

Outwitted by Sidcup's set pieces

19 February 2024



Sidcup 45 Sutton & Epsom RFC 22. Saturday 17th February.

Sutton & Epsom RFC first played at Crescent Farm in February 1898 and it is a delight to record that modern times have not hindered this historic rivalry as the clubs met for the 21st time in the league era on Saturday afternoon. Earlier in the campaign the teams met at Rugby Lane with both clubs apologetically at the bottom of the table with a solitary success each. Sutton & Epsom came from behind to take the honours on that day. Since that November day the season has improved considerably for both clubs with the hosts arriving on the back of five straight wins. Sidcup's successful streak continued as they comprehensively and deservedly defeated S&E 45-22.

Sutton & Epsom were forced into four changes from the side that beat Gravesend with the back division incurring most of the disruption with three absentees but with the advantage of hindsight the loss of the Black & Whites' hooker probably had greater significance on the events that were to unfold. Captain Bunting started proceedings as the sides sparred in search of any early defensive frailties. The teams recycled the ball quickly, defences closed rapidly and kickers looked for open spaces and the status quo was maintained. A looping run from Sutton 10 Tom Lennard initiated the first genuine chance in the 22 but solid defensive tackling saw the ball go forward a few phases later. In contrast from a scrum on halfway Sidcup scored from their first sortie. The ball went wide and an overlap was created on the flank and Louis Keeley finished with aplomb despite a valiant effort from the diving Matt Symonds. The conversion fell short but the hosts led 5-0.

Sutton & Epsom's next chance to score was manufactured by a magnificent touchline clearance from Gareth O'Brien, being a yard or two from touch he magically threaded the ball 50 metres down the line. Though denied a stunning 50/22 the slaving chasers forced a penalty and Freddy Bunting happily accepted the points on offer for S&E to trail 3-5. As ever restarts are crucial and scrappy play saw the Black & Whites suddenly 5 metres from their own line with a scrum. Matt Whitaker carried well from a retreating pack giving Tom Lennard time to clear. Relief was temporary and punishment severe. Moments later Louis Keeley was collecting his and Sidcup's second try. On this occasion the winger left a less challenging conversion that was gratefully accepted by Tom Shea. The Crescent Farm fans warmly applauded the 12-3 lead with the first quarter nearly complete. It had become apparent that the excellent Sidcup pack had the upper hand in the set scrum. In addition Sutton were struggling with their lineout ball. Additionally and unexpectedly Freddy Bunting missed a chance to narrow the deficit as he slipped slightly on the muddy surface attempting another penalty. Then the visitors were further hampered as fullback Gareth O'Brien departed with an injured knee to be replaced by Ciaran Mohr. Once more it was a marvellous kick, this time a 50/22 by Tom Lennard that put the visitors in the opposition 22. S&E pressed for a score and were brought back for a penalty. Declining the easy three points they took the tap and Matt Whitaker celebrated his birthday with a try on the ground where he had previously recorded his 100th league try. Freddy Bunting added the extras and Sutton trailed 10-12 on the half hour.

Sutton & Epsom won a penalty at the restart as optimism rose amongst the ranks of the travelling support. Seconds later they were relieved that play was brought back for a knock on as Sidcup had intercepted and a certain try from 70 metres was denied. With half-time approaching Alex Mount received a yellow card. Not only was the Sutton scrum under pressure their front row had incurred the wrath of the referee over the technical issue of the scrums engaging. The result was a ten-minute breather for Mount for the accumulated offences. Reduced to 14 Sidcup had a wonderful opportunity to make the scoreboard reflect their pack's dominance. The 14 men from Rugby Lane appeared to have navigated the choppy seas to the safe waters of half-time harbour but the Kent men scored with the final play of the half. Taking the ball blind from deep the ball-carrier stepped out of a low tackle and an overlap opportunity developed from halfway. With clinical efficiency fullback Dan Masters strode home and Tom Shea's conversion was met by the whistle that concluded the first period. The 19-10 interval lead was a fair reflection of superiority that Sidcup enjoyed in the key areas of the lineout and scrum that had provided the vital possession.

