

Season's Review

During the summer there was a number of changes in the constitution of the Kent League. Crockenhill dropped down to the Kent County League because of the lack of floodlights at Wested and four new teams were elected to Division One - Ashford Town, Erith Town, Greenwich Borough and VCD Athletic.

Because of the number of clubs competing, the Reserves section was split into two regional divisions. Each comprised eleven teams giving a total of twenty matches; the winners of each division to play off for the championship. To compensate for the reduction in the number of league games, the league cup competition was organised on a group basis with the winners of the four groups going forward to the semi-final stage.

New sponsors were found for the League since Winstonlead were not continuing their interest and Bass Brewers, the company that brought us Carling and Tennents lager, Caffreys and Hoopers Hooch, took over.

On the playing front there were the usual comings and goings; the main additions being Justin Smale making a return to Senior football after a bad injury and youngster Wayne Grizzle from Catford Wanderers. Other trialists included James Humphreys, Adam Woods and Andy Mills.

The management put together a tough pre-season schedule taking in various outposts of Kent football.

It all began way back on 20th July with a visit to Herne Bay. Our opponents were expecting the first team squad rather than the makeshift reserve team that arrived and as if to prove it, produced a teamsheet and charged an appropriate level of admission. In Simon Vowles' absence, Steve Marriner took over in goal but was unable to prevent a 0-3 defeat.

Jon Lovell and Steve Johns each served 45 minutes between the sticks for the match against VCD's first team squad. Reasonable performances from all concerned resulted in another 0-3 defeat against much stronger opposition.

Over the weekend of 24th/25th July, Dartford took part in the four team UK Insulation Supplies Ltd Charity Cup at Lordswood F.C.. The competition was designed to result in a Lordswood versus Chatham final on the Sunday, which is what came about. On the Saturday the reserves were well beaten 1-5 by Lordswood's first team and in the 3rd/4th place play off on Sunday lost 1-3 to a Gillingham Youth team that included Jon Lovell's brother Mark.

Andy Arnold was the unfortunate in goal when the reserves took on a strong Thamesmead Town side on their second pitch. Poor defending and a number of goal-keeping errors contributed to a 1-6 drubbing.

The last pre-season match was played at Hythe, again against a Kent League Premier Division side. Stuart Nicholson and Trevor Hand beefed up the midfield after that had gone missing at Thamesmead. Everybody worked hard and it was only a defensive error that allowed Hythe to score the decisive goal.

Six games and six defeats before the end of July! But, as any manager will tell you, it's not the results that are important at this stage of the season.

August

And so to the real business; the first league match of the season. Swanley Furness are the only first team in the division, and the highest placed club in last year's competition to find themselves in the Northern section this year. Dartford were not however impressed and cruised into a three goal lead and also missed a penalty. An injury to Stuart Nicholson just before half time upset the balance of the side and Swanley's rather quick forwards exploited the gaps to score three second half goals and grab a share of the points.

The next fixture was also away, at landlords Cray Wanderers. Added spice normally attaches to these games because of the number of players that have moved between the two clubs. Amongst the four ex-Darts on this occasion was Matthew Quinlan who had recently come out of retirement. A Glenn McTaggart hat-trick contributed to a 5-1 defeat of Cray who, despite rumours of payments to players, were still a poor side.

The first home game was against newcomers to the league Erith Town who previously had competed in the South London Alliance. Dartford fielded five youth team players and indeed had only the bare eleven present on the day. Inevitably the older and more experienced Erith team won although the only goal came when Simon Vowles, playing his last game for the club before defecting to Cray, dropped a floated cross at the feet of Simon Williams who gratefully tucked it away.

Dartford were now struggling for a goalkeeper and five different players filled that position over the next five games. Willie O'Sullivan was the first to try the shirt on for size in the home league game against Chatham Town. In an entertaining match for the spectators, if not the management, Dartford ran out 5-4 winners with the goals coming from first teamers Lee Jones, Paul McCarthy(2), and Chris Arnold(2). Willie saved a penalty but this had to be retaken as he was adjudged to have moved off his line.

Hot, brilliant sunshine greeted Dartford's entry into Group A of the First Division Cup away at Lordswood. A scratch side including Tony Day of Welsh Tavern in goal, and the Youth team management pairing of Grant Spelling and Simon Halsey lost 0-1 even after Lordswood's Ben Arnold had been sent off inside the first minute of the second half.

VCD Athletic made a strong start to their debut season in the Kent League and swept Dartford aside 4-0. Their team included former Dartford players Matt Longhurst, Terry Ratchford and Jason Martin.

