

DARTFORD 2 WELLING UNITED 2

Dartford came from two goals down to earn a point in the Kent Derby, as bottom-of-the-league Welling United arrived at Bericote Powerhouse Princes Park on a cold Saturday afternoon.

As the current pandemic and lockdown continued to wreck havoc with football games across the country, both sides arrived determined to put the recently enforced suspension behind them. However, it was the visitors that rediscovered their form initially, while the Darts spluttered along, searching for second gear.

That being said, however, it was the hosts who actually created the first opportunity, courtesy of the talented Nassim L'Ghoul. Unfortunately, the winger's long-range effort in the sixth minute failed to trouble goalkeeper Charles Cook. At the other end, Daniel Wilks would be called into action to save Lyle Della-Verde's strike with twelve minutes played.

The visitors responded well to proceedings, as they looked to impress new manager Steve Lovell, and should have edged in front in the 15th minute. After pressing forward had forced a corner, Lewis Hobbs was able to jump high enough to reach the ball before everyone else, but his header flew well wide of Wilks' upright.

With momentum on their side, the Wings seized the opportunity of the slow start from the hosts, and were allowed to get their noses in front in the 18th minute. The goal arrived after Jack Jebb had lost out in the midfield, which enabled the visitors to break along the Dartford left flank. Former Dart, Della-Verde, eventually received the ball before squeezing it beyond Wilks.

Despite being stunned, the Darts responded immediately and Charlie Sheringham found himself one-on-one with Charles Cook a minute later, but his effort hit the goalkeeper's legs before falling into the path of David Ijaha. His follow-up shot ricocheted behind for a corner, but the hosts were unable to create an opening from the set-piece.

As Dartford tried to light that spark, the visitors seemed able to clip their wings and slow play down efficiently, despite the best efforts of Luke Allen. The midfield engine never gave up, a feat that would earn him the Man of The Match award later, and his excellent flick-on in the 29th minute failed to reach his teammates, as it went harmlessly behind for a goal-kick.

A minute later saw Connor Essam receive a yellow card for a rather cynical foul, which prevented a dangerous counter-attack from the Wings. The defender got caught out again in the 40th minute but referee, Oliver Mackey, gave him the benefit of the doubt and decided to issue what was surely a final warning.

Unsurprisingly unhappy with his players' first-half performance, Steve King was quick to make a change, as Josh Hill entered the frame to replace Connor Essam. The big defender made an immediate impact on proceedings, but for the wrong reasons, as his challenge on Anthony Cook was deemed to be illegal, and Mr Mackey awarded Welling a penalty! Up stepped Dipo Akinyemi to put the ball beyond Wilks to stretch his side's lead to 2-0 (46).

The hosts tried to respond five minutes later, as Luke Allen burst into the penalty area, but his excellent half-volley flew straight into the arms of Charles Cook. The tireless midfielder was finally rewarded in the 58th minute, after Jacob Berkeley-Agyepong (who had come on to replace Jack Jebb on 55 minutes) fed a great ball to Nassim L'Ghoul, who then sent it into the danger area. The ball found its way to Allen, who smashed the ball home to pull a goal back for his side.

The pendulum had now swung towards the hosts after the arrival of Jacob Berkeley-Agyepong, and manager Steve King must surely have smelled blood, as he introduced Femi Akinwande for Charlie Sheringham in the 59th minute. And, with Welling pinned up against the ropes, Dartford's ignition was finally fully lit, as they plowed forward with confidence.

Within a minute of entering the pitch, Akinwande was the beneficiary of a L'Ghoul flick, but could only shoot straight at Charles Cook. The visiting goalkeeper then saved another Luke Allen effort (62), before picking the ball out of his own goal after Berkeley-Agyepong had equalised a minute later! The goal came after Romain had seen his header blocked, but the Wings failed to clear their lines, and the ball fell into the path of the substitute, who fired home.

With the game now level, it was the hosts who looked the more likely to snatch all three points, as Welling were on the verge of collapse. Yet, the Darts just couldn't find that final knockout blow and, the longer it remained at 2-2, the more the visitors grew back into the game.

To be honest, Dartford should have taken the lead in the 72nd minute, after superb link-up play between L'Ghoul and Berkeley-Agyepong resulted in the latter sending a wonderful ball towards Romain. The striker reached the ball, but couldn't direct his free-header towards the target. The visitors reacted with a rare attack a minute later, and Rhys Murrell-Williamson forced an excellent save out of Daniel Wilks, which served as a warning that his team were still in this encounter.

Elliott Romain would surely wonder how he didn't score his previous effort, yet another opportunity would present itself two minutes into additional time at the end of the ninety. With Welling pegged back in their own half, the Darts piled forward and, once again, Nassim L'Ghoul was the player who created the match-winning opportunity. His wonderful cross flew across the box before reaching Romain. Unfortunately, like before, the striker's header failed to hit the target!

Despite remaining a threat, the Wings were also determined to waste as much time as possible, and Charles Cook was subsequently booked for such tactics in the 77th minute. Mr Mackey had a rather busy game this afternoon, and would issue a yellow card to Josh Hill four minutes later, then Craig Braham-Barratt in stoppage time as well.

In all fairness, this was a game of two halves (literally), in which Dartford will surely be the happier of the two teams after snatching a draw from the jaws of defeat. With a little more accuracy and concentration, such a game would have seen Steve King's men come away with all three points. Nevertheless, the draw sees Dartford remain at the top of the National League South table, having played two more games than two of the three teams directly below them.

TEAMS

DARTFORD: Daniel Wilks, Jazzi Barnum-Bobb, Craig Braham-Barratt, David Ijaha, Connor Essam, Tom Bonner ©, Jack Jebb, Luke Allen, Charlie Sheringham, Nassim L’Ghoul, Elliott Romain.

SUBSTITUTES: Josh Hill, Ky Marsh-Brown, Jacob Berkeley-Agyepong, Jack Barham, Femi Akinwande.

WELLING UNITED: Charles Cook, Chiori Johnson, Lyle Della-Verde, Lewis Hobbs, Anthony Cook, Dipo Akinyemi, Krystian Campbell, Olumide Durojaiye, Rob Strachan, Ade Shokunbi, Darren Oldaker.

SUBSTITUTES: Scott Doe, Dominic Vose, David Hughes, Lionel Ainsworth, Rhys Murrell-Williamson.

By Chris Palmer