

## Season's Review

### Kent League

As you will recall, last season the Kent League Division One was split on a North / South regional basis, in part to reduce travelling time and costs. After the resounding success of that experiment, a further change was proposed with the clubs finishing in the top six of each division this season forming Division One next year, with the remaining clubs forming Division Two. The aim is to introduce a more competitive edge to the league, with promotion and relegation between the two divisions. The unfortunate side-effect of this of course being the restoration of the travelling that it was so important to reduce in previous years.

For this season both sections were brought up to their full complement of 12 teams by the inclusion of Corinthian and Erith and Belvedere in the Northern section and Maidstone United Reserves in the Southern section. Greenwich Borough had already withdrawn. A new three year sponsorship deal was negotiated with Go Travel Independent Travel Agents of Petts Wood.

### Pre Season

After a number of seasons ground sharing with today's visitors at Oxford Road, the directors have agreed terms with Kent County League club Crockenhill to share their ground at Wested. Unfortunately the ground is not provided with floodlights; a circumstance which in part led to their withdrawal from the Kent League a few seasons ago.

Steve Robinson who returned to the club in February 2003 in the capacity of Reserve team Manager, continued in that role for the current season with the added bonus that he would also be available as a player. New faces at the start of the season included goalkeeper Ben Jolley from Ashford Town, utility player Richard Everitt from Fleetdown United and midfielder Terry McCann from Gravesend and Northfleet's PACE team. Stuart Nicholson made a brief reappearance following his return from New Zealand as did Mitchell Crawley before moving on to Cray Wanderers. Other trialists included former youth team player Chris Jones, American Chris Jack, and Gary East from Tumbridge Wells.

The pre-season matches got off to a slow start in the sunshine at Milton Athletic in Sittingbourne on 20th July. This public training session ended in a 2-4 defeat. Judging by their reaction, the result had more significance for the home side than the visitors. For the record, Dartford's goals came from Steve Robinson whose shot went in off the underside of the crossbar and later from Rob Browning who, attacking down the left flank, beat the goalkeeper from fifteen yards.

The pace was stepped up a notch for the visit to VCD Athletic at Oakwood. A 1-1 draw was gained when Wayne Grizzle beat the offside trap and scored with a wonderful shot past the home goalkeeper with just two minutes remaining.

A double header followed at Deal Town, with the reserves match being followed by a first team friendly. Terrible defending gave Deal three goals which were sandwiched between a ninth minute opener from Ted Ansell - a low shot from the edge of the box - and another terrific goal from Wayne Grizzle who, receiving the ball from a throw in, turned in the box and put in an unstoppable shot across the goal.

At this stage it is more about building up fitness and performances rather than results, however, the match at the Small Glen against Slade Green's Premier Division team should not have been the mismatch that it turned out to be, but the Dartford players simply did not perform. Robinson made five changes at half time but this failed to stem the flow. Matt Longhurst and Phil Harryman shared goalkeeping duties and Matt Smith scored the consolation goal halfway through the second half, but Slade Green were well worth their 6-1 victory.

With Dave Wadhams temporarily in charge, the last pre-season friendly game was played against Greenwich Borough's first team on their back pitch. The only goal of the match was scored when Greenwich sliced through the Dartford defence after seven minutes. This was a much better performance, but there still appeared to be something missing.

#### August

Three away league matches were scheduled for August. Eventually only two were played and these yielded but one point. The opener was against today's visitors, Cray Wanderers, at Oxford Road. Cray were gifted a goal shortly before half time although it must be said that Lewis Wood finished well. Both sides had good chances in the second half - Cray had a goal disallowed for offside and Joe Fitzpatrick had a goalbound shot cleared off the line, but overall Cray shaded it.

