

DARTFORD 1 HUNGERFORD TOWN 1

Dartford's grip on top spot of the National League South table remained intact, after Josh Hill stepped up to earn his team a deserved point in a feisty game against Hungerford Town at Bericote Powerhouse Princes Park.

The Darts arrived hellbent on stretching their unbeaten run against the visitors to four games, but The Crusaders arrived having one of the best away records in the league. Considering that both sides are in-form and challenging for the top four places, gamesmanship and unsporting challenges was the order of the day, as the temperature threatened to boil over on a cold January afternoon.

And it was the in-form visitors who created the first opening in a game of few clear-cut goal-scoring chances, when goalkeeper Daniel Wilks was called into action as early as the fourth minute to clear the danger after The Crusaders' second corner in quick succession.

The hosts soon began to get themselves going, however, as the attacking trio of Nassim L'Ghoul, Charlie Sheringham, and Femi Akinwande combined well together to try and breach a stubborn, yet organised Hungerford defence. With that being said, it was actually midfielder Luke Allen who had the first real opportunity on the Hungerford goal, but his rather tame shot from distance was easily covered by goalkeeper Luke Cairney in the 11th minute.

With neither side able to get a firm grip on the game during the opening exchanges, temperatures threatened to boil over, and referee Alex Blake became a little busier after seventeen minutes. When the hosts cleared the ball for a Hungerford throw, captain James Rusby became too vocal towards Mr Blake and earned himself a yellow card in the process. Six minutes later saw the referee get his card out twice within a minute as first, Josh Hill saw yellow for fouling his man (23), and then David Ijaha received the same treatment for shoving a Hungerford player in the back (24)!

After calming down a little, the Darts focused on trying to edge their noses in front, but couldn't quite find the target. Akinwande was the first to try his luck after collecting the ball from a terrific L'Ghoul cross, but headed the ball wide of the post with Luke Cairney stranded in the center (26). L'Ghoul was able to draw the foul from his man to get his side a free-kick, which Jack Jebb took. He sent a pacey ball into the box, but Hill couldn't quite reach it and Cairney gathered safely (32). A minute later saw L'Ghoul dribble the ball forward, before pulling the trigger, but his effort travelled wide of the Hungerford upright.

Unfortunately, the visitors were always a threat going forward and, despite a harmless effort from Ryan Seager a few minutes earlier, The Crusaders soon edged in front before the break. Craig Fasanmade scored the goal, after getting onto the end of a through-ball, which wrongfooted the Dartford defence, leaving him with more space than usual and enabling him to drill the ball under Daniel Wilks (41).

Now behind in a tricky first-half, Steve King was then forced to make a change in personnel after Jordan Wynter limped off injured. Young Academy player, Cameron Brodie, entered proceedings moments before Mr Blake blew for half-time.

With their noses in front, Hungerford continued their gamesmanship by adding time-wasting to their repertoire as early as the 47th minute, as they resorted to frustrating the hosts. However, it wasn't too long before Luke Cairney was called into action after Rusby fouled Luke Allen. With the Hungerford captain extremely fortunate to escape a second yellow card, Jack Jebb whipped in a superb free-kick, which was met by the head of his captain, Tom Bonner. The big defender sent his perfect header towards the top corner, but somehow Cairney managed to pull off an outstanding save to preserve the visitors' lead (51).

Steve King's men were in full control now, as they drove forward in numbers, probing for a breakthrough. And in the 57th minute they were awarded for their efforts, after Nassim L'Ghoul was fouled. Jebb sent another of his dangerous free-kicks into the Hungerford box, and there was Josh Hill to head the ball home to level the score, and score his first goal of the season.

Chris Dickson was then introduced for Femi Akinwande in the 58th minute, as Steve King looked to shuffle things up a little, before another Hungerford player (Matt Partridge) was shown a yellow card by the referee for literally shoving a Dartford player to the floor (59)!

The towering figure of David Ijaha was, once again, putting in an excellent shift, as he stood strong to help his defenders, while also trying to play the ball through to the midfield. His terrific interception to regain possession in the 61st minute almost paid off, after he had played Charlie Sheringham through with a neat pass. Unfortunately, the latter's effort from distance failed to trouble Cairney in the Hungerford goal.

With the game passing the hour, neither side seemed able to get a grip on proceedings, and things became a little scrappy. Connor Essam would be called into action to clear imminent danger from Ryan Seager (64) and Craig Fasanmade (69), but that was the closest anyone really came to an opening for some considerable time. Even a string of substitutions between the 76th and 88th minutes didn't make any immediate difference, of which Ky Marsh-Brown replaced Nassim L'Ghoul (88) for Dartford.

Yet it was the hosts who regained control towards the end, as the visitors appeared to be satisfied with a point. Luke Allen and Nassim L'Ghoul combined well in the 78th minute to enable the latter to release Chris Dickson into space. Dickson struck the ball well, but Cairney was equal to it. A great run by Marsh-Brown almost opened up the Hungerford defence as we entered stoppage time, but that defence eventually managed to clear the danger.

The Darts weren't finished there, though, as Luke Allen and then Connor Essam almost had the last laugh deep into stoppage time. As the hosts drove forward with one final attack, Allen broke into the box before pulling the trigger. His shot ricocheted off of a Hungerford defender and was sent sailing behind for a corner. Jack Jebb's corner flew towards Essam, who created mayhem with his effort. Yet, somehow, the Hungerford defence managed to scramble the ball clear and earn themselves a share of the points.

And, so a Man of The Match performance and a well-taken goal from Josh Hill earned the Darts a hard-fought, yet valuable, point in a close and feisty encounter with The Crusaders. The draw ensures that Dartford's unbeaten run at Bericote Powerhouse Princes Park in 2021 continues, as they maintain top spot in the National League South table.

TEAMS

DARTFORD: Daniel Wilks, Jordan Wynter, Tom Bonner ©, David Ijaha, Josh Hill, Connor Essam, Nassim L'Ghoul, Luke Allen, Charlie Sheringham, Femi Akinwande, Jack Jebb.

SUBSTITUTES: Chris Dickson, Cameron Brodie, Ky Marsh-Brown, Denilson Carvalho, Jack Barham.

HUNGERFORD TOWN: Luke Cairney, Curtis Angell, Matt Partridge, Keith Emmerson, James Rusby ©, Callum Willmoth, Ryan Seager, Craig Fasanmade, Jake Evans, Andre Burley, Rhys Tyler.

SUBSTITUTES: Louis McGrory, James Harding, Antonio Diaz, Harrison Bayley, Jordan Edwards.

By Chris Palmer