

DARTFORD 0 EBBSFLEET UNITED 0

Dartford were held to a 0-0 draw by a stubborn Ebbsfleet United, as the two sides met for the first game of 2021 at Bericote Powerhouse Princes Park in the North Kent Derby.

As the air temperature plummeted throughout the afternoon, the temperature on the pitch increased, and the game remained precariously poised on a knife edge the closer to the ninetieth minute it got. And despite coming closest to breaking the deadlock, the Darts just couldn't find that final killer's instinct in front of goal in a tight game.

The fact that this was a North Kent Derby wasn't lost on either side, and no space was freely given despite this being the first league meeting between the teams at Princes Park since December 2016. Yet the visitors would be forgiven for feeling slightly unlucky when captain Lee Martin pulled up with an injury within fifty seconds! James Dobson replaced him, while teammate Josh Payne took on captaincy responsibilities.

The enforced change in personnel didn't deter the visitors, however, as they created the better chances in the opening exchanges. Bobby-Joe Taylor breached the Dartford defence in the fifth minute, but his shot flew high over the host's crossbar. Ebbsfleet created another opportunity five minutes later, this time on their left flank, as a cross was sent into the box, but the resulting header failed to test Craig King.

It was the host's turn next, as they responded in fine fashion with the superb Nassim L'Ghoul, after some excellent passing and movement of the ball. The move came through the middle of the pitch and L'Ghoul's pass split open the Ebbsfleet defence, this playing teammate Chris Dickson through. Unfortunately, goalkeeper Jordan Holmes was alert, rushing out to make the block before Dickson could pull the trigger.

The Dartford defence was then called into action, as Craig King saved a long-range effort comfortably (20), before Connor Essam made a superb tackle to prevent a possible goal after Jacob Berkeley-Agyepong had been robbed of the ball (22).

As Steve King's side grew into the match, their passing game got sharper when in possession. The football on show from the hosts was exciting, especially when their passing enabled them to switch play with ease. Such tactics were made easier by the strength of David Ijaha, who held up the ball well and made strong defensive tackles when necessary. Unfortunately, he went in a bit too late on his opponent in the 24th minute and earned himself a yellow card.

With thirty minutes on the clock, the two Craigs of Princes Park got in on the action a little more. Firstly Craig King stepped up to make an excellent save from a Jack Paxman effort. Then two minutes later saw Craig Braham-Barratt serve up a platter of superb defending, win the ball and then pass to Chris Dickson. Dickson then drove forward powerfully, fed the ball to L'Ghoul, who was suspiciously pushed over in the penalty area. Unfortunately the referee had other ideas...!

Braham-Barratt was at it again in the 36th minute, as he collected the ball following a signature Jacob Berkeley-Agyepong run. The Dartford full-back sent a peach of a cross towards Dickson, but the latter could only head the ball over Holmes' crossbar. Meanwhile, at the other end, a rare mistake from Tom Bonner in injury time allowed Ebbsfleet to get into the Dartford penalty area, but Craig King was there to save well.

As the second forty-five began, Steve King made his first change in personnel, as he shuffled his side with full-back Jazzi Barnum-Bobb replacing David Ijaha. The visitors, on the other hand, suffered *déjà vu* when Jake Goodman picked up an injury. Unable to continue, he was replaced by Adam Mekki in the 48th minute.

Chris Dickson would show everyone that he's still got possession of his footballing skills, when he drove into the box and wiggled past the Ebbsfleet defence with some excellent ball control in the 55th minute. Sadly, the striker's efforts went unrewarded, as the ball was eventually cleared before he could strike towards goal. Swiftly afterwards saw Ebbsfleet almost commit proverbial suicide when they gifted the hosts an opportunity. Once again, however, the Darts failed to capitalise when Jack Barham's pass failed to reach a teammate.