The following Saturday it was off to Gay Dawn Farm, the scene of some brutal encounters in years gone by, to play the newly resurrected Corinthians. Sunny and hot, this was a day for the beach which is where the Dartford players must have thought they were. The visitors were 0-3 down inside twenty three minutes. Chris Williams scored two similar, well taken goals as the ball was chipped into the space behind the Dartford back line for him to run on to. George Fenwick completed the Corinthian scoring when he turned in the edge of the box and shot into the top corner of the net. Dartford's revival started just before half time and was led by skipper Matt Fagan and Rob Browning down the left wing. Halfway through the second half a poor defensive clearance by Corinthian fell to Terry McCann on the edge of the box and his first time shot flew into the net. Ten minutes later a left wing cross by Rob Browning was again met by McCann who rifled it into the goal. Following a good spell from Corinthian, Wayne Grizzle sped away down the right wing and crossed for Ted Ansell to score and earn a draw with two minutes to spare.

The match at Danson Furness on 31st August was postponed at out opponents request.

P. 2 W. 0 D 1 L 1 F 3 A 4 Pts. 1 Pos 10th



## September

Lordswood provided the first opponents at Wested. They were fairly easily swept aside 3-0 with goals from Steve Taylor, Terry McCann and Wayne Grizzle. The twenty five paying spectators saw the one and only appearance of Rio Alderton who had previously been associated with Millwall and Southend United.

At Beckenham the following week, Dartford made a bright start scoring after three minutes through a headed goal from Wayne Grizzle. The lead was extended when Matt Smith helped the ball on to Ted Ansell who chipped it over the goalkeeper from the edge of the box. For the entire first half Tommy Martin and Ted Ansell had the midfield sewn up, and the good form continued after the break. It was only in the final fifteen minutes that Beckenham clawed their way back into the match to earn a point whilst Dartford threw two away.

When Dartford entertained Thamesmead Town, managed by the dynamic duo of Grant Spelling and Simon Halsey, the visitors sat atop the league having won all five of their opening fixtures. Dartford had the best of the first half with Joe Kevin a tower of strength in the heart of defence, until he was injured. Thamesmead scored the only goal of the game from a free kick taken on the edge of the box which was headed in by Brett Northover and thereafter took control of the game as Dartford appeared to tire.

At Chatham Town Dartford offered a spiritless performance and were shown up by a lively Chatham forward line who combined to score three goals. The margin would have been much larger had it not been for an inspired Ben Jolley who pulled off a number of fine saves. This turned out to be Terry McCann's last game before trying his luck at Sittingbourne. One win from the opening six games is not the stuff of which championships are made.

P. 6 W. 1 D 2 L 3 F 8 A 11 Pts. 5 Pos 10<sup>th</sup>

## October

With a repeat of the previous season's league success increasingly unlikely, it would have to be in one or other of the cup competitions that honours would come. The opening round of the Kent Intermediate Cup paired Dartford with Lordswood, one of only two clubs below them in the league. Dartford had the best of a niggly first half but were caught offside far too often. A piece of vintage Matt Smith – cutting inside the full back and shooting low into the far corner of the net – gave Dartford a half time lead. During the second half, there were long periods when Lordswood dominated. They struck the crossbar with a penalty before finally drawing level after sixty eight minutes when a right wing cross was tucked away past Martin Bright. Dartford started to compete again in the first half of extra time four minutes Grizzle set up Matt Smith who chipped the goalkeeper to secure the lead, and as it turned out, the match.

In an effort to shake things up a bit, Steve Robinson introduced Lee Sales, Jay May and Robert Taylor for the return match against Beckenham, and each player justified his inclusion. Beckenham relied heavily on the offside trap which Dartford seemed unable to break down until the final minute of the game. Good work by Wayne Grizzle down the left wing resulted in him shooting, and just as it seemed his effort would be cleared off the line, substitute Matt Smith slid in to divert the ball into the roof of the net from the tightest of angles.

Danson Furness were a slightly different proposition. However, Dartford took the lead when Grizzle back heeled to Steve Taylor who switched the ball to his favoured left foot and curled the ball into the net from some distance. Furness levelled after half an hour with John Maine volleying home a left wing cross at the far post. Furness controlled the opening part of the second half before Matt Fagan, Robert Taylor and Jamie Rogers each had efforts hit the woodwork. In the last five minutes, Joe Kevin unfairly challenged a Furness forward in the box and Maine converted the resulting penalty.

