

Saturday 21st February 2015

**BASINGSTOKE TOWN 0, BISHOP'S STORTFORD 1
(VANARAMA CONFERENCE SOUTH)**

Nearly seven years after he left, the Blues' prolific marksman Greg Pearson returned to score the only goal of the match to seal a vital win over Basingstoke Town at The Camrose. The third in the table hosts began the contest the better side with the Stortford defence a little edgy but once Rod Stringer's men had settled down they gave a determined and organised display with Stoke looking tentative and unsure with passes going astray.

The team that won their fifth match on the road this campaign showed a couple of change to the squad that had won the Herts Charity Cup a few days earlier. As well as Pearson going straight in to lead the attack, Frankie Merrifield was in the side. Kenzer Lee was absent through illness and Rickie Hayles filled the left back berth. Amongst those on the bench were new signings Nicky Nicolau, Henry Randall and Evandro Rachoni de Lima, a Brazilian goalkeeper.

The early minutes of the match saw Jake Larkins tested. Firstly a long range effort from Shaun McAuley was held by the keeper low down and then shortly afterwards he blocked well from former Blue Liam Enver-Marum after the striker took advantage of some hesitation by Adam Bailey-Dennis further up the field and run through on goal.

It didn't take long though for Stortford to get into a groove and start to test the Dragon's defence. Ashley Miller and Sheldon Sellears started to trouble the hosts left flank and in the fifth minute Miller played the ball inside and Frankie Merrifield miskicked not far from goal. Then Sellears sent the ball low across the six yard box with no one able to get a connection.

Liam Enver-Marum tried a 25 yarder that was over the top but the Blues went ahead shortly afterwards in the 22nd minute. Excellent inter-passing again by Ashley Miller and Sheldon Sellears destroyed the left side of the Stoke defence and when Miller crossed from hard on the line 12 yards from the near post **GREG PEARSON** was on the far side of the six yard box to hook the ball high into the net from close range (0-1).

It was the boost that Stortford needed and five minutes later Bobby-Joe Taylor almost broke through the home defence after cutting inside from the left but the Cambridge United loan player was eventually blocked out by a defender a yard or so inside the box. George Allen was then close with a far post header following a Sellears corner from the left.

In the 37th minute a fine through ball from the Dragons' James Harper found Enver-Marum drifting in from the left but the number nine over-ran the ball and Larkins quickly grabbed the ball. Enver-Marum also almost got on the end of a Nathan Smart cross to the near post.

Although Anthony Church wasn't far off target with a 25 yarder himself in the 42nd minute Larkins had to be alert in the closing minutes of the half. The Blues' stopper got down low to hold on to a Tom Bird free-kick at his near upright and then with the last kick of the half a cross-shot from Louie Soares was comfortably taken by the keeper.

Half time: 0-1

As expected Basingstoke on the restart pushed forward at the Stortford defence. However, the Blues back four were strong and marked tightly to limit the hosts' openings. They did have a chance in the 58th minute as Chris Flood, on the left, slipped the ball inside to Louie Soares but the shot from the edge of the box skimmed a foot over Larkins' bar.

Stortford were close to doubling their lead twice in the space of a minute. In the 62nd minute Stoke's Shaun McAuley lost possession of the ball to Joe Tabiri 20 yards out and when the midfielder aimed a shot at goal home keeper Stuart Moore mishandled the ball over his head but reacted to turn quickly round and scoop the ball off the line. Sheldon Sellears' resultant corner then saw Anthony Church's neat back-flick saved by Moore at his near post.

Basingstoke made a double substitution and Chris Flood was narrowly wide with an angled shot across the area from the left. At the other end, in the 69th minute, Frankie Merrifield struck a rising effort over the target after good approach work. The hosts final pass was letting them down but a glancing header by substitute Manny Williams' glancing header from fellow substitute Simon Dunn's cross was close.

In the 78th minute Jake Larkins held a fierce long range drive by Dunn at the second attempt and then three minutes later there was strong appeal for a hand ball in the box by Adam Bailey Dennis after a cross by Manny Williams but the appeals were mostly from the crowd and Referee Anthony Da Costa waived play on.

The hosts were reduced to ten men for the last eight minutes of normal time. Defender Nathan Smart had already been shown a yellow card after an incident with Greg Pearson just before the break and when he fouled the Blues striker late on outside the box Referee Da Costa had little option but to brandish the yellow card at him for the second time in the match.

The only time that the Dragons threatened to equalise was just before the start of stoppage time when following a free-kick the ball was loose in the box and Jake Larkins spread himself to beat away a 16 yard shot from Chris Flood.

Referee Da Costa booked the Blues Greg Pearson, George Allen and Joe Tabiri and Stoke's Shaun McAuley during the match.

Full time: 0-1

BISHOP'S STORTFORD: Jake Larkins; Ashley Miller; Rickie Hayles; Joe Tabiri; Adam Bailey-Dennis; George Allen; Sheldon Sellears; Anthony Church; Greg Pearson (sub - Donovan Simmonds 84 mins); Frankie Merrifield; Bobby-Joe Taylor.

Unused substitutes: James Walker, Nicky Nicolau, Henry Randall and Evandro Rachoni de Lima.

BASINGSTOKE TOWN: Stuart Moore; Nathan Smart; Tom Bird; Robbie Rice (sub – Manny Williams 64 mins); Robert Dickie (sub – Nicholas Bignall 76 mins); David Ray; Louie Soares; Shaun McAuley (sub – Simon Dunn 64 mins); Liam Enver-Marum; Chris Food; James Harper.

Unused substitutes: Andrew Jenkinson and Lloyd Macklin.

Attendance: 679