



Whitstable Town FC 2020-21 to date A review of the early weeks of an interrupted campaign

The current football season is once again being severely affected by the coronavirus pandemic. A late start, then a month's suspension and now the announcement of a new tiering system with stricter rules that present serious challenges for the potential return of non-league football.

While we await confirmation of a possible restart – or not, here is a review of the football that was played by Whitstable Town in the couple of months before the season was halted, together with a look at other news from the club, but we begin with the latest thoughts from the chairman and first team manager.

Chairman's Comments

We were all pleased and relieved to return to playing football after the long break and it was great to be able to welcome supporters back to the Belmont in late August. We had to do a lot of work behind the scenes to ensure the ground was as safe as possible for all; this meant carrying out a risk assessment and putting a number of new plans in place. These included additional signage and new procedures to ensure social distancing and compliance with "Track and Trace" requirements. We installed card readers in the bar, tea hut and on the gate, together with a real time system to monitor numbers, placed hand sanitisers around the ground, provided PPE for staff and made changes to the clubhouse access and hospitality arrangements. There was also a need to limit access to the changing rooms and provide alternative places to allow the players more space.

We had also completed a considerable amount of work at the ground during the extended break, both on the pitch and around the ground. Thank you to everyone that gave up their time to help and especially our generous sponsor Fibretech UK, who provided a lot of the required materials. We have plans to improve the ground further and are looking for support to help with these developments, so if anyone can offer support, please get in touch.

Once the football returned, we saw some promising pre-season performances before experiencing a frustrating start to competitive action. This was followed by a run of three wins, then a couple of losses as we struggled for consistency, before we put in two very good performances despite conceding late equalisers in both games. The ups and downs are all part of the joy of football and following a loss at VCD, unfortunately Covid once again meant a break in the action.

Work still continues during the latest break and it has been necessary to completely re-cover the clubhouse roof and also that of the external toilet block after both were damaged during the recent poor weather.

Thank you to all those who are members of our supporters' fund, which does help towards our manager's playing budget. If anyone else would like to join, the details can be found on our website. Let's hope that we can all get back to enjoying our football again soon.

Yours in sport,
Steve



Manager's Comments

It's been a topsy-turvy start to the new season and one I expected to be quite honest. I certainly felt it was right thing to do to cut last season short, as well as delaying the restart by a month. It made things very difficult though regarding pre-season and lots of things have played a part in what I feel has been a very inconsistent start for us.

There's no doubt the longer period of absence hasn't helped some players regarding injuries and fitness. I remember preparing for one game with no less than seven players unavailable. This is no excuse however and after speaking to a lot of other managers and coaches, I found we weren't the only club suffering in this way.

We started the campaign with a very difficult FA Cup draw away at Carshalton Athletic. I think it was the hardest draw possible for us and so it proved. After a decent pre-season campaign, we came up against a very impressive side that I expect to be challenging for promotion this season in the league above.

Two disappointing league fixtures followed where individual mistakes cost us. Defensive injuries led to a lack of cohesion and lapses of concentration in our play and we were all very disappointed in our work. There was no need to panic but we did talk openly to say that these errors cannot happen again and that as a group we expect to be doing a lot better.

Three very good results followed against Haywards Heath, Three Bridges and Burgess Hill. The players took on board what was necessary to earn the victories and I was very pleased how we responded after the initial disappointment of the opening games.

Frustratingly we then faced an experienced Hythe Town team who punished every single mistake we made and we felt as if we'd let everyone down especially after all the work that we had done in the previous three games.

We were now looking to get some consistency in our performances and results. An FA Trophy defeat against Ashford Town (Middlesex) was tough to take. After a very hard fought performance against a high flying side, we were only separated by a "worldie" strike, however there were positives to take into what saw us now approach a run of very tough league fixtures.

Our performances against unbeaten East Grinstead and the impressive Cray Valley were very encouraging. We tactically got everything right and the players executed everything we asked of them. It felt like we were robbed of victory in Sussex by a very poor refereeing decision following a challenge on Dan Eason and we were similarly disappointed not to claim all three points at home to Cray Valley, but it shows how capable we are and also that we aren't satisfied with draws against two sides I expect to be challenging for the title.