P. 8 W. 2 D 2 L 4 F 10 A 12 Pts. 8 Pos 10<sup>th</sup>

Prior to Dartford's visit to Harrow Meadow, Erith and Belvedere had only claimed three points all season, and these from Lordswood. Dartford featured Richard Corbyn in the heart of defence and Ben Coaker from the under 18s in the forward line. Dartford won rather easily on a wet afternoon with a headed goal from Steve Robinson, a penalty from Joe Fitzpatrick and a close range effort from Richard Usherwood. Unfortunately it transpired that Usherwood had not signed Kent League forms and consequently three precious points were docked.

The other chance of glory this season would be the League Cup. In the first round Dartford were drawn at home to Margate in a two legged tie. After a number of postponements, the matches were eventually played in reverse order. Midweek at Hartsdown Park, Dartford started brightly and the combination of Joe Fitzpatrick and the newly returned Kevin Spriggs added bite to the midfield. Margate took the lead, much against the run of play, with an unchallenged header from a corner. Tommy Martin restored order ten minutes into the second half when his low curling shot from twenty five yards found its way into the net. Two minutes later Matt Smith applied a glancing header to Steve Taylor's right wing cross for the winner.

It is not recalled whether or not a 'gate' was taken at the second leg, but if it was, Dartford's first goal was alone worth the cost of admission. Steve Robinson went on a surging run up the field, played a one – two on the edge of the box before striking a left foot shot into the top left hand corner. After what appeared to be a foul on Jamie Rogers, Margate went on to equalise on the stroke of half time. Dartford regained the lead when Wayne Grizzle struck home a ball that Matt Smith had played into his path. The third goal came ten minutes from time when Smith followed up a weakly taken penalty and Dartford passed into the second round in convincing style.

Thamesmead Town had slipped to second in the table behind Danson Furness when Dartford travelled to Bayliss Avenue for the return Kent League fixture. Grant and Simon had by now parted company with the home club but Dartford were well beaten by the organised team that they had left behind. The solitary goal was scored early in the second half when Curtis Williams broke through the defence and rounded Ben Jolley.

P.10 W. 3 D. 2 L. 5 F. 13 A. 13 Pts. 8 Pos. 10<sup>th</sup>

## December

Stuart Abbott returned to the club in time for the visit of Chatham Town, Joe Diggins took the left wing back berth and out of favour Adam Morrish played up front. Dartford took the lead when Steve Robinson's header was not properly cleared and Wayne Grizzle stabbed home the loose ball. Morrish extended the lead when he charged down the goalkeeper's clearance and the ball rolled into the net. Mark Lampard pulled a goal back for Chatham when Ben Jolley spilled the ball at his feet. In a carbon copy of Dartford's first goal, Robinson's header rebounded off the crossbar and Stuart Abbott followed up. Chatham's second goal came from an Adam Douglas penalty.

The return of Grant Spelling to the club to assist with coaching duties coincided with the Kent Intermediate Cup match with VCD Athletic and a comfortable 4-0 victory. Wayne Grizzle opened the scoring after thirty minutes having been put through by Joe Fitzpatrick. Early in the second half Steve Robinson headed in Joe Diggins' floated free kick then in the dying minutes the ball was played in behind the VCD defence and Fitzpatrick reacting first, chipped the goalkeeper. With almost the last kick, Stuart Abbott scored from close range after Jay May had chested the ball into his path.

It was interesting to note the slowly improving confidence evident during the home match with Danson Furness. Dartford although strengthened by the inclusion of Steve Marriner, Richard Usherwood and Brett Northover who had joined from Thamesmead Town, still chose to do things the hard way. After going 0-1 down midway through the first half, Grizzle equalised from a Marriner cross after sixty six minutes but three minutes later Furness were back in front when Dave Rose put his twenty five yard shot into the net over Ben Jolley's head. Immediately Dartford responded as Brett Northover marked his debut with a goal – just getting onto the end of Jamie Rogers' cross. In quick succession, Kevin Spriggs found the net via the left hand post and Stuart Abbott buried a lofted Marriner cross to bag three more points.