Kent League Division One North	P. 5	W. 2	D. 1	L. 2	F. 13	A. 13	Pts 7	GD. 0	Pos. 6th
Division One Cup Group A	P. 1	W. 0	D. 0	L. 1	F. 0	A. 1	Pts 0	GD. -1	Pos. 5th.

September

An attempt to strengthen the team was made with the arrival of John Monteith from Fisher Athletic, although he only lasted two games before moving on to St Leonards. Jamie Rogers who had joined pre-season but had been injured before playing a game was also now available for selection. These new additions could not however stop Hastings Town from running out 2-0 winners in this league cup match at Pilot Field. The goals both came in the last ten minutes of the game. Dartford overran Beckenham Town after their influential captain Jimmy McGuire was carried off after only six minutes. They scored four goals without reply including two from Glenn McTaggart before two defensive mistakes were punished by Ben Walder-Gabriel to make the final score 5-2.

Sloppy defending again cost Dartford dear when they visited Greenwich Borough in the league. Danny Guiste scored three in this 0-4 defeat. Dartford missed Stuart Nicholson in the heart of midfield as he had just commenced a six-week run in the first team.

Marc Brown had by now settled into the goalkeepers position but he could not stop the reserves losing their third consecutive league cup tie, this time 2-3 at home to Ramsgate. Two defensive slips allowed Ramsgate to steal a 2-0 advantage inside the first twenty five minutes. A fine individual goal from Wayne Grizzle reduced the arrears before half time and ten minutes into the second half, McTaggart provided the cross for Nicky Barnes to head home at the far post. However, once again the ball was given away cheaply by the defence and Ramsgate punished the error. As ever it was a pleasure to welcome Ramsgate's manager Danny Ward to Oxford Road.

Kent League Division One North	P. 7	W. 3	D. 1	L. 3	F. 18	A. 19	Pts 10	GD. -1	Pos. 6th
Division One Cup Group A	P. 3	W. 0	D. 0	L. 3	F. 2	A. 6	Pts 0	GD. -4	Pos. 6th

October

There was no reserve team fixture on 2nd October and this allowed a rare opportunity to see the First Team in action. Stuart Nicholson made his first start of the season against Spalding and was responsible for the initial hoof down the pitch that led to Dartford's first goal and then covered himself in glory by arriving at the far post to head in the winner.

An entertaining mid-week trip to Chatham found Dartford always trailing. Glenn McTaggart added another two goals to his personal total in this 2-3 defeat.

The Kent Intermediate Cup First Round match at home to Ramsgate was scheduled for Saturday 16th October. However, the local intelligentsia has amused themselves by breaking beer bottles on the pitch and despite the valiant efforts of the Hon. Secretary to remove the debris, the referee, who just happened to be being assessed that day, decided to call the game off just thirty minutes before kick off as he could not guarantee the safety of the players. This left Ramsgate with a wasted 140 miles round trip and a pitch that would be in exactly the same condition seven days later.

Ramsgate duly returned the following Saturday for an afternoon of sunshine and showers. Living dangerously at times, Dartford ran out 3-1 winners.

The fixture secretary managed to fit in another league cup match on the last Saturday of the month at home to Swanley Furness who so far had played and won four group matches and were sitting pretty at the top of the table. Dartford did not upset the form book and duly lost 0-1. With fifteen minutes to go the ball was given away by the defence leaving Marc Brown little alternative but to concede a penalty. Chris Lockley made no mistake for Swanley.

At the end of October, beginning of November, Nicky Barnes was given a few starts in the first team by Gary Julians as cover for Simon Roberts. He was included in the team that beat Sittingbourne 6-0 in the Kent Senior Cup and scored one of the goals.

Kent League Division One North	P. 8	W. 3	D. 1	L. 4	F. 20	A. 22	Pts 10	GD. -2	Pos. 7th
Division One Cup Group A	P. 4	W. 0	D. 0	L. 4	F. 2	A. 7	Pts 0	GD. -5	Pos. 6th

November

With the home league match against Cray Wanderers, Dartford began a three month, eight match, unbeaten spell that lasted until the trip to VCD on 5th February. Simon Vowles, now playing for Cray was his usual unpredictable self. After half an hour his poor goal kick fell at the feet of McTaggart who took the ball on and scored with a shot across the goal. Ten minutes later Vowles pulled off an amazing mid-air save that would not have disgraced a senior professional.

