

Season's Review

The now traditional disorganised pre-season started on 4th August with a friendly match at Phoenix Sports of the Kent County League. Dartford had lost their goalkeeper at short notice and brought with them only twelve players, none of whom was a recognised goalkeeper. Two new faces were in evidence, Richard Glynn who was co-opted to play in goal for the first half and Lysander Bryant, both of whom had been playing football at university. Dartford lost 0-1 to a goal after half an hour when a right wing cross was touched in from close range. An opportunity to equalise was squandered when Frank Cole deposited a penalty kick into the foliage behind the goal.

The second pre-season game was played the following Wednesday at Oxford Road when Tonbridge AFC Reserves who had finished ninth in the Southern Division of the Suburban League the previous season, were entertained. Still with no regular goalkeeper, Paul Baxter of Paul Johns Sunday side helped out. A trial was given to Kirk Desson of Gravesend and Northfleet in the number nine shirt. This was a much more worthwhile workout which Dartford won 3-0 with goals from Matt Smith, Wayne Grizzle and Richard Glynn.

August

Dartford had no game scheduled for the first Saturday of the season and were then frustrated as the midweek game against Chatham and the following Saturday's fixture with Lordswood were postponed.

The season finally kicked off on Wednesday 22nd with the visit of Chatham Town who had easily overcome Greenwich Borough 5-2 the previous Saturday. Their ranks included former Dartford Youth player Danny Murkin and probably would have included Courtney Rayfield had he not turned his ankle over in the Greenwich game.

Dartford took the lead after half an hour when a free kick from the right wing, was headed firmly in at the far post by Jamie Rogers. Five minutes later Murkin was sent off for use of foul language, a victim of the FA's new offensive against swearing on the pitch, and it would be a few matches yet before we would see a game completed with all of the players remaining at full time. In spite of this handicap, Chatham equalised halfway through the second half when Phil Harryman gave away a penalty which was converted by Danny Jeffrey. Chatham were reduced to nine men for the last fifteen minutes through injury but Dartford were unable to capitalise and the match finished 1-1.

On the following Tuesday Dartford thrashed Erith Town 6-0 on a day of high humidity and temperatures of 90°F. The goals came from Richard Usherwood (2), Steve Marriner (2), and substitutes Lysander Bryant and Wayne Grizzle.

P. 2 W. 1 D. 1 L. 0 F. 7 A. 1 Pts. 4 Pos. 3rd

September

September started with a rare visit to Tunbridge Wells who had resurrected their Reserve team using the previous season's Youth Team as its foundation. After a goalless first half, Wayne Grizzle opened the scoring following some good work by Richard Usherwood down the right wing. Two minutes later Willie O'Sullivan made it 2-0 with a headed effort. Gary East was sent off for foul language before Robert Perkins tapped in with two minutes to go to make it 2-1.

Next up were landlords and then current league leaders Cray Wanderers. Dartford were no match for the muscular and experienced Cray team and perhaps adopted the wrong tactics in the circumstances, playing to their opponents strengths rather than their own. They were a goal down within fifty seconds when a long distance punt dropped just inside the post. Further behind ten minutes later when a defensive mix up on the edge of the box allowed Cray to score, Dartford reduced the arrears straight from the restart when Matt Smith did well to dribble through the defence and scoop the ball into the roof of the net. On the half hour, a goal that Phil Harryman will be keen to forget was scored by his opposite number Mark Brooks whose clearance bounced over his head into the goal. Cray's fourth goal came shortly before half time when poor marking at a corner allowed Sam Wright to head in. In the second half, a remarkable display of petulance saw Cray's midfielder Robbie Palmer talk himself off the pitch with his side 4-1 ahead and cruising to victory.

During the month we learned of the death of former fixture secretary Geoff Riley who body was discovered in his parked car. Our thoughts go out to his young daughter.

The Reserves now embarked on a run of four straight victories. First to the slaughter was a young Beckenham Town side at Oxford Road. Dartford struggled to make much headway in the first half and it was not until halfway through the second period that the deadlock was broken when Steve Marriner's cross was headed over the goalkeeper by Frank Cole. Beckenham countered this setback by pushing an extra man forward and were rewarded by a goal from Dennis Reid who beat the offside trap before slipping the ball under Phil Harryman. A late rally by Dartford saw Wayne Grizzle set up goals for Steve Marriner - a far post header from a difficult angle - and Matt Smith.