The second half began with the Black & Whites still numerically hampered and before anyone could debate if they could survive without further addition to the scoreboard Sidcup had their third try. Outside centre George Bird breezing through the defence to notch up their bonus point try which was effortlessly converted by Tom Shea for 26-10. Sutton showed their defiance a minute later. From a ruck on the 22 Matt Whitaker opted for the most direct route and found clear water before he evaded the last couple of defenders to score his second try. Freddy Bunting added the conversion and with that kick recorded his 200th point of the league campaign. Sutton & Epsom trailed 17-26 and hope lingered on.

It was Sidcup's turn to pin Sutton & Epsom back with a 50/22. Though S&E were now back to their full compliment the hosts immediately created a chance and how on earth they did not score will remain a mystery to all who were present. The Black & Whites cleared their lines from a 5-metre scrum but it was a temporary stay of execution. In contrast to the recently butchered offering Connor McDonald excelled with a wonderful solo effort weaving his way to the line. Though the conversion faltered with the score at 31-17 it was threatening to become a long afternoon for the visitors. That threat became a reality five minutes later. Forced back into their 22 the visitors conceded a penalty. The hosts opted for a scrum then ran wide and Connor McDonald had the ball again, with the defence desperately trying to cover men outside, he ghosted in for his second score. Tom Shea added to his account and Sidcup extended their lead to 38-17.

With 15 minutes remaining Sutton needed to carry the game to Sidcup and attempt to get something from the fixture. A fine kick return by Angus Findlay ably supported by replacements Callum Gibson and Dan Jones got S&E into the 22. There followed a Sutton try that owed more to Heath Robinson than Christopher Wren. From a central position Tom Lennard chipped ahead and the ball was not secured by the defence in the ensuing chaos the ball ended up in the right hand corner where Freddy Bunting was on hand for his first try of the season. Sutton & Epsom now had a very attainable target, the fourth try and a valuable bonus point, despite trailing 22-38.

Sutton suffered the immediate handicap of Callum Gibson becoming the second member of

the front row union to get a yellow card through accumulated indiscretions. Sidcup went for the jugular only to be denied by Alex Mount’s tackle under the posts forcing a spillage. The award of a 5-metre scrummage under their own posts was a mixed blessing for the Surrey men. The pack was shunted back, the posts were waving dramatically and Number 8 Nick Jansen touched down for a magnificent seventh Sidcup try. Tom Shea added the easiest of conversions for his tenth point of the afternoon as his side led 45-22.

The contest was over but there began the game within the game as Sutton went in search of their bonus point. First of all Matt Whitaker stormed to the halfway but to no avail. Then a wonderful run down the wing by Angus Findlay ended as he failed to get his pass to Ellis Rudder who was in support. The veteran Whitaker again went on the rampage and threw in a kick ahead for good measure. A penalty was kicked into the corner and the 5-metre lineout was lost. Then on the final play of the game Ellis Rudder broke clear in the 22 and passed to Matt Symonds. The rapturous cheers of the Sutton supporters turned to groans as the referee whistled for a forward pass. The game ended with Sidcup the clear winner by 45-22.

If there was a Man of the Match Award it should have gone to the Sidcup pack as they were magnificent to a man. The domination of the scrum, lineout and giving their backs front-foot ball was the telling factor in this game. Sutton & Epsom will regroup with a weekend off from the cut and thrust of league action before the visit of London Cornish on 2 nd March to Rugby Lane. For those wishing to attend please note that it will be a 3pm kick off.

Sutton & Epsom: Gareth O’Brien, Angus Findlay, Ellis Rudder, Freddy Bunting ©, Matt Symonds, Tom Lennard, Joe Lovatt, Tariq Al Khaldi, Alex Mount, Tom Boaden, Josh Glanville, Ewan McTaggart, George London, Rob Hegarty & Matt Whitaker.
Replacements: Callum Gibson, Dan Jones & Ciaran Mohr.

Sidcup: Dan Masters; Connor McDonald, George Bird, Sam Leek, Louis Keeley, Tom Shea, Simon Vincent, Teddy Gibbons, Jonathan Fordham, Sam Carmen, Ben Stock, Steven Evans, Fred Ruff, Billy Williams & Nicholas Jansen.
Replacements: Harry Large, Tom Epps & Alex Ure.

Epsom dig deep to beat Gravesend

19 February 2024



Sutton & Epsom RFC 21 Gravesend 19. Saturday 3rd February.

