

DARTFORD 0 EASTBOURNE BOROUGH 1

Dartford fell to a first league defeat at Bericote Powerhouse Princes Park since mid-November, as an in-form Eastbourne Borough took all three points thanks to a Chris Whelpdale goal late in the first-half.

The Darts began the game on the back of an excellent home run against tonight's opponents, having been unbeaten in the previous six meetings. However, Eastbourne Borough's recent league form suggested that this would be a difficult encounter, and so it proved to be.

With that being said, the fact that this game went ahead at all on a freezing cold Tuesday night is testament to the willingness and hard work of the football club alone! As the groundsman, staff, and volunteers took time out to clear all the snow away from the pitch's covers, as well as ensure that the ground was indeed suitable to play on in the first place. All the hard work was certainly appreciated and they, more than anybody else, deserved a positive result after ninety minutes.

Manager, Steve King, shuffled his side a little, as he kept in mind the amount of games still to be played (provided the powers that be don't cancel the season outright). One notable addition was the returning Ricky Modeste, who made only his second start of the season. From the whistle, Modeste was making his presence felt, and possibly could have had an assist as early as the sixth minute. Having received a great ball from Jazzi Barnum-Bobb, Modeste sprinted down the right flank, before whipping in a pacey cross. Unfortunately, Franco Ravizzoli was alert and able to clear the danger.

The Darts were in control during the opening exchanges and Charlie Sheringham could have edged his side in front in the ninth minute. It was the superb Nassim L'Ghoul (who would be rewarded for his efforts with the Man of The Match award later) that created the opportunity, as he drove forward in excellent fashion, before picking out Sheringham. The latter was through on goal and tried to chip Ravizzoli, but didn't get enough lift on the ball, and the goalkeeper made the save.

The big striker was in the mix of it all again in the 14th minute, having been shoved in the back by his opponent. L'Ghoul swung the free-kick into the box and Sheringham tucked it away, only to be caught offside and see his goal ruled out. Roles would be reversed later on, when Sheringham broke forward and fed a delightful ball towards L'Ghoul, but his pass was just a tad too long and L'Ghoul was closed down by the time he reached the ball (27). A minute later saw another attacking play open up the Borough defence after David Ijaha's through-ball released Luke Allen. The midfielder struck the ball confidently, but his effort was deflected just wide of Ravizzoli's upright.

Despite a few half-chances from distance, the visitors rarely threatened Craig King in the Dartford goal. However, the longer the half went on, the more Eastbourne began to soak up the pressure and begin exploring avenues of getting forward. One such move occurred in the 36th minute when Kai Innocent played Charlie Lambert through. However, the towering figure of Connor Essam was alert to the situation and snuffed out the attack. Undeterred, the visitors continued gaining momentum and were subsequently rewarded for their efforts four minutes before half-time. The attack came along their left flank and Greg Luer was given a little too much space, which enabled him to send in a dangerous cross. Chris Whelpdale was able to get up and head the ball beyond Craig King and give

his side the lead. Sadly for him, the remaining four minutes would be his last, as he injured himself while scoring and would be replaced by Dean Cox at the start of the second forty-five.

The hosts weren't giving up, though, and would rightly feel aggrieved at ending the first-half a goal down. They responded immediately with Ijaha driving towards the edge of the box in time to receive the ball, only to see his strike blocked and cleared by the stubborn Eastbourne defence (45). Seconds later saw L'Ghoul get on the end of a superb cross from Craig Braham-Barratt. The former went for the spectacular and the ball struck the arm of the defender. Amid cries of handball, the ball ricocheted to somebody else within the melee of bodies, but their strike was cleared off the line, before being followed by more calls for handball. The moment seemed to be the visitors' get-out-of-jail free card because, unfortunately, the referee failed to see the offence...

The second forty-five took a little while to get going, as the hosts held the ball well and probed for an opening, while Borough seemed quite content to sit back and delay the clock. Yet, in the 54th minute, only excellent defending by Steven James prevented Jacob Berkeley-Agyepong's piledriver from breaking the net and levelling the score. Teammate Nassim L'Ghoul also made himself an opportunity two minutes later after combining well with Braham-Barratt and Luke Allen. Unfortunately, the conditions would hinder him on this occasion, as he slipped before being able to pull the trigger.

With his team having good spells of possession but seemingly going nowhere fast, Steve King decided to introduce fresh pairs of legs by replacing Ricky Modeste with Femi Akinwande (58) and Jacob Berkeley-Agyepong with Jack Barham (71). His side would create opportunities as the half progressed, as L'Ghoul shot over the crossbar with an overhead kick (75), Craig King's long kick was then met by the head of Connor Essam, who forced an excellent save from Ravizzoli (78), and Akinwande used his strength to force his way into shooting position, before sending his effort wide of the target (81).

Meanwhile, Eastbourne offered very little in attack, despite always posing a threat on the counter-attack, and they should consider themselves fortunate not to have conceded late on. Another Dartford attack was rewarded with a corner, which was sent into the box and appeared to strike the arm of a defender. Once again, however, the referee wasn't interested and awarded another corner instead! This one reached the towering header of Tom Bonner, who connected with the ball perfectly, only to see it crash off of the crossbar in the 87th minute. As the ball ricocheted downwards, the Captain's defensive partner, Connor Essam, arrived in time for the follow-up header, but received an opposition boot to the face for his efforts!

Despite not being given the decision by the referee, the Darts continued throwing men forward, and it would be the two defenders once again who almost came to the rescue. First Bonner connected with the ball beautifully following some headed pinball in the Borough box, only for his strike to sail straight into Ravizzoli's arms (90+1), before Essam received a wonderful ball from Jazz Barnum-Bobb, which found the defender space to shoot. Once again, however, the goalkeeper was able to save Essam's well-struck effort.

And, so the Darts left the pitch having fallen to a first league defeat at Bericote Powerhouse Princes Park of this year. With a little more accuracy and luck, the result would surely have been completely different, but it just wasn't to be tonight. One thing is for certain though, Tom Bonner and Co will intend to make amends next time out.

TEAMS

DARTFORD: Craig King, Jazzi Barnum-Bobb, Craig Braham-Barratt, David Ijaha, Connor Essam, Tom Bonner ©, Ricky Modeste, Luke Allen, Charlie Sheringham, Jacob Berkely-Agyepong, Nassim L'Ghoul.

SUBSTITUTES: Femi Akinwande, Elliott Romain, Jack Barham, Josh Hill, Jack Jebb.

EASTBOURNE BOROUGH: Franco Ravizzoli, James Vaughan, Kai Innocent, James Ferry ©, Mitchell Dickenson, Steven James, Joel Rollinson, James Hammond, Greg Luer, Charlie Lambert, Chris Whelpdale.

SUBSTITUTES: Charlie Towning, Dean Cox, Daniel Blackmore, Leone Gravata, Luke Glover.

By Chris Palmer