Around this time, Paul Johns went into hospital for an operation to equalise the length of his legs putting him out of action for six months.

Thamesmead Town are usually one of the stronger teams in the Reserve Division but this season they are rebuilding under the former Dartford Youth management team of Grant Spelling and Simon Halsey. Their ranks included former Dartford players Matt Longhurst, Paul Gilchrist and Darren Thomson. On the day, Dartford's forwards were rampant with Marriner and Grizzle running the Thamesmead defence ragged. The first goal came after twenty minutes when a ball hoisted into the box by Willie O'Sullivan found Marriner in space behind the defence with enough time to pick his spot. Thamesmead equalised early in the second half with a headed goal from a corner. Dartford then edged ahead when O'Sullivan freed Usherwood wide on the right and he went on to beat several defenders and the goalkeeper before slotting the ball into the goal. Only two minutes later a deep cross from Marriner was headed in at the far post by Glenn McTaggart. The fourth goal was scored by Matt Fagan who headed in Usherwood's cross.

P. 6 W. 4 D. 1 L. 1 F. 17 A. 8 Pts. 13 Pos. 3rd

October

During the month of October, the league programme all but ground to a halt with two legged Division One Cup matches taking centre stage. Dartford were granted a bye from the first round and were consequently idle for three of the four Saturdays in the month. They did however manage a fairly comfortable 2-0 victory over Greenwich Borough on the day that the First Team were playing Gravesend and Northfleet in the FA Cup. Both goals, one in each half, were scored by Matt Smith who had a fine game. In the first half he picked up a poor clearance from the goalkeeper and rolled the ball into the net from the edge of the box. In the second half he ran onto a through ball from Jamie Rogers and buried it from the edge of the eighteen yard box. A frustrated Greenwich Borough manager was sent off for comments made to the referee.

P. 7 W. 5 D. 1 L. 1 F. 19 A. 8 Pts. 16 Pos. 3rd

November

November saw the return of Joe Fitzpatrick to the fold after a brief sojourn at Bromley, Paul Wilson made his come back after a long lay off through injury and Glenn McTaggart left to try his luck as a member of Thamesmead Town's first team squad. There were other changes at the club which we shall come to later.

The first match played was the return fixture at Greenwich Borough where the small crowd was treated to a sparkling display of forward play from Marriner and Smith who were still looking for first team recognition. Each scored fairly simple, if well taken, tap ins to give Dartford a 2-0 lead inside the first twenty minutes. Matt Fagan then threaded the ball through into the space behind the defence and Smith, reacting first, just beat the goalkeeper to the ball, striking it with the outside of his right boot into the net. Just before half time a breathtaking piece of skill by Marriner saw him turn his full back and score with a low shot from a tight angle. Peter Scullion scored the all important fifth goal at his second attempt.

A trip to Lordswood followed the first snow of the winter. A good first half display saw Dartford go in at the break 1-0 ahead, Marriner's seventh minute shot from the edge of the box giving the home 'keeper no chance. In the second half they let it slip rather, and the inevitable equaliser came three minutes from time.

Dartford entered the Division One Cup at the second round stage and a two legged tie with Folkestone Invicta; the first match being played at Cheriton Road. This was the first opportunity to gauge the strength of the Southern Section where Folkestone were occupying a mid table position. The visitors had the best of the first half yet trailed 0-1 as a result of a penalty awarded against Peter Scullion for handball. In the second half Dartford were chasing the game and conceded a second goal following a quickly taken free kick on the half way line. The ball was passed across the pitch to the right wing before a pin point cross into the box was headed in by the Folkestone substitute. The management were not unduly concerned by the scoreline feeling that the deficit could be made up in the return match.

However, before that match could take place, Gary Julians parted company with the club being replaced by Tony Burman in a caretaker role. This had ramifications throughout the club as the following Saturday Willie O'Sullivan and Nicky Johns resigned as manager and coach of the Reserve team, allegedly piqued at not being offered the opportunity to move on to the First Team.

Nevertheless, their last game in charge was an action packed affair with everyone playing as though their life depended on it. Finally breaking through just after half time, Dartford built up a 2-0 lead which would have meant extra time at least, had Folkestone not scored with ten minutes left to make the score 2-1, 2-3 on aggregate.

