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FA Trophy win for Wealdstone



Wealdstone manager Sam Cox celebrates his team's third goal as Forest Green Rovers boss Robbie Savage kneels to the floor in dejection. Image: Jon Taffel

Cox: 'Excellent' Stones deserve place in quarters

WEALDSTONE boss Sam Cox marvelled at his side's "excellent" performance as the Stones booked their place in the quarter-finals of the FA Trophy with a 3-0 away win over Forest Green Rovers.

Veteran winger Enzo Boldewijn broke the deadlock after 22 minutes, arriving at the back post to nod home Nathan Tshikuna's corner.

Dylan Kadji was then presented with a glorious chance to double the Stones' advantage but could only fire his effort well over the bar when it looked easier to score.

After the hosts had an equaliser disallowed for a marginal offside call, Cox's side held off sustained pressure from Forest Green to kill the game as second-half strikes from Olufela

Tom Norton

Olomala and Sean Adarkwa sealed a memorable away win to advance to the quarter-finals of the FA Trophy.

"I'm very proud of the boys. I thought they were excellent to a man, and the out-of-possession stuff they did was top drawer," Cox told the club website post-match. "I think they defended their box excellently. Our style and the way we've asked them to play in the structure, the work that we did on Thursday with the patterns of our play – they all came out in the first half and probably should have been 3-0 up going into the second half."

Albeit leading 1-0 at half-time, Weald-

stone might have been out of sight had they taken their chances in a game full of action throughout.

But a valiant defensive showing in the second period showed Wealdstone's ability to grind out a result with their backs against the wall.

"We still had lots of defending to do in the second half. I thought the boys defended excellently, and we were hard to break down. I think we got our just rewards, and the boys thoroughly deserved that," added Cox.

"I think that's now three clean sheets and wins on the bounce, and we find ourselves in a really good place. I'm really proud."

Having had two fixtures postponed in recent weeks due to a waterlogged pitch (Tamworth on January 21 and

Gateshead on January 23), the Stones were afforded two weeks off since their last competitive match when Cox's side won at home to Woking on January 17.

When asked if the break might have helped his side going into the game, Cox said: "I think so, yeah. At the time, and probably still looking at it in hindsight, with us having the momentum of two games won, we wanted the Tamworth game on, and we wanted the Gateshead game on.

"I think the boys – where they are at the moment – they just want what's next. They're ready for every challenge that they're facing. It was a difficult Christmas period, and they've overcome that. There's definitely a resilience about the group, certainly a character about the group."

George to lead England

RUGBY UNION



Six Nations opens on Saturday

JAMIE George will lead England into their Guinness Six Nations opener against Wales at Allianz Stadium on Saturday. George's grieving Saracens clubmate Maro Itoje has been given a replacement's role, the first time he has not been in the starting XV for a Championship game since 2020. British and Irish Lions skipper Itoje missed the start of England's training camp in Girona to attend the funeral of his mother Florence in Nigeria following her death in December.

And head coach Steve Borthwick insists giving Itoje a supporting role is the right call in light of recent events but expects him to be greeted with a "big roar" when he steps off the bench.

"We all feel for Maro and his family after the very sad loss of his mum," Borthwick told BBC Sport.

"Maro and I talk a lot as you would expect. It is the right thing for him and the team this week.

"Maro was out in Nigeria and arrived back in camp a day or two after everybody else. We made the decision for this game that it's best for him to start on the bench.

"I think he is going to have a massive impact. I also know the crowd when Maro comes to the touchline, I'm sure he will get a big roar."

Itoje has played every minute of the last 30 Six Nations matches but on this occasion he will form part of England's 'Bomb Squad', which includes fellow Lions Luke Cowan-Dickie, Tom Curry and Henry Pollock among six replacement forwards.

"Maro is good. As you would expect, he has thrown himself into the preparation here and has been a role model and an example to the other players, as he always is," Borthwick said.

"This squad is really building a connection."