The VCD game saw us hit the post twice and succumb to a 2-0 defeat and I felt our decision making in the final third let us down so overall not a happy result but I did see positives.

With all that's gone on during this crazy start to the season our main focus is one of gaining consistency and form. When we do restart (whenever that will be) we look forward to returning players who I believe will improve the strength our talented squad...as well as the addition of the creative Tom Carlton. Defensively our record needs to improve; let's not hide from that fact, but I have a committed group of players determined to work and improve. I'm inundated with pictures and videos, as well as fitness data I requested the players send me during this period.

It would be wrong if I didn't mention the amount of serious hard work everyone is doing at the club currently. No stone is being left unturned by the chairman, his directors and the support of our amazing sponsors, mainly Steve and Val Andrews from Fibretech UK.

All that's left to say is that I hope everyone is staying safe during this time and I look forward to getting back to playing football at the Belmont and seeing you all.

Up the Oysters,
Blacky

A long unwelcome break

The 2019-20 season ended abruptly, with a 2-1 defeat at Hastings on 7th March being the final action. Football was not to return for five months. During the lengthy lay off, there was still plenty of maintenance required around the Belmont Ground. The pitch needed some attention after the very wet winter. The goals had seen better days and had to be replaced before they fell apart. A new tractor and goals were purchased with considerable help from Football Foundation grants and a watering system also installed. A GoFundMe campaign was launched and the Whitstable supporters responded brilliantly to raise over £5,000 that was a great help in testing times. The access to the academy classroom and new office had been difficult in the wet as the area became boggy, so a new decking path was laid to both buildings. The materials were kindly donated by our sponsor Fibretech UK, who also provided the decking for the new bench seating area next to the committee room that kept Gary Carter busy for many weekends over the summer. The public address system was also replaced because there were a number of problems developing with the previous one and some new fencing and gates were put up. The ground was completely repainted by a number of club directors and volunteers with their families and the first team manager was also to be found wielding a paintbrush on Saturday afternoons.



When news eventually came that football could resume, it was necessary to conduct a risk assessment and put in place an action plan to ensure its safe return.

On the playing side, the majority of the first team squad remained at the club, although John Ufuah moved up a level to sign for Margate and Marshall Wratten returned to his parent club Dover Athletic. Liam Dickson and Connor Sanders also departed, although Liam Gillies returned from Sevenoaks. Charles Etumnu made three further appearances before leaving to sign for VCD Athletic. Jake Mackenzie and Harry Stannard re-signed, but have been unable to appear to date. A number of new faces were introduced, some in the close season and others more recently – welcome to Ollie Gray, Luke Medley, Tom Mills, Victor Aiyelabola, Dean James, Ollie Gray, Reece Gillies, Simon Kabamba, Ryan Flack, Jack Miles, Will Thomas and Tom Carlton.

Pre-season part one: behind closed doors

It was a late start to pre-season training and friendlies, with the early games taking place behind closed doors. Saturday 8th August was the date football returned to the Belmont with Rusthall the visitors and the SCEFL Division One team deservedly won 3-1. All of the goals came in the second half and a Jay Hards goal was the only consolation for a rusty looking Whitstable, although there was a substitute appearance for youth team goalkeeper Alex Hardman. Three days later, Scott Porter was scheduled to bring his Hawkinge Town team to the Belmont, but their late withdrawal saw Thanet United visit instead. Whitstable manager Lloyd Blackman used twenty players on a warm evening as his team cruised to a 4-0 win, with goals from Liam King, Tom Bryant, Muhammed Cham and Etumnu. A week later, an away trip to Deal proved a tough test and after conceding early, Whitstable needed late goals from Etumnu and Aaron Millbank to secure a 2-1 win, although the second was actually scored with twelve players on the pitch when nobody had noticed a substitution had not been completed! During the game, news filtered through that limited numbers of spectators would be allowed back from the following weekend.

