

Thursday 25th September – Maidstone Utd U18 vs Dartford FC U18 FT: 1-0
Ground:- Bourne Park, Sittingbourne K/o: 19:45

After having the decision made that the Kent Youth League team had been entered into the FA Youth Cup, we were all looking forward to representing the club in this prestigious Youth Cup. Seeing who our opponents were, we knew it was going to be a tough fixture with Maidstone Utd putting out a side that was predominantly Ryman Youth League players. We wanted to go with the strongest squad available but we still had 4 players out injured/ill/unavailable. Our squad also includes 4 players (Ibrahim, Dent, Heffernan & Eyers) who also represent Dartford in the Conference Youth League.

The players turned up looking very smart in their shirts & trousers (no tracksuits as no sponsor this year ☹) and walked out on the pitch taking it all in. The smell that was detected midweek, when the first team played at Bourne Park, didn't seem to be present. We just had the thick, black smoke and debris, from a torched car blowing over the pitch! Luckily that dispersed in time for the players to come out through the tunnel onto the pitch for the mandatory FA line up and handshake.

The first 10 minutes was pretty much fast pace, ball in the air stuff, with Dartford unable to impose their controlled passing game in the early stages. However, Dartford forced their tempo and passing game and soon started to play the ball about and they started to use the wings a bit better. Maidstone defence struggled to contain the powerful running of Callum Nye and it was down the right hand side that Dartford forced their way into the game. The first chances of the game went Dartford's way, but a mixture of poor decision making and poor shooting left the score goal less. By now Dartford appeared to be getting on top in terms of purposeful football with the opponents playing a more direct style of play which left their defence under pressure as the ball kept going back. In the 22nd minute, Dartford played their way out of trouble in their left back area but conceded possession cheaply on the half way line and the resulting long ball over the top, left Billy Eves and the Maidstone forward chasing a ball into the area. From my angle in the dugout it appeared a simple enough decision to award the penalty when Billy appeared to foul the Maidstone striker, however, now having seen a replay, Billy simply stumbled and the opposing player didn't need a 2nd invitation to go down. The penalty was put home and I don't think it stretches the boundaries of realism that this was against the run of play.

Going behind seemed to galvanise Dartford and they looked more likely to score than their opponents. Connor Heffernan went close with a drive from 20 yards, Frazer Bent had an opportunity from the edge of the area and several corners and chances from set pieces came but we couldn't make the break-through. ***Half-time score 1-0. At half time I stressed the importance of continuing to work hard and compete whilst persevering with our style of play and not resorting to sinking to a level below the ability of our side by matching the long ball tactics of our opponents. In the changing room, everyone agreed that we weren't out of the game and we felt hard done by to be a goal down. The maturity of this side is such that more was spoken about us rather than the penalty decision and its credit to this group of players that they can take a blow to the chin and get on with the game.***

The second half saw Dartford start with a renewed vigour and hunger for the ball. Dartford managed to impose their style of play on the game and the passing was definitely improved for the 2nd half. The full-backs were getting more involved, the wide men were holding the ball at the right time and getting their crosses away and the two forwards were causing the defence some real problems. Dartford kept knocking on the door and creating chances and it was testament to Dartford's play that the home bench were becoming more and more vocal.

In the 62nd minute, substitute Lewis Sutherland came on for Connor Heffernan, this allowed Karl Dent to switch from his unusual right back position to the centre of midfield. This helped free up Danny Crouch and it was Danny that had perhaps the best chance of the 2nd half, when a Karl Dent through ball saw Crouch bearing down on goal. Unusually for Dan his effort was off target as were good chances for Frazer Bent and Callum Nye. In the 70th minute, Danny Nash had to be withdrawn due to a back injury and was replaced by Tom Eyers, and 5 minutes later the final substitution saw Ashley Issuer replace Billy Eves.

Despite some sustained pressure and being on top, Dartford couldn't force an equaliser. It's obviously disappointing to go out in the first round but I have to say that the Dartford squad gave everything they could against their Ryman Youth League table topping opponents. We more than matched Maidstone on the night and it was a very fine line between winning and losing. We will pick ourselves up and dust ourselves down and get back to league action this coming weekend with a home fixture against Chatham Town on Sunday 5th October, k/o 11am.

Team:- Molloy, Dent, Ayoola, King, Eves (Issuree 75), Heather (C), Nash (Eyers 70), Crouch, Nye, Bent, Heffernan (Sutherland 62)
Subs not used:- Ibrahim
MOTM:- Sean Heather
Attendance:- 71

<http://www.dfc18.co.uk>