

## **DARTFORD 1 BILLERICAY TOWN 0**

Dartford's unbeaten run at Bericote Powerhouse Princes Park continued, as an early mistake by goalkeeper Damian Niemczycki was pounced on and converted by an in-form Jake Robinson, to set the Darts on the way to a ninth league win in fifteen games.

The hosts started brightly and came close as early as the fourth minute, after Josh Clarke's excellent run and cross set up Jake Robinson at the first time of asking. Unfortunately, the striker's header flew agonisingly over the Billericay crossbar.

And, while Billericay held a tight unit together as the Darts controlled the ball well in possession, Josh Wright's poor back-pass put Oxford United loanee, Damian Niemczycki, under pressure from the rushing Ade Azeez. The debutant goalkeeper panicked, passed straight to Robinson, who couldn't miss to give the hosts a tenth-minute lead.

The visitors tried to respond, but were fortunate to not be two goals behind by the time we reached the eighteenth minute. Noor Husin split the defence open with a marvellous pass towards Tyrique Hyde, who was brought down inside the box. However the referee, Mr Joel Mannix, showed absolutely no interest whatsoever and it remained 1-0.

After the 21st minute, the Blues (wearing red!) roamed forward and Joe Felix got inside from their right before pulling the trigger. Thankfully, his effort failed to test Dan Wilks between the Dartford sticks. The goalkeeper was tested seven minutes later, when a long-range effort from Josh Smile forced him into action. However, the loose ball fell towards Shaquile Coulthirst who struck it first time, forcing Connor Essam to intervene with a superb block.

As we reached the 37th minute, another excellent decision from Dartford saw a brilliant ball played towards Robinson, who raced clear of the defence. Unfortunately, Niemczycki was equally alert and rushed off his line to prevent Robinson from getting to the ball first. Josh Smile then tried his luck at the other end, but Wilks wasn't to be beaten either (42).

The Dartford number one was forced into action again early in the second-half, as he saved well from Jack Munns (51) after Billericay had made a more positive start.

The hosts, meanwhile, appeared to be stuttering a little, so manager Steve King brought on George Porter to replace Tyrique Hyde on 56 minutes. Six minutes later saw the league leaders come agonisingly close when Jernade Meade's perfect cross found Ade Azeez in the box. Unfortunately, the top-scorer's header flew just over the Billericay crossbar.

A series of events then took place, which ultimately cost the visitors any chance of a point. An excellent move by Robinson forced Marvel Ekpiteta to make the foul and, consequently, a yellow card (67). Robinson then set up Porter with a lovely squared ball, but the latter's effort was blocked by the Billericay defence (70), before Robinson once again raced clear of the defence and invited Niemczycki to leave his line. The goalkeeper duly obliged and rushed out, taking out the striker on the edge of his area.

As Robinson received lengthy treatment, Mr Mannix took plenty of time to assess the situation. Being left with no choice, he subsequently issued Niemczycki a straight red card, leaving Toby Stevenson to take his place between the sticks (74). Kieran Murtagh eventually stepped up to take the free-kick, but Stevenson ironically made the save to keep the 10-men in the contest (78), before Robinson left the field to be replaced by Dan Roberts with ten minutes remaining.

Before that took place, the visitors had made changes themselves, and two former Dartford players were introduced to try and rescue something for the struggling side. Both Bagasan Graham and Norman Wabo came on for Shaquile Coulthirst and Jack Munns respectively in the 71st minute. Wabo, in particular, looked quite lively but couldn't get the better of the excellent Dartford defence.

They'd make a final change three minutes from the ninety, when Kurtis Cumberbatch replaced Josh Smile, but it made little difference. In fact, it was the hosts who came closest to doubling their advantage when another good attacking move saw George Porter hit the crossbar in the 90th minute.

Neither side could really grab the game by the scruff of the neck on this cold afternoon, but Dartford did just shade it and took the opportunity when it presented itself. Both teams offered strong defensive units throughout, but Tom Bonner, Ronnie Vint, and Connor Essam stood strongest and weren't to be beaten. The latter received a well-deserved Man of The Match award in front of 1,156 supporters, as Dartford took the victory to remain a point clear at the top of the National League South table.

## **TEAMS**

**DARTFORD:** Dan Wilks, Josh Clarke, Jernade Meade, Connor Essam, Ronnie Vint, Tom Bonner ©, Noor Husin, Kieran Murtagh, Jake Robinson, Tyrique Hyde, Ade Azeez.

**SUBSTITUTES:** Danny Leonard, George Porter, Michael Kedman, Dan Roberts, Luke Wanadio.

**BILLERICAY:** Damian Niemczycki, Toby Stevenson, Aaron Ekumah, Marvel Ekpiteta, Michael Chambers ©, Josh Smile, Shaquile Coulthirst, Jack Munns, Joe Felix, Tariq Hinds, Josh Wright.

**SUBSTITUTES:** Denilson Carvalho, Kurtis Cumberbatch, Norman Wabo, Toby King, Bagasan Graham.

**By Chris Palmer**