

our first brush with the play-offs but it was a game too far

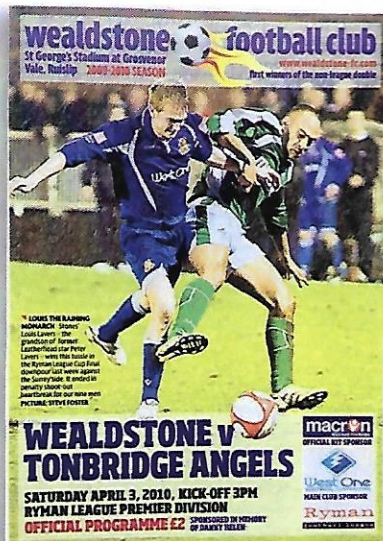
Thursday April 22 2010, Ryman League Premier Division: Wealdstone 2 Tonbridge 1

WHAT a crazy end to the season this was! We played 20 games in 54 days, about one every two and a half days, as a long FA Cup run and a long wet winter - forcing postponements - forced the Stones to shoehorn just too many games into the last couple of months.

Gordon Bartlett's excellent book about that season, *'Off the Bench'*, highlighted the week of this Tonbridge game in particular.

An unexpectedly long run in the Ryman League Cup added to the problems. We actually reached the final (in another week of four games) and had to play 120 minutes against Leatherhead before losing on penalties. And then had two players red-carded in the final just when we dreaded suspensions to our flagging squad!

Fortunately, the astute GB had captured 18 year-old striker Matt McClure (right) on loan from



Wycombe Wanderers and his goals revived our play-off hopes. He netted twice at Horsham in a 3-1 win and bagged both in this Thursday night win over play-off rivals Tonbridge at the Vale. Two days earlier we had snatched a point from Champions Dartford in a valiant show at Ruislip, thanks to a late Alan Massey goal. Tonbridge were on a great late run and we were almost out on our feet! They took the lead but McClure levelled with a volley from a Lee Chappell long throw.

And as Gordon describes in his book (above right) it was another Matty Mac strike of pure quality (similar to Danny Green's goal here last Saturday) at the bottom end of the Vale that saw us take all three points and kill off Tonbridge's play-off dreams.

We then had to win our final

Then a long throw from Chaps, knocked down and Matt McClure equalised from yet another volley. The fans were fantastic, really getting behind us as they knew exactly what was at stake. Then, three little incidents that helped us. Chaps gave the ball away in his own half and Tonbridge squandered the opportunity. A free header from a corner crashed against the crossbar and finally, we presented them with a breakaway from our sloppy throw in and we got away with that too.

Three basic errors in the last ten minutes of the half which thankfully didn't cost us. We used them to highlight the importance of concentration at half time. I have to mention half time as it was so important to the rest of the game. We felt their bench were very upright and it was transmitting the pressure and anxiety onto the players. We tried to be exactly the opposite. As we came in at half time I wanted everything to be nice and relaxed so I took my time and let all the boys sit down. It was all quiet - except that we could hear their manager ranting and raving. I slowly poured and sugared my tea then said *'just listen to that. That's desperation. They are under so much pressure. With their run, they are expected to do well tonight. We are going to relax, keep things tight and maintain our discipline.'* I highlighted the problems at the end of the half and then added that we should look to get strikes in early on goal as their keeper was spending a lot of time off his line.

Well, blow me down, the first ten seconds of the second half, young Matt McClure picked the ball up from the kick-off ran a couple of yards and drilled one into the top corner. We were 2 - 1 up. Ten seconds. It was very early to score and I wondered if we could hang on but we did. We defended superbly with great discipline. The anxiety from Tonbridge became more and more evident and they went from playing the ball wide and forcing us back to lumping the ball down the middle. It was a valuable lesson. You want people to be 'up for it' but sometimes it can go too far the other way. We were totally drained but delighted with the result. On to Saturday, one game, ninety minutes, could we do it again? Carshalton needed to win to ensure safety, we needed to win and hope one of three other sides dropped a point to get us into the play-offs.

game, two days later and again at the Vale v Carshalton - and hope fifth placed Kingstonian failed to win their last game - to extend our season.

But it was a game too far. Carshalton had a week to prepare for the match and they were 4-1 up at half time with a hat trick from Byron Harrison (who we had tried to sign) and another from a certain Richard Jolly.

But we still remember that McClure strike. He scored four times in eight games in a blue shirt and went on to have a decent career at Wycombe, netting 24 goals in 101 games before being sold to Dagenham & Redbridge. He scored a goal in every four games for the Daggers and is now scoring regularly for Aldershot Town.