With the hosts seemingly in control, Ebbsfleet delivered a warning shot to remind them that they were still in the game. Thankfully, the header from a corner crashed off the crossbar and was eventually cleared by the hosts (59). The effort sparked both sides into attacking life, and we were all treated to end-to-end football.

As we reached the 67th minute, Nassim L'Ghoul got into the opposition's box, as his talents continued to cause headaches for the visitors. He saw his initial effort blocked, but as he went for the follow-up, he was brought down in the penalty area for the second time in the game. Once again, however, the referee wasn't obliging and awarded a corner instead! It's fair to say that L'Ghoul was superb throughout the game, causing problems for Ebbsfleet all over the pitch. The fact that he was the most fouled player this afternoon is testament to that, as he was fouled virtually every time he received the ball!

With a corner to face, which sadly came to nothing, goalkeeper Jordan Holmes received a yellow card for voicing his opinions to the referee. His teammate, Adam Mekki also got booked for a foul on Jacob Berkeley-Agyepong (72), as temperatures began to rise on the pitch. The resulting free-kick was lobbed into the box, causing havoc for the defence and allowing Dickson to shoot from a tight angle. Only strong defending by Ben Chapman prevented the Darts from taking the lead, as he cleared the ball off the line.

With twelve minutes remaining, the Ebbsfleet defence were tested again when some excellent play from L'Ghoul was rewarded with a free-kick in a dangerous area. Berkeley-Agyepong stepped up to send a superb cross into the box, which was met by an equally superb header from Connor Essam. It was going in, but once again, a defender was there to clear the ball off the line!

Rewinding back to the 70th minute, Steve King brought off the pacey and hardworking Jack Barham and introduced Elliott Romain, with the hope of the latter adding to his solitary league goal of the

season. Sadly, with one exception, any remaining meaningful efforts would come from the visitors as, first Adam Mekki tried his luck from distance and forced Craig King into a save (80). As the ball swerved at the last second, King could only parry the ball, thus allowing Reece Grant to shoot. Thankfully, the goalkeeper was alert and smothered the ball at the second attempt. Mekki was at it again a minute later, but his long-range strike ricocheted behind for a corner.

That aforementioned exception arrived in the 88th minute after Connor Essam blocked a goal-bound effort in superb manner. Elliott Romain collected the ball and drove forward to win a corner for the hosts. L'Ghoul swung the ball into the box and the Darts managed to strike towards goal from in amongst the melee... once again, however, it was cleared off the line!

The last word went to goalkeeper King, who literally put his body on the line to preserve his clean sheet and a hard-fought point as we entered additional time at the end of the ninety. A long ball over-the-top fell to Reece Grant, who was through on goal. Alert to the situation, King raced off his line to make the save and put himself in harm's way. Grant received a yellow card for the challenge and King was able to continue to the relief of his teammates.

And, so a hard-fought encounter finished with a point apiece. There were some good performances from the Darts in a difficult match, but it was the excellent Nassim L'Ghoul who came away with a thoroughly deserved Man of The Match reward, which was awarded by today's match sponsors, the Goldsmith Group.

TEAMS

DARTFORD: Craig King, Jordan Wynter, Craig Braham-Barratt, David Ijaha, Connor Essam, Tom Bonner ©, Nassim L'Ghoul, Noor Husin, Chris Dickson, Jack Barham, Jacob Berkeley-Agyepong.

SUBSTITUTES: Josh Hill, Elliott Romain, Jazzi Barnum-Bobb, Ky Marsh-Brown, Luke Allen.

EBBSFLEET UTD: Jordan Holmes, Tobi Adebayo-Rowling, Bobby-Joe Taylor, Sefa Kahraman, Jake Goodman, Josh Payne, Ben Chapman, Jack Paxman, Michael West, Lee Martin ©, Rakish Bingham.

SUBSTITUTES: Tom Hadler, Adam Mekki, Will Wood, Reece Grant, James Dobson.

By Chris Palmer