It has reached the business end of the campaign and for all clubs a studious look at the table and the remaining fixtures will determine their aspirations. For Sutton & Epsom and Gravesend it was a fixture that would relieve relegation fears for the victor but increase anxiety for the defeated. When the clubs met earlier this season on the Rectory Field it was a match rather ruined by the referee’s penchant for puritanical pedantry as the crowd endured an endless stream of penalties. Gravesend triumphed 36-29 with their clinical lineout securing multiple tries. On Saturday, with great credit to referee Kasey Allen, those present enjoyed a rousing contest unimpeded by the whistle as the Black & Whites secured their first win after a quartet of losses.

On a cloudy but mild afternoon on an excellent surface Gravesend kicked off playing towards the clubhouse. The temptation to watch England play Italy was too great for many and a rather Spartan gathering assembled. As England’s plight increased so did the crowd watching the local contest. The opening five minutes of high tempo rugby with both sides attacking with gusto set the tone before the first scrummage interrupted the entertainment. The backs probed, the defences demonstrated thunderous tackling and the kickers sparred for territorial advantage. If Sutton were not wary of the Gravesend pack before the start they had an unpleasant reminder on the quarter hour mark. A penalty was conceded and the ball kicked into the corner. The lineout ball was taken cleanly. The initial surge was halted but slickly the ball was spun to the blindside where Brendan Kelly was in splendid isolation and had the easiest task to score in the corner. Fortune favoured S&E as Josh Smith’s finely struck conversion came back off the upright. Gravesend led 5-0 with Sutton left to ponder discipline and penalty counts.

Any anxiety in the ranks of the Sutton supporters was instantly assuaged. The visitors cleared the restart but Gareth O’Brien and Ellis Rudder combined to run it back into the Gravesend 22 to win a penalty. It was the hosts’ turn to kick into the corner for the attacking lineout. The first assault saw Freddie Bunting close to glory but an earlier infringement meant the home team had a second chance. As it has been for over a decade the go-to man was Matt Whitaker and he delivered. Perhaps conscious of his veteran status he arrived clean-shaven this week, though it only took days off his appearance it had not diminished his strength and footwork near the line as he powered over. Freddy Bunting’s conversion put Sutton & Epsom ahead 7-5.

It was now that Gravesend winger Andrew Cooke entered the fray. His first run was rather lateral but evaded too many defenders before the ball was marshalled into touch. That was merely an appetiser to his next contribution. He gathered a clearance in his 22 in the middle of the pitch and ran the ball straight back into the Sutton 22 before being denied a sensational try. Perhaps it needed that fright to ignite the hosts. S&E now put together their best phases of the match as forwards and backs in unison swept down the pitch recycling the ball at pace. The attack ended with a penalty for a high tackle. Yet again the crowd waited to see if a 5-metre lineout would be converted into points. Once more with clinical efficiency the forwards controlled the ball and advanced to the line for lock Josh Glanville to score. Captain Bunting bisected the uprights to extend Sutton’s advantage to 14-5.

The remainder of the first period was played out without further addition to the scoreboard. The indication of the first half was that this match was evenly poised with Gravesend not only dangerous through their powerful pack but carrying significantly more attacking threat in their back division than was seen in the October meeting. For S&E the lineout was functioning superbly, the set scrum had manfully met the challenge and they were playing with pace and precision. The

sides turned around with all to play for with Sutton holding the upper hand 14-5.

The Rugby Lane crowd nearly had the perfect start to the second half. Centre Lawrence Elliott went from the sublime to the ridiculous. He picked the perfect angle to break the line and strode purposefully into the Gravesend 22 with a try looking probable he then threw out a pass that could generously be described as unforgiving as the bemused winger, Ellis Rudder, watched the ball speed towards the advertising hoardings. Though Sutton stole the lineout ball they could not manufacture another opening. Soon the Rugby Lane XV was to be on the defensive. A penalty in the Black & White 22 saw the visitors opt for a scrummage and as they went wide a kick through rolled against the corner flag as Sutton scrambled in defence. This started a period of relentless pressure. The hosts did not aid their cause by failing to find touch with a clearance. The Kent men were now playing their best rugby and it seemed to be a question of when rather than if they would score.

However, it was now that possibly the key factor of the fixture was becoming evident. The Sutton defence was obdurate in the extreme, to a man they tackled tenaciously and got on their feet eager to put in another hit. Almost miraculously the line held as Gravesend were frustrated time and again as they were held up over the line. Eventually the visitors scored and it took exceptional