For the last match of the year, VCD did Dartford the honour of fielding their first team in a reserve team fixture. VCD were the stronger looking side in the first half although at the end of forty five minutes the teams were separated by Kevin Spriggs seemingly offside goal. Right at the end of the second forty five minutes, Matt Smith burst through the VCD defence as it pushed forward to salvage something from the game, and poked the ball under the 'keeper. Dartford rode their luck throughout and Ben Jolley pulled off a number of superb saves to maintain a rather fortunate lead. Four wins out of four in December included a couple of good, solid performances.

P.13 W. 6 D 2 L 5 F 22 A 17 Pts. 17 Pos 7th

#### January

Snowfall and the consequent thaw meant the suspension of football for a couple of weeks. On the resumption Dartford were pitted against Gravesend and Northfleet's Capital League team in the Kent Intermediate Cup third round at Stonebridge Road. At the time Northfleet had played seven league games, winning one and drawing three. They were undoubtedly the stronger outfit and Dartford's weakness in certain areas was exposed playing against higher calibre opponents than is normally the case. The only goal came on the half hour as Louis Evans touched home a free kick at the far post. After the match Matt Fagan signed Kent League forms for VCD Athletic, hoping for Premier Division football. Northfleet went on to beat Cray Wanderers on penalties in the semi-final.

Cup match followed cup match and next up was a trip to Hythe Town in the second round of the Kent League Cup. Hythe were a very young team, rooted to the foot of the Southern section table. That Dartford only put three goals past them beggars belief. Lee Sales scored the opener, and his first for the reserves when he cut in from the right wing to shoot under the keeper. Five minutes later Hythe equalised when Ben Jolley's clearance fell to one of their forwards who put it into the net from twenty five yards. The game was sewn up in the first half with two goals from Richard Usherwood.

P.13 W. 6 D. 2 L. 5 F. 22 A. 17 Pts. 17 Pos. 8th

#### February

The return match with Hythe proved another easy victory for Dartford with splendid goals from Wayne Grizzle and Stuart Abbott before Kevin Spriggs, who had had numerous other attempts all afternoon, scored with a speculative lob into the box that eluded everybody and bounced forlornly into the unguarded net.

The first league match for seven weeks took place at Erith Town's inhospitable stadium. The match kicked off fifteen minutes late as we waited for the third official to make his entrance. An unimpressive first half saw Dartford go in 0-1 down - a melée resulted in the ball crossing the line at the third attempt. The manager must have employed all of his motivational skills during the break because it was a different Dartford team that came out for the second half. Within ten minutes a poor punch by the Erith goalkeeper fell conveniently for Matt Smith who floated the ball into the net from the edge of the box. The lead was established when Joe Fitzpatrick's free kick was met at the far post by Steve Robinson's head and this provoked a great deal of excited celebration. There was still time for Brett Northover to pick up a long ball forward and knock it round the keeper with the outside of his boot to complete the scoring with the last kick of the match.

The playing record was much more respectable now, but the team was still lying outside the top six and may even yet rue those three deducted points.

P.14 W. 7 D. 2 L. 5 F. 25 A. 18 Pts. 20 Pos. 7<sup>th</sup>

#### March

The third meeting with VCD Athletic, this time at Wested, resulted in a poor game between two poor sides. Both goals in this 1-1 draw came in the minute before half time. First a hopeful ball forward was kept in play and squared before being blasted past Michael Bennett in the Dartford goal. Immediately from the restart the ball was played forward to Brett Northover who ran between two VCD defenders and just managed to slip the ball between the goalkeeper and the post before being flattened from behind.

Simultaneous March winds and April showers provided the setting for the trip to Lordswood. Dartford started one man short and survived a couple of close calls before Jamie Rogers joined the fray eight minutes into the match. With Wayne Grizzle warming the first team bench, Ben Coaker was drafted in to partner Matt Smith, but the pair were not given the service they needed from midfield. Smith did finally break the deadlock ten minutes before halftime as he swept in Joe Fitzpatrick's free kick with a first time shot.

