

UCD (3) 3 DUNDALK (1) 1

D. McMillan 13, Kilduff 15, Corry 45+1 Kudozivic 38

Airtricity League, Premier Division
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By Brian de Salvo

If, as the old cliché has it, you are only as good as your last game, this UCD team is entitled to morning after optimism. Last night's comprehensive victory over a Dundalk side topping the table on merit was achieved in a manner which surely satisfied manager Martin Russell's credo that success should stem from playing the beautiful game. In consequence, spectacle as well as statistics was well served.

But in truth you're really only as good as your next game and Dundalk remain League leaders by virtue of St Patrick Athletic's inability to take even a point from a managerless Drogheda side slim on personnel and handicapped by a lengthy injury list. UCD's next challenge is an FAI Cup third round tie in Drogheda, where a three-nil victory on the opening night gave impetus to the Students' return to the top tier. By the same token, a subsequent visit to Dundalk resulted in a three-nil drubbing. There is still everything to play for.

Last night both teams were missing a key central defender. UCD's Andy Boyle is in Ukraine with the Under 19 International team, Dundalk captain Liam Burns was absent through injury. The difference was how the respective managers were able to re-shuffle their resources.

Ian Foster switched Wayne Hatswell into a central defensive role and brought Nathan Murphy in at left back in a back four that always looked suspect. By the time the manager returned Hatswell to left back and introduced Ciaran McGuigan in the centre, ten minutes into the second half, it was too late; UCD was in cruise control.

In Galway last week Martin Russell replaced Boyle with Michael Leahy, a central defender of exceptional promise. Against Dundalk the manager moved Brian Shortall into the middle to accommodate Ciaran Nangle, one of the best young full backs in the League, who had, through no fault of his own, slipped to the subs bench in recent weeks. Shortall gave a barn storming display, Nangle's contribution, if less dramatic, left nothing to be desired. Just how Russell will shuffle his defensive pack on Boyle's return remains to be seen, the point is that he has options denied to Foster.

The visiting manager may understandably complain that his team conceded three soft goals but that does not do justice to the excellence of their execution. Ciaran Kilduff set up the first although he played no part in the moment of scoring. But it was his determination in pursuit of a seemingly hopeless cause that enabled him to block Garry Breen's attempted clearance and then harass the defender into conceding a corner on the left. That corner yielded another, Chris Mulhall's flag kick was beautifully executed for pace and trajectory and David McMillan's run and header perfectly judged to open the scoring after thirteen minutes.

Two minutes later Brian Shortall made a swashbuckling raid from inside his own half before slipping the ball to Kilduff whose finish was precise. UCD looked to have preserved this lead into the interval, indeed but for a great save from Peter Cherrie in deflecting Kilduff's drive onto and over the crossbar, it would have been three. Instead, in the 37th minute Faz Kuduzovic put Dundalk back in contention with a fine individual goal, working across from the right touchline to the central edge of the penalty area and firing low into the left corner of Billy Brennan's net. I'm sure there's a section in the coaching manual that says this kind of run should not be allowed to happen but such close control at such high speed is hard to negate.

UCD's clincher, on the stroke of half time, was even better, stemming from a great passing movement orchestrated by Mulhall and involving Kilduff and Paul Corry whose elegant finish capped a fine evening for the midfielder.

The second half provided plenty of entertainment but was really significant for the maturity with which this young UCD side put the game to bed. If, after Kuduzovic's first half goal you wondered if the game might change course there was never any doubt after the interval as to which team would prevail. Bolger run from midfield, skipping past four men, to shoot narrowly wide represented UCD's superiority.

There's plenty to engage the attention at the Bowl right now, on and off the pitch. Second guessing Martin Russell is a subject worthy of a degree course. Keith Ward's excellent technical skills have been mostly used off the bench this season, seeming to indicate that the flank man might be regarded as something of a luxury to be used accordingly. But, against the leaders, Martin Russell chose to start Ward and retain his services until the final whistle. It proved to be another box successfully ticked but did the manager make the selection in the expectation that Ward would confront the huge physical presence but suspect mobility of Wayne Hatswell or because he already knew that injury to Burns would cause a re-shuffle that Ward's trickery might exploit?

Whatever the reason, the manager, his staff and players have passed the current examination with honours.

UCD: Billy Brennan; Sean Harding, Evan McMillan (capt), Brian Shortall, Ciaran Nangle; Keith Ward, Greg Bolger, Paul Corry; Chris Mulhall, Ciaran Kilduff (Dwayne Wilson 87), David McMillan (Robbie Creevy 64).

DUNDALK: Peter Cherrie; Shaun Kelly, Wayne Hatswell, Nathan Murphy (Ciaran McGuigan 55); Stephen Maher, Tom Miller, Michael McGowan (Alan Cawley 62), JJ Melligan; Neale Fenn, Fahrudin Kuduzovic.

Referee: Neil Doyle.