

## Concord reach play-off finals as East Thurrock freeze

### East Thurrock United 0, Concord Rangers 1

Report by NEIL SPEIGHT

A WONDER goal from Danny Heale carried Rangers through to the Ryman One North play-offs on a night when the side that finished 16 points in front of them wept bitter tears of frustration and disappointment.

While Rangers have become an unstoppable force in the season's run-in, East Thurrock have suffered an unfathomable lack of confidence and they compounded last Saturday's title-costing defeat at the hands of Aveley with another unpalatably disappointing defeat.

Take nothing away from Concord, who arrived at Rookery Hill with a game-plan and stuck to it with robust endeavour, but once again East Thurrock had the lion's share of possession but failed to test Rangers keeper Dale Brightly even once.

A side that has scored more than 100 goals forgot how to unpick a defence and sent Canvey's impressive central defenders home with a headache, not from the after-match celebrations, but the repeated thud of heading away balls pumped aimlessly down the middle or short from free kick positions that held promise.

To say the better team lost is unfair to Concord on the night, though their cynical approach to the game, constant play-acting and a brutish disposition is unlikely to take them far in the higher echelons.

They also benefited from an appalling poor set of match officials. The Ryman League sent out four of them for this showpiece occasion and they all managed to turn in dreadful displays - though it would be unjust to say they were the major influence on the eventual result, other than missing one blatant penalty, such was the paucity of East Thurrock's own attacking performance,

What they did do was add to the increasing frustration of the home side by disrupting any flow to the game - there were more than 50 free-kicks (not counting offsides) and referee Mr Linden was not slow in booking East Thurrock players, though he was indifferent to the antics of the visitors. The player who benefited most was Rangers' skipper Nicky Cowley who gave an exemplary performance of how to snarl, kick and dive his way through the game and intimidate a match official.

It was a performance in the Roy Keane class and perhaps illustrates best why East Thurrock promised so much in the season, but fell short. They lacked a ruthless streak.

While Rocks lick their wounds, Cowley and his cohorts go on to a promotion-chasing finale with the night's other surprise package, Waltham Abbey, with Rocks wondering if it really is fair to earn 95 points and score 112 goals and end up with nothing.

Concord have no such concerns, they will say all is fair in love and war, and if East Thurrock are the romantics, it is the pragmatists who have shown the necessity to be ruthless.

The match itself won't stay long in the memory, other than for Heale's goal.

It lit up a rather shoddy first half when Rangers weathered Rocks' early storm by packing men behind the ball and denying their rivals time and space.

Ben Boyce briefly flickered but failed to follow up one, enterprising early run and, in truth, it was home keeper Richard Wray who was far the busier of the two custodians, though neither was stretched to a proper save.

That was until Heale's glorious 40<sup>th</sup> minute intervention when he latched onto a loose ball 30 yards from goal and volleyed it over Wray's head to perfection. If ever there was a goal to win a match, this was it, and he has probably never scored a better one.

The second half became increasingly one of one way traffic as East Thurrock pegged Concord back but they only once threatened with any sort of venom, Max Cornhill lashing a close range shot wide of the post.

Concord always threatened to catch them on the counter-attack, but weren't really interested in adding to their goal. More on packing their increasingly impressive defensive wall, showing real relish for the task with some great headers as and when Rocks delivered the ball into the danger area, though it would be fair to say there was little craft or initiative in much of the delivery.

True, they should have had a penalty when Danny Harris, a late season acquisition from Bishops Stortford, was unceremoniously tugged to the ground but the officials were once more suckered by Concord's cynicism - some would say professionalism - and Mr Linden somehow gave a free kick to the visitors.

His linesman and fourth official, who must have seen the offence, failed to intervene, something they did on several other occasions - always to the detriment of East Thurrock, including a touchline sending off for Ryan Sammons for a comment which actually sounded as if it came out of the crowd.

To his credit, Rocks boss John Coventry conceded that however bad the officials were, they weren't as bad as his team on the night and he refused to blame them for the defeat that perhaps was inevitable after the crushing disappointment of Saturday's reversal of fortune against Aveley.

And Concord should not be dismissed lightly either. They have shown remarkable conviction, enterprise and fortitude on a glorious run to the end of the season and while their 'in your face' approach may not be to everyone's approval, it has got them within a match of promotion.

As fifth-placed in the list of finishers at the end of the season, they now have to overcome the fourth-from-top. It may not seem right to the purists, but they don't make the rules and Rangers now have their shot at glory.