

Season's best gives unbeaten Vixens a run for their money

HUNGERFORD TOWN under 13s produced their best performance of the season before their tremendous run came to an end with a 4-2 extra-time defeat at the hands of South Reading Vixens in the final of the South Chiltern League's Chronicle Cup.

Vixens - boasting a 10 per cent league record from their 22 games - found first-timer Katie Taylor in top form in the Hungerford goal but it was Hungerford who had the best of the early chances with Emily Stubbs twice denied by the goalkeeper.

Vixens finally broke the deadlock following a 20th minute corner but Hungerford withstood the following onslaught until five minutes after the interval when Vixens struck again.

A re-shuffle bolstered Hungerford with Alice Linn adopting a free role and she soon reduced the arrears to set up a rousing Hungerford rally.

Vixens struggled against Araminta Naylor's long throws and it was one of those that led to the equaliser when a poor clearance fell to Linn, who rifled the ball into the bottom corner.

With 10 minutes to go, it looked as if

Hungerford might sneak a winner but their pressure came to nothing and it was Taylor again who came to Hungerford's rescue with some fine saves as they took the tie into extra-time.

Hungerford suffered a blow when Vixens went ahead within two minutes of the re-start and they threw everything forward in a bid to claw back the deficit with Stef Bathe, Alice Pocock and Linn all going close before Vixens broke out two against one to score a simple decider and end Hungerford's valiant effort.

● **THATCHAM TOWN GIRLS under 11s completed their South Chiltern League programme with a 3-0 home win over Whiteknights Gems.**

Lily Chubb scored twice in the first half to reward Thatcham for some fine passing football, and the season was rounded off in style when a goal of the season from player of the Match Hayleigh Thomas as Thatcham finished a creditable third in the table.

● **THATCHAM Town Girls marked a highly successful first season in competitive football with the club's**

first presentation evening last week.

Marcia McGregor of sponsors Optiplan was the guest of honour and presented the following awards.

Under nine: Commitment Award - Megan Fitter; Most Improved Player - Jessica Salt; Player's Player - Megan Herbert; Player of the Year - Emily Bilcliff.

Under 11: Commitment Award - Amy Lambden; Most Improved Player - Rebecca Herbert; Player's Player - Rebecca Muckle; Player of the Year - Rebecca Muckle.

Under 13: Commitment Award - Rhiannon Gainall; Most Improved Player - Melissa Kenah; Player's Player - Zoe Lambden; Player of the Year - Kasmin Forbes.

Just around the corner from something better

NOWADAYS, a trip to Cardiff at this stage of the season is something to treasure. Be you a Manchester United or Arsenal fan heading to the FA Cup final, or a supporter of one of the play-off final teams, it is a nerve jangling time.

Long ago Wembley was the hottest destination for an end of season jolly. Now for £4.80 a trip over the bridge and into Wales is worth every penny. Perhaps Wembley will come back into fashion before the end of the 21st century, but in the mean time Cardiff is the place to be seen.

This Saturday Reading are going to that very City. My ticket says 'Ninian Park.' I thought the Millennium Stadium staged the big games, but obviously I was wrong. To use footballer's parlance, the game this Saturday between Cardiff and Reading at Ninian is "massive", with a capital M.

West Ham's 1-0 victory over Stoke on Tuesday night closes the gap between the not-entirely-happy Hammers in seventh and the Royals in sixth, to just one point.

Only Derby, who are level

on points with Reading but one place above courtesy of a more healthy goal difference, have a game in hand. For the other 23 teams there are three games remaining. The bottom nine teams will still be worrying about relegation. As things stand Nottingham Forest and Brighton are most likely to accompany Rotherham into the first division next season. At the other end of the table Sunderland are a win away from confirming automatic promotion, with either Wigan or Ipswich hoping to reap the same reward.

Ipswich manager Joe Royal has been particularly vocal in his dislike of the play-off system in recent weeks. It seems the script is written, and Ipswich will lose the play-off final on penalties. It would seem the race for the remaining three play-off spots are between Preston, Derby, Reading, West Ham and at a stretch Sheffield United. Therefore only 6 teams can banish all thoughts of either promotion or relegation at this stage of the season. Royal may loathe the play-offs, and nobody in their right mind would argue it is the fairest way to determine which team goes up, but fans pay to

be entertained, and a string of meaningless games in the last month of each season would be a financial disaster.

Cardiff hang perilously over the drop zone. Only Crewe and Brighton, both within a point, are between them and division 1 football. Reading can expect the Cardiff players to be fighting like wounded animals (as opposed to fighting in the Lee Bowyer/ Kieron Dyer sense). A scrappy muscular match may suit Reading who looked a little nervous against Nottingham Forest last Saturday.

The turning point came when the visitors goalkeeper, Paul Gerrard, was given his marching orders for handling the ball outside the area when under pressure from Les Ferdinand. Down to ten men, they were unable to defend the ensuing free kick, and James Harper turned the ball into the net to give them a 1-0 win. You do not get points for artistic impression, so Reading fans went home satisfied their team had taken another stride towards a top six finish.



