

DARTFORD 3 ST ALBANS CITY 1

Kieran Murtagh bagged a brace and an assist in a Man of The Match performance, as Dartford returned to winning ways in front of 1,012 supporters at Bericote Powerhouse Princes Park.

As the teams settled into their formations before the start on a chilly and windy Spring afternoon, long-serving Captain, Tom Bonner, was presented with an award from Co-Chairman Steve Irving for having reached 400 starts for the club in the previous game. The ever-reliable Skipper received a well-deserved standing ovation before taking his place in the Dartford backline in his 401st start. What an incredible achievement indeed.

The opening exchanges of the game, however, offered extremely little in terms of excitement, as both sides fought a battle more fitting to a game of chess instead of a game of football. That was until the sixteenth minute at least. Dartford's midfield trio of Samir Carruthers, Kieran Murtagh, and Jack Jebb all combined to torment the visitors, before Jebb clipped a delightful ball towards Marcus Dinanga. Unfortunately, the striker's attempt to chest it down wasn't quite enough and goalkeeper Michael Johnson collected with ease.

The hosts began to settle into more of a rhythm soon after, as they started to ask questions of the St Albans City defence. Kristian Campbell, in particular, was getting forward often and sent in a delicious cross from the left-flank after 27 minutes. It caused a little trouble inside the box, and eventually fell to present Jebb with the first real effort of the afternoon. Luckily for the visitors, it flashed just wide of Johnson's far post.

The pitch opened up more soon after, as both sides tried to gain the upper hand. The hosts went first via a delightful ball from Samir Carruthers, which released Kalala to race down the right wing. The lively winger got the better of Alex Lankshear, before sending a wickedly low cross into the box. Unbelievably, the ball flew narrowly wide of the post after having ricocheted off of a St Albans defender (33).

The Saints responded with a good move of their own five minutes later, after David Noble won the ball in the midfield before threading it out towards Zane Banton. He broke forward with pace along the St Albans' left-flank, before squaring the ball to John Goddard. Thankfully, the latter's strike sailed just wide of Reice Charles-Cook's upright.

However, that little moment didn't deter the Darts, who attacked once again. Jebb delivered another trademark ball into the St Albans box, which Ade Azeez struck with a superb volley. But, Johnson was equal to it with a superb save to keep the deadlock intact (43). Yet, the hosts weren't finished. The resulting corner was whipped in by Jebb, and up leapt Kieran Murtagh to guide the ball into the back of the net with a minute of the half remaining.

The goal had a positive impact on Steve King's side, as they started the second-half buzzing. Marcus Dinanga and Kalvin Kalala combined well, which led to the latter delivering yet another teasing cross into the Saints' box. On this occasion, though, Joy Mukena was on hand to slide the danger clear (47).

Once again, however, the visitors had to face a Dartford corner. And, once again, the ball found Murtagh. However, this time the midfielder couldn't find the target (48).

Yet, just as the hosts were beginning to look comfortable, St Albans managed to pull themselves level. As David Noble, Kyran Wiltshire, and Zane Banton combined together with some decent passes, the latter found space before crossing into the Dartford danger area. Shaun Jeffers rushed into the box and met the ball with a header, which had the beating of Reice Charles-Cook (54).

Referee, Mr Ben Atkinson, then issued Kieran Murtagh with the first yellow card of the afternoon for a foul on Shaun Jeffers (56). The subsequent free-kick was taken by John Goddard, but Tom Bonner's defensive unit dealt with it confidently.

Ade Azeez was the next player to go into Mr Atkinson's book five minutes later for another late challenge, before the visitors created a half-chance via Banton, which Reice Charles-Cook collected with ease (62).

The yellow cards continued coming, as Kyran Wiltshire was booked for a foul approximately 18 yards outside his team's penalty area. Jack Jebb sent the free-kick into the box, which the Saints failed to clear. The ball eventually fell to Kieran Murtagh, who poked the ball across the goal and into the far post (65). Having not scored all season, the Dartford number eight had doubled his tally in what was proving to be an impressive performance.

We then had our first change in personnel of the afternoon, as St Albans City introduced Mitchell Weiss for Joe Neil (70). This would be followed by a double substitution in the 80th minute, when David Noble and John Goddard were replaced by Bayley Brown and Liam Sole respectively.

Steve King responded with a double substitution on 74 minutes, as Danny Leonard and Jordan Greenidge came on for Calvin Kalala and Ade Azeez, before Olumide Durojaiye replaced Samir Carruthers late on (82).

Yet, before the latter changes, Steve King's side had stretched their lead to 3-1. A mistake in the middle of the park by Noble enabled the hosts to capitalise. As Greenidge won the ball, he passed to Murtagh, who then found Marcus Dinanga with a great ball. Dinanga was through and composed himself before sending the ball beyond the hapless Johnson to net his ninth goal of the season with just eleven minutes remaining.

The visitors tried to claw their way back into the game, as Sole forced a fine save out of Reice Charles-Cook (89), before Jeffers missed the target from close range in stoppage time. However, Tom Bonner and Co weren't going to be denied the victory this afternoon.

The result sees Dartford remain in fourth place in the National League South table, as they chase down Ebbsfleet United for third, whilst beginning to pull clear of Oxford City in fifth.

TEAMS

DARTFORD: Reice Charles-Cook, Jordan Wynter, Kristian Campbell, Samir Carruthers, Kory Roberts, Tom Bonner ©, Calvin Kalala, Kieran Murtagh, Marcus Dinanga, Jack Jebb, Ade Azeez.

SUBSTITUTES: Jake Robinson, Danny Leonard, Jordan Greenidge, Tyrique Hyde, Olumide Durojaiye.

ST ALBANS CITY: Michael Johnson, Kyran Wiltshire, Michael Clark, Shaun Jeffers, Zane Banton, David Noble ©, Alex Lankshear, Callum Adebijoye, Joy Mukona, John Goddard, Joe Neil.

SUBSTITUTES: Tom Bender, Bayley Brown, Liam Sole, Dave Diedhiou, Mitchell Weiss.

By Chris Palmer