Pre-season part two: the return of fans

Following some hard work behind the scenes, a maximum capacity of 200 was permitted for the remainder of August. Cray Wanderers were the first of three Isthmian Premier teams to visit and 152 fans came to see Whitstable edge a tight game, as Ollie Rowe scored on his first outing since he scored his team's last goal of the 2019-20 season at Hastings. The next game, against Margate on a very windy evening, ended in another 1-0 win with Millbank scoring the goal. This was a very different game to the previous pre-season when Margate had won 6-4 despite a late Millbank hat-trick.

The permitted capacity was increased to 400 in September and 260 turned out to see Folkestone Invicta win an entertaining game 4-2. The in-form visitors took a two goal lead before Medley and TJ Jadama drew Whitstable level, only for Folkestone to score two late goals. Pre-season finished on 5th September at South Central Division Chipstead in a forgettable game that finished goalless.



September – competitive football returns (LLL)

After the long wait, the first three competitive games all ended disappointingly in defeat with twelve goals conceded.

First up was a tricky FA Cup tie at Premier Division Carshalton Athletic on 12th September and although it took the home team 37 minutes to open the scoring, they went on to score five times before Rowe grabbed a late consolation as Whitstable suffered an early cup exit.

The next Saturday a trip to Sittingbourne began another Isthmian League campaign and although Whitstable scored early and late through Jadama and Medley, the hosts scored three times in between to claim the points.

If the Sittingbourne game had been disappointing, the first home game against VCD Athletic was much worse. Millbank gave Whitstable a half time lead, but a poor second half saw the Vickers comfortably win 4-1.

September also brought sad news when club stalwart George Corney passed away aged 77.

Debuts:

12th: Luke Medley, Tom Mills, Dean James, Victor Aiyelabola.

19th: Reece Gillies

October – eight games in a month of mixed fortunes (WWWLLDDL)

A busy October started with three wins against Sussex teams, the first coming in a much improved performance at Haywards Heath Town when first half goals by Rowe and Jadama earned the first points of the season.



Three days later, Whitstable won 3-2 at Three Bridges after coming from behind in a dramatic end to the game, scoring twice in added time. A poor first half display saw the home team claim a two goal lead before a great Millbank free kick reduced the deficit on the stroke of half time. Despite being the better team after the break, Whitstable left it very late as Millbank scored his second in the 93rd minute, then substitute, and academy player, Muhammed Cham hooked in a great winner in the 98th to make the journey home far more enjoyable.

The hat-trick of wins was completed in front of 369 fans at the Belmont against Burgess Hill Town who played some good football only to lose to a flying header by Jadama from a great Medley cross. Dan Eason made sure of the points with a “man of the match” display that included a penalty save.



The run of success came to a resounding halt when Hythe Town visited on the next Tuesday evening. Rowe failed a late fitness test and unfortunately has not featured since due to a knee problem. It was a night to forget for the defence, as Hythe rattled in six goals without reply. Whitstable showed some spirit late in the game, but it was all too little too late.

There followed a break in the league schedule with a journey to new opponents, Ashford Town (Middlesex), in the FA Trophy. It was nice to see two under 18 players among the substitutes for this game. A good number of travelling supporters witnessed a better display against a well organised team. In a game of few opportunities, an outstanding strike from the home side's Matt Bunyan was enough to end Whitstable's interest in the competition. Ashford's reward was a trip to Hastings where they were eventually beaten in a penalty shootout.

Next up was a tricky looking fixture at East Grinstead who had a 100% record in their opening league games and are a very different side to the one that finished bottom in the previous season, having signed a number of high profile players in the summer. Whitstable however surprised the expectant home crowd and were the better side on the day. Medley gave them a half time lead and although former Gillingham player Sean Clohessy equalised, Millbank restored Whitstable's advantage only for the home team to make it 2-2 in the 92nd minute when the referee failed to spot a foul on Eason.

Things did not get any easier with a midweek home game against a Cray Valley team that had just won 3-2 at National League Maidenhead United in the FA Cup to reach the first round proper. Whitstable produced another good performance though and Jadama gave them an early lead that they held until conceding another 92nd equaliser. Most would have taken two draws against two of the more fancied teams, but to suffer late heartbreak in both games was frustrating.