Reading could win silverware this Monday. The club's schoolboy team take a 2-0 away win against Sefton into the second leg of their English Schools Trophy Final at the Madejski. The youngsters record is one their senior counterparts should envy. In this year's competition they have scored 26 goals in the previous rounds, and conceded just two. Nicholas Bignall scored in the 2-0 win in the first leg of the final, keeping up his run of scoring in every round.

The last time Reading reached the final was in 1980, when a certain Martin Allen captained Reading to a 4-1 defeat to Middlesborough. The last time Reading won the trophy was in 1920 against Grimsby. If you want to see potential stars of the future in what is regarded as the FA Cup for schoolboys head to the Madejski for a 7pm kick-off on Monday 25th April.

Coppel is glad that one is over and out of the way

Reading 1
Nottingham Forest 0
READING manager Steve Coppel admitted after this match that he expected the visit of relegation-threatened Forest to be the toughest in their play-off run-in.

Gary Megson's men certainly provided some stubborn resistance and only a 70th minute James Harper strike after Forest goalkeeper Paul Gerrard had been sent off, separated the two sides.

Coppel said: "When it was 0-0 at half-time, it was no surprise and it was exactly what I thought might happen."

"They played a 5-3-2 formation and, with Kris Commons dropping back at times, that even became a 5-4-1."

Despite Reading opening up a four point gap from the last play-off place to seventh placed West Ham, Coppel said: "We have to look at ourselves and do our own stuff."

Forest showed some threat early on with Scott Dobie just a whisker away from opening the scoring.

But Steve Coppel's men gradually started to take command and nearly took the lead midway through the half after Forest had survived a couple of scares.

Skipper Graeme Murty's superb through-ball found Steve Sidwell, whose right-footed shot flashed across the face of the goal but just missed the far post with keeper Gerrard looking well beaten.

Then after a short corner routine, Nicky Shorey delivered a great cross onto the head of Martin Keown, but his header was superbly clawed away by Gerrard.

Forest finished the half brightly, with Paul Evans just clearing the crossbar and Marcus Hahnemann

doing well to keep out a cross from Dobie with Commons lurking.

However, the best chance of the half came in the final minute when impressive defender Shorey delivered a great free-kick and Gerrard did brilliantly to get down low to keep out Dave Kitson's header.

Reading made a bright start to the second half as Gerrard did well to hold on to Nicky Forster's shot from the edge of the area, which bounced just in front of the Forest keeper with Kitson breathing down his neck.

Forest rallied as Commons and Gardner combined to set up Dobie, whose first attempt was blocked by Shorey, but his fierce follow-up just cleared the crossbar.

Royals midfielder Kevin Harper stabbed an effort just wide of the upright, before Les Ferdinand was introduced as a replacement for Paul Brooker with 25 minutes to go in an attacking 3-4-3 formation.

Then came the pivotal minutes of the match, virtually condemning former European champions Forest to the third tier of English football.

First, Forest goalkeeper Paul Gerrard, booked in the first half for dissent, handled Andy Melville's back-pass outside the area and was sent off.

Les Ferdinand's free-kick cannoned against the wall, but from Reading's next attack the ball was sent into the box.

Ferdinand's header struck the hand of Gareth Taylor, but James Harper ignored the appeals of his team-mates to rifle the ball past Colin Doyle into the top corner from seven yards out with 16 minutes left.

Chances were at a premium after Reading broke the deadlock, with Forest unable to find a reply and now needing a miracle to avoid relegation.

Theo's England call

FORMER AFC Newbury starlet Theo Walcott has been named in the England squad for the European UEFA under 17 championships next month.

Walcott has scored five goals in nine previous games for his country but the news that he has been selected for this summer's squad comes on the back of another excellent performance for Southampton FC.

The 16-year-old, who is still studying for his GCSE's at The Downs School, Compton, played a starring role in Monday night's FA Youth Cup final as he set up both goals in the 2-2 first-leg draw against Ipswich.



Vodafone celebrate their success in Sunday's Lakeside Cup final at Thatcham in which they beat Hampstead Norreys 2-0.

OLA spot on again

Old London Apprentice 0
MDM Newbury 0
(OLA won 5-4 on penalties)

OLD London Apprentice made it to their third cup final after holding their nerve in a tense penalty shoot-out.

MDM provided them a with a real test in this Newbury Benevolent cup semi-final clash but captain Robbie Clark was in fine form at the back to break up their attacks.

At the other end, OLA had their chances but could not take them so the tie had to be settled from the penalty spot.

Jamie Hines, Kirk Willmoth, Chris Prior and Russell Davies were all on target for OLA and with one penalty each missed the shoot-out went to sudden death before top scorer Shaun Thorp settled the issue.

**Hermitage 1
Thames Sports 0
HERMITAGE are on the**

brink of sealing their first ever Newbury Sunday Premier League thanks to Daniel Hollingshead's only goal of the game.

Just a point is now needed against Burghclere to win the title after this narrow win of few chances.

Hollingshead produced a fine turn and low shot to score the all important winner in front of over 60 spectators.



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