Lordswood scored both goals in the return league cup match at Oxford Road. They took the lead early in the second half when a poor punch by Marc Brown fell to one of their forwards who drilled his shot against the post leaving Joe Lewis to tap in the rebound. With practically the last move of the game, Lordswood's Brian Willison headed past his own keeper to level the scores.

Dartford gained revenge for their earlier 0-4 thrashing by Greenwich Borough in the return league fixture on 27th November. Joe Kitson played in goal whilst Paul Hennessy had a run out on the way back to full fitness after his appalling injury and subsequent serious illness earlier in the season. Dartford scored three good goals in this match. The first came through Wayne Grizzle who slotted the ball in off the far post from the tightest of angles after thirty minutes. Greenwich equalised early in the second half before a fine individual effort from Steve Johns. He ran through the opposition defence from the half way line to the edge of the box before drilling a low shot into the net. The third, ten minutes from time, followed an interchange of passes between Wayne Grizzle and Ouzineb Nabil in the box resulting in the latter finding the net.

Kent League Division One North	P. 10	W. 5	D. 1	L. 4	F. 24	A. 24	Pts. 16	GD. 0	Pos. 6th
Division One Cup Group A	P. 5	W. 0	D. 1	L. 4	F. 3	A. 8	Pts. 1	GD. -5	Pos. 6th

December

During December two games were played, both against Swanley Furness and both were drawn. In the first, the away league cup fixture, Dartford claimed what turned out in retrospect to be a creditable 1-1 draw. The equalising goal came from a twice taken McTaggart penalty three minutes from time. On each occasion he placed the ball in exactly the same spot leaving the goalkeeper flat-footed. This was the only group match that Swanley Furness failed to win.

The following week saw the home league match on a heavy Oxford Road pitch. Swanley took the lead in the first minute before Chris Arnold picked up a speculative punt from Steve Johns to equalise. Just before half time Joe Kitson was carried off with a head injury and Willie O'Sullivan went in goal. An invisible defence allowed Swanley to take a 2-1 lead setting up a frantic last fifteen minutes rounded off by a marvellous Steve Marriner goal with the game's last kick.

The second round of the Kent Intermediate Cup away at Knatchbull Reserves was pencilled in for the 18th December. The home club called the game off citing an unfit pitch but the KCFA took a different view and awarded the tie to Dartford.

Kent League Division One North	P. 11	W. 5	D. 2	L. 4	F. 26	A. 25	Pts. 17	GD. 1	Pos. 6th
Division One Cup Group A	P. 6	W. 0	D. 2	L. 4	F. 4	A. 9	Pts. 2	GD. -5	Pos. 6th

January

Following a three week Christmas and New Year lay-off, the reserves continued their good run into the new millennium. A 2-1 away win at Ramsgate in the league cup was followed by a 3-0 victory over Erith Town in the third round of the Kent Intermediate Cup. Stuart Nicholson opened the scoring after fifteen minutes having been given sufficient time to take two touches ten yards from goal. The lead was extended half way through the second half when Jamie Rogers helped in a Justin Smale corner and Peter Scullion completed the scoring pushing the ball over the line after the woodwork had taken a battering.

The last match in January was the home league fixture with Hastings Town. Disaster struck after only twenty seven seconds when an attempted clearance by Marc Brown was charged down by a Hastings forward who slotted the ball home from close range. The equaliser came with ten minutes to go when Nicholson headed in a Smale corner floated in from the left hand side.

During January Glenn McTaggart was resident on the first team substitutes bench but spent very little time actually playing.

Kent League Division One North	P.12	W. 5	D. 3	L. 4	F. 27	A. 26	Pts 18	GD. 1	Pos. 6th
Division One Cup Group A	P. 7	W. 1	D. 2	L. 4	F. 6	A. 10	Pts 5	GD. -4	Pos. 6th

February

The four fixtures in February failed to yield a win and the unbeaten run inevitably came to a halt with the visit to second placed VCD Athletic. A goal-less first half failed to impress the Dartford management who proceeded to read the 'Riot Act' to their players. A spirited performance in the second half was not enough to stop a good VCD side from running out 2-1 winners. Dartford's goal came after sixty minutes when a ball in from the right wing by Willie O'Sullivan was turned back by Glenn McTaggart to Stuart Nicholson who fired in a shot from outside the box.

There being no first team fixture, about sixty paying spectators witnessed the visit of Greenwich Borough in the league cup. Two second half goals, the second following an unpunished foul on Joe Fitzpatrick, gave the game to Greenwich. The visitors' midfield included a rather rotund Dave Mehmet.