The third round of the Kent League Cup brought an away trip to Hastings United. With the first team away at St Leonards on the same afternoon, both teams travelled down together on a Kings Ferry double decker. The first team lost 1-3 to the bottom of the league side; the bad news being communicated via a series of loud cheers from the ground above. The reserves' trip was more fruitful as they defeated the home side 3-1. Matt Smith opened the scoring after three minutes with a fierce shot. Kevin Spriggs battled his way down the right wing and put in an inch perfect cross for Wayne Grizzle to head in for the second and Jordan Assender did equally well early in the second half as he forced his way into the box before placing his shot out of the keeper's reach. Hastings had a pair of very quick forwards who fortunately were only once able to penetrate the Dartford defence. Steve Robinson received a cut to his head which necessitated his occasional removal from the action for repairs.

P.16 W. 8 D. 3 L. 5 F. 27 A. 19 Pts. 24 Pos. 7<sup>th</sup>

#### April

The penultimate month of the season started with the last away league fixture. This was at TunbridgeWells and was brought forward a week at Dartford's request to provide match practice prior to the Kent League Cup semi finals. The only goal of the game came in the first five minutes when Wayne Grizzle played and missed Stuart Abbott's cross and Kevin Spriggs running in behind bundled the ball over the line. At this stage we could all have gone home as what followed was fairly even and uninspiring with Dartford knocking long balls forward to Coaker and Grizzle without really giving them a chance.

The Kent League Cup semi finals paired Dartford with Dover Athletic and Cray Wanderers with Sittingbourne. Dartford were hugely disappointing in the first leg. Dover took the lead in the first half when their number nine was able to turn and shoot unchallenged from the edge of the box. Shortly after this, the injured Ben Jolley was replaced in the Dartford goal by Dominic O'Connor, though this had no direct bearing on the result of the game. Early in the second half he was beaten by a direct free kick from outside the box, and may have been at fault with his positioning, but goals three and four resulted from poor defending. Of course, at 0-4 down, the tie was over as a contest.

The second leg was played at Folkestone Invicta the following Saturday. Dover played the more controlled football whilst Dartford concentrated on pumping long balls forward without involving Stuart Abbott and Joe Diggins who were playing wide. Dover scored in the first half when the ball was given away in midfield and Joe Robson, the last defender, was unable to get a foot in and the shot beat Dominic O'Connor from the edge of the box. Dover Athletic will contest the final with Cray Wanderers who beat Sittingbourne 9-1 on aggregate.

A freezing cold Easter Saturday saw bottom of the table Erith and Belvedere at Wested. Missing both Wayne Grizzle who started for the first team at Ashford Town and Stuart Abbott who was unavailable, Dartford failed to break down a poor Belvedere side. There was no lack of effort, however, and particularly pleasing was the performance of Michael Collier and, when he came on at half time, Brad Potter. Matt Smith worked hard all afternoon without real support and was involved in Dartford's best chance when he challenged the Dere's suspect goalkeeper only to see the loose ball hacked off the line by a defender. Michael Collier returned the ball but it went high and wide. This was another disappointing result if not, overall, a disappointing performance.

Strange team selection saw Steve Robinson elevated to the first team for the meaningless home fixture against St Leonards, whilst representatives of what might be viewed as the club's future languished in the reserves. Dartford continued where they had left off on Saturday and struggled to break down a determined Corinthian defence, marshalled by their experienced captain. All that separated the two teams at the end of ninety minutes was Kevin Spriggs' penalty which entered the net via the left hand post. We saw some good individual performances from Brad Potter, Paul Gilchrist, Joe Robson and a particularly enthusiastic Jamie Rogers.

Dartford Reserves 0 Erith Town Reserves 1. For those not present at Wested on Saturday, be grateful. This was pure end of season fare. With Dartford never able to keep the ball on the ground, and Erith rarely able to, the visitors did most of the pressing. They scored a messy goal midway through the second half and this was enough to secure the three points and enable them to leap-frog Dartford in the top half of the table.

P. 20 W.10 D. 4 L. 6 F. 29 A. 20 Pts. 31 Pos 6th

Tunbridge Wells declined the invitation to visit Wested midweek with a six o'clock kick off, and it now looks as though the season will continue into May.