area of what is now the M25. They were senior amateur clubs, but not of the status of top Isthmian Leaguers like Bromley.

Cray had done very well in the previous year's competition, losing 5-4 to Windsor and Eton in the final, after pulling back from 4-1 down. However, it was fair to say that the Southern Combination Cup was not a high priority for them. Far be it for me to mention the words 'Micky Mouse', but this may well have been an early example of managers using a game to give their 'squad players' a bit of experience.

For the Staines game, the Wands brought in three reserves. Goalkeeper Cliff Baker had little to do, but right-half Peter Warner and young centre-forward Ted Clarke played their part in what turned out to be a comfortable 5-0 win. It is possible that some of Cray's ex-professional players, such as 'keeper Ron Vosper, were ineligible to play.

It wasn't a bad time for the Cray management to be doing a bit of experimentation as, after a good start to the season, the side had lost its last two games, 2-3 at Herne Bay and a very poor 1-4 home defeat to Willesden. It's impossible to know for sure whether Staines were experimenting, too. I suspect they were, as they proved to be pretty weak opposition, even though the Spartan League was considered to be on a par with the Aetolian.

On a Wednesday evening, the Wands impressed their supporters at Grassmeade with a determined performance and took an early lead when Terry MacDonald headed in an Albert Dorey cross. It became 2-0 on twenty minutes, as MacDonald put away a good pass from Mickey Thompson.

The same three players combined to put the result beyond doubt in the second half, as Thompson scored twice himself, with Dorey and MacDonald the providers. Two of the reserves engineered the final goal, which was the best of the match, as Clarke fired home a fierce shot from Warner's pass in the closing stages. Left-half Dave Round also had a good game for the Wands.

Clarke obviously benefited from the experience of playing in the first team, as he was chosen for the following Saturday's league game at Chatham. He scored, as Cray won 3-2 and he stayed in the team for most of the season, finishing top scorer with 15 goals. Confusingly, another Edward Clarke joined the Club later in the year. He was also a free-scoring centre-forward and was known as 'Eddie' to distinguish him from Ted!

Despite the victory over Staines, 1961-62 proved to be a poor season for the Wands. They lost in every other cup competition at the first hurdle and never rose above mid-table in the league. In theory, they should have been looking forward to a semi-final game in the Southern Combination Cup at the end of the season, but the game never took place.

It wasn't a case of fixture congestion, but quite the opposite. Cray played their last league game in early April and I suspect they called time on the season immediately afterwards. By the time the semi-final of the SCC came around, the Wands simply didn't have a team to fulfil the fixture. Whether Staines were re-instated or Cray's prospective opponents were given a bye to the final, I don't know. The competition (which continues for reserve teams to this day, I believe) may not even have been completed.

So the win over Staines counted for nothing!

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