P. 9 W. 6 D. 2 L. 1 F. 25 A. 9 Pts. 20 Pos. 2nd

December

As luck would have it there followed a three week hiatus before the next fixture which was the Kent Intermediate Cup Second Round tie away at Deal Town. Tommy Sampson, another former Dartford player, was appointed First Team manager on 11th December, and it was agreed that he should be involved in the choice of Reserve Team manager. It was also decided that Youth Team managers Danny Sulman and Steve Sales should look after team affairs in the meanwhile. Tony Burman had given Steve Marriner a chance in the First Team and he had taken full advantage; his services were consequently lost to the reserves for the remainder of the season. This was hardly surprising as he had developed rapidly as a consequence of expert coaching whilst at college in America. New additions to the squad came in the shape of Joe Robson, Gary Saunders and Ross Baker from the Youth Team.

And so to the Deal match. With everybody eager to impress, the whole team looked much more lively than they had in the recent past; Robson in particular gave a good account of himself at right back. Dartford conceded a goal midway through the first half before equalising on the half hour, this a demonstration of clinical finishing from Matt Smith. In the second half Dartford were gifted a goal when Smith intercepted a wayward backpass and dispatched the ball with aplomb. Deal equalised almost immediately when Stiggy Meadows was given too much room in the box. The game continued to ebb and flow and it was only in the second period of extra time that Dartford's young legs gave out as they conceded three goals in a five minute spell to leave Deal victors by the rather flattering margin of 5-2.

On the last Saturday of the year, Thamesmead Town were visitors to Oxford Road and proving that the earlier 4-1 drubbing was no fluke, Dartford sent them away empty handed although the 4-0 scoreline was hardly a reflection of the dour game that unfolded. Frank Cole opened the scoring with a trademark twenty five yard shot having been set up by a neat layoff by Wayne Grizzle. Shortly before half time Jamie Rogers rose above the defence to head in Richard Usherwood's corner. In the second half, a mis-hit cross from Matt Fagan fell to Usherwood on the right wing. He slipped the ball inside for Matt Smith to toe poke home. The fourth goal came five minutes from the end. Some quick footwork by Fagan allowed him to get round his full back and curl the ball over the goalkeeper into the top right hand corner of the net.

At the half way mark in the league competition, Dartford lay second in the table, two points behind Cray Wanderers but with two games in hand. VCD seemed the most likely team to challenge the top two but they were a further eleven points behind with three games in hand.

P. 10 W. 7 D. 2 L. 1 F. 29 A. 9 Pts. 23 Pos. 2nd

January

Only two matches were played in January but we began to see signs of things to come with the occasional appearance of a First Team squad player not required for Southern League duties.

The first game in the new year was a goal-fest at home to Furness. Dartford won 5-4 in terms of goals scored and 11-9 in terms of players remaining on the pitch at the final whistle. The first goal was a penalty after just six minutes awarded for a foul on Paul Wilson. The same player made no mistake with the spot kick. After twenty minutes a free kick was played into the space between the Dartford defence and the goalkeeper and a Furness forward was quickly off the mark to chip it over Phil Harryman. Dartford's lead was restored five minutes later when Matt Fagan's free kick from the byeline was only partially cleared and Wilson was on hand to bury the loose ball. Wilson completed his hat trick two minutes later, heading in Fagan's corner. Almost immediately Furness were back in the game when a poor goal kick fell at the feet of Brown who slotted the ball past Harryman. On the stroke of half-time, Furness' John Maine scored his fifteenth goal of the season to make it 3-3.

Dartford eased ahead again seventeen minutes into the second half when the ball was hooked on by Frank Cole to Matt Smith who proceeded to chip the goalkeeper from twenty five yards. Cole's free kick a little later found Tony Kyle in space at the far post where he was able to walk the ball into the net. Furness made the score 5-4 ten minutes before the end before having two players sent off in the final minute.

Tommy Sampson organised a friendly match at Bromley during the following week in order to assess some of the Reserve team players. For the record, the game was won 1-0 with Matt Smith scoring Dartford's goal. Tommy was impressed enough by what he saw to introduce Smith, Fagan and Usherwood into the First Team squad.

A fairly ordinary return match against Cray Wanderers, who were still heading the table, ended in a 0-0 draw. This result probably suited Cray more than it did Dartford. Phil Harryman's handling was particularly good as he claimed his fifth clean sheet of the season.