The following week saw the return match, a completely meaningless affair since Swanley Furness had already attained an unassailable position at the top of Group A by the end of January. Twice behind, Dartford earned a point with a Glenn McTaggart penalty awarded when Nicky Barnes was tripped in the box and, with about two minutes to go, a driven Willie O'Sullivan free kick that was turned past his own goalkeeper by a Greenwich defender. The point lifted the reserves off the foot of the table where they were replaced by Hastings Town who had fallen behind with their fixtures.

The next fixture meant another trip to Crayford, this time to play league leaders Thamesmead Town. The home side was stunned in the first minute when Ouzineb Nabil crashed the ball into the roof of the net following a good left wing move. The lead was short-lived however as Thamesmead equalised four minutes later through Scott Lewis who turned in Barry Sweeting's right wing cross at the far post. Dartford matched their hosts throughout the game and were in confident mood for the Kent Intermediate Cup semi-final the following week. Tony Kyle found himself in the starting line-up for the first team's Southern League match against Fisher Athletic deputising for the injured Luke Morrish and was consequently ineligible for the cup match.

During February Steve Marriner, who had had a six week trial with Gillingham, grabbed a second chance of football in America when he was offered a professional contract with Tennessee Rhythm based in Franklin. Follow his fortunes on www.rhythmsoccer.com where it is reported that he is '... a 19 year old midfielder/forward from England who has played there for several teams, most recently the first division Dartford Football Club. He played his collegiate soccer at Lewisburg University in North Carolina.'

At the end of February, the leading goalscorers in the Kent League Division One were as follows:-

- 19 Stiggy Meadows (Deal Town)
- 15 Tim Blackman (Dover Athletic)
Sam Kodjoe (Swanley Furness)
- 14 Darren Waring (Deal Town)
- 12 Glenn McTaggart (Dartford)
James Dryden (Folkestone Invicta)
Hickman (Ramsgate)

Kent League Division One North P.14 W. 5 D. 4 L. 5 F. 29 A. 29 Pts 19 GD. 0 Pos. 7th
Division One Cup Group A P. 9 W. 1 D. 3 L. 5 F. 8 A. 14 Pts 6 GD. -6 Pos. 5th

March

The season plodded along at a sedate pace at the rate of one game a week, there being no need for midweek games as the club was well up on its fixtures.

The last chance for any silverware came on 4th March with the visit of Lordswood in the Kent Intermediate Cup semi-final. The Dartford team was slightly under-strength with the unavailable McTaggart being replaced by Curtis Williams and Tony Kyle having to watch from the sidelines. Lordswood played better as a team and were prompted by the experienced Gary Allen at left back. A goal in each half took the visitors through to the final with Folkestone Invicta on what turned out to be a disappointing day for Dartford.

The reserves returned to winning ways the following week when they visited Erith Town. The only goal of the game came within the first two minutes when Wayne Grizzle, attacking down the left hand side, beat the keeper with a well placed shot. This was one of the reserves better performances in an uneven season with the ball being played constructively through the midfield pairing of O'Sullivan and Barnes. Marc Brown pulled off two superb saves to spare the blushes of his defence. Substitute Nabil was the victim of some zealous refereeing when he was dismissed for two bookable offences after barely fifteen minutes on the pitch.

On 18th March the First Team had no league fixture so Gary Julians organised a friendly match at Faversham Town with a view to casting an eye over some of the promising reserve players. The game resulted in a 6-2 win for Dartford with Wayne Grizzle choosing his moment to hit a hat-trick.

Meanwhile back at Oxford Road the reserves, augmented by the likes of Danny Evans and Paul McCarthy, took on top of the table Thamesmead Town. A hard fought match resulted in a narrow 1-0 victory. The goal came from a beautifully executed cross shot by Nicky Barnes after he was set up by Liam Nash. This result left the championship wide open with VCD mathematically able to overhaul Thamesmead whilst Dartford could finish as high as fourth if they can show some consistency over the remaining month.

Another close game ensued at Ashford where the home side took the lead through Dave Peachey nine minutes into the second half and Glenn McTaggart equalised with a well taken goal with two minutes remaining. Tempers frayed at the final whistle, but order was soon restored.

Kent League Division One North	P.17	W. 7	D. 5	L. 5	F. 32	A. 30	Pts 26	GD. 2	Pos. 5th
Division One Cup Group A	P. 9	W. 1	D. 3	L. 5	F. 8	A. 14	Pts 6	GD. -6	Pos. 6th