The final Saturday in October brought the eighth game of the month and a return match at VCD, who had won at the Belmont a few weeks earlier. Despite hitting the post and bar, Whitstable were not able to find a way through and a goal in each half by former Whitstable striker Marcus Elliott was enough for the home side to go second in the table, leaving Whitstable in seventh place with eleven points from nine games.

Debuts:

3rd: Simon Kabamba

10th: Ryan Flack

17th: Jack Miles

27th: Will Thomas



November – another enforced break for all teams at the club

That was the end of the action for the time being with “non-elite” football being stopped for a month as part of the government’s response to the rising infection rates across the country. Further announcements would be made towards the end of the month.

The situation meant that football also stopped for all of the youth teams at the club and also the reserves and academy, although the education side of the academy was able to continue.

This season the reserves were moved up a division to the Kent County League Division One Central and East and are currently in tenth place with ten points from their eight games played.

The academy first squad are competing for the first time in the National League U19 Alliance Division B and to date have four points from five games, having earned their first win at Phoenix Sports just before the lockdown.



December – tier 3 means the return to football is unclear

The news that Kent and Medway were to be put into tier 3 in the latest government attempt to control the pandemic places considerable restrictions on the return of football after the second national lockdown ends on 2nd December. This time, it means more difficult decisions for leagues and clubs because it creates uneven playing conditions within a number of divisions that contain teams in different tiers, with tier 3 clubs unable to admit fans. The Isthmian South East Division is an example of this with different restrictions applying to its clubs based in neighbouring counties. Another problem for clubs is the new guidance preventing the sale of food and drink at grounds in tiers 2 and 3. The Isthmian League had previously announced football could resume in December and rearranged the postponed fixtures, but now further news is awaited following consultation with member clubs.



The latest statistics

Playing records to date 2020-21:

Date	Opponents	V	Comp		Score	Att	Goals
12-Sep	Carshalton	A	FA Cup	L	1-5	326	Rowe
19-Sep	Sittingbourne	A	League	L	2-3	263	Jadama, Medley
26-Sep	VCD	H	League	L	1-4	221	Millbank
03-Oct	Haywards Heath	A	League	W	2-0	145	Rowe, Jadama
06-Oct	Three Bridges	A	League	W	3-2	91	Millbank 2, Cham
10-Oct	Burgess Hill	H	League	W	1-0	369	Jadama
13-Oct	Hythe	H	League	L	0-6	255	
17-Oct	Ashford Town (Middx)	A	FA Trophy	L	0-1	163	
24-Oct	East Grinstead	A	League	D	2-2	295	Medley, Millbank
27-Oct	Cray Valley	H	League	D	1-1	271	Jadama
31-Oct	VCD	A	League	L	0-2	126	

Players:

Appearances 2020-21		Goal Scorers 2020-21	
Player	Matches	Player	Goals
James Brown	11	Tijan Jadama	4
Dan Eason	11	Aaron Millbank	4
Tijan Jadama	11	Luke Medley	2
Tom Mills	11	Ollie Rowe	2
Liam Gillies	10	Muhammed Cham	1
Luke Medley	10		
Luke Girt	9		
Aaron Millbank	9		
Simon Kabamba	8		
Reece Gillies	7		
Victor Aiyelabola	6		
Ryan Flack	6		
Jay Hards	6		
Leo Mazzone	6		
Tom Bryant	5		
Ollie Rowe	5		
Dean James	4		
Jack Miles	4		
Charles Etumnu*	3		
Ollie Gray	3		
Muhammed Cham	2		
Will Thomas	1		

Top Career Appearances For 2020-21 Players		Most Career Goals Scored For 2020-21 Players	
Player	Matches	Player	Goals
Dan Eason	235	Aaron Millbank	19
Tom Bryant	152	Harry Stannard	16
Jake Mackenzie	145	Tom Bryant	12
Luke Girt	92	Tijan Jadama	11
Ollie Gray	63	Jake Mackenzie	7
James Brown	58		
Tijan Jadama	49		
Aaron Millbank	48		
Harry Stannard	46		
Liam Gillies	43		