P. 12 W. 8 D. 3 L. 1 F. 34 A. 13 Pts. 27 Pos. 2nd

February

Into February, and the first opponents were VCD Athletic who were fifth in the table twelve points behind Dartford but having played four games less. Dartford were slightly understrength being without Kyle, Fagan, Smith and Usherwood all of whom were playing for the First Team in their 5-2 drubbing of Erith and Belvedere. Centre back Keith Marshall who had previously played for Slade Green made his debut, and Mitchell Crawley, nursing a ham-string injury, made his first appearance for the Reserves in nearly four years having returned to the club from Tonbridge. On the day, the experienced VCD team were just too good for Dartford and were well worth their 3-0 win.

Prior to the next match at home to Lordswood, an announcement was finally made regarding the management team for the Reserves when Steve Robinson and former Reserve Team assistant manager Mick Crawley were installed. The player merry-go-round continued with Steve Johns, Frank Cole and Michael Morgan leaving to join Tonbridge. Coming into the club were Phil Eagle (formerly of Greenwich Borough, Fisher Athletic and more recently Stansfield O&B of the Kent County

League), Shane Holbrook who returned from working abroad, and Daniel 'Ted' Ansell who was previously associated with Bromley.

Lordswood brought the bare eleven players having been relieved of three others by the First Team at short notice. They found themselves trailing by 3-0 at half time thanks to another Paul Wilson hat-trick. Whilst the first half was played in driving snow, the second half was bathed in bright sunshine. Lordswood obtained a consolation goal, seemingly offside, ten minutes into the second period. It was pleasing to see that Holbrook had lost little, if any, of his pace and could still put over an accurate cross following nearly a year out of the game.

P. 14 W. 9 D. 3 L. 2 F. 37 A. 17 Pts. 30 Pos. 2nd

March

Finally the Reserves were starting to play matches each Saturday, but with players coming and going regularly, the chosen eleven were rarely able to gel as a team.

The return match against VCD was played on a freezing cold afternoon at Oakwood. The recently transfer listed Chris Arnold made a rare appearance for the Reserves at number nine. Dartford were in control for the first twenty minutes or so yet VCD established a lead in spectacular style. The ball was played across the back line to Tony Kyle at right back. He was immediately put under pressure and his attempted back pass flew over Steve Williams into the net from fully thirty yards. Insult was added to injury a minute later as John King broke down the left wing, cut inside, and shot low into the far corner of the net. VCD were 2-0 up having had only one shot! Overall this was a disjointed performance against a well organised side. Joe Fitzpatrick in midfield and Shane Holbrook on the left wing turned in good performances however.

The match at Green Court Road against Furness was played with a gale blowing at right angles across the pitch. Tommy's latest signing, Danny Pitts from Purfleet scored a wonderful goal after half an hour. The ball was flicked into his path as he raced into the box and he unleashed a powerful shot into the left hand corner of the net. Early in the second half, John Maine raced through the Dartford defence, shaking off a challenge from Jamie Rogers before shooting under Phil Harryman just inside the near post.

Once again Tommy Sampson arranged a midweek friendly, this time at a damp, misty Lordswood. The result was a 0-1 defeat but it allowed the manager to run the rule over Holbrook, Eagle, Pitts, Rogers and his latest trialist, Sam Keevill, lately of Basingstoke.

Last Saturday the Reserves were at Erith Town who earlier in the season they had beaten 6-0. Five players remained from that Dartford team but the result was more of the same - a 4-1 win. The pitch was in good condition given the amount of rain that had fallen during the week. And although starting dry the afternoon soon degenerated into yet more heavy showers.

Dartford opened the scoring after thirty minutes. A superbly struck shot from outside the area by Joe Fitzpatrick was only parried by the Erith goalkeeper to Wayne Grizzle who gratefully turned the ball into the net. Four minutes later Paul Wilson struck. The ball was crossed from the left and he turned and shot low into the far corner. Just before half time Dartford conceded a sloppy goal when a ball floated in from the right wing was headed in completely unchallenged at the far post. Wayne Grizzle turned provider for Paul Wilson to score the third goal which he stabbed home at the second attempt before Grizzle completed the scoring. He ran down the right wing before shooting from an almost impossible angle into the far side of the goal to round off a satisfying afternoon. With three games remaining however, it seems unlikely that Dartford will be able to win the division.

P. 17 W. 11 D. 4 L. 3 F. 45 A. 22 Pts. 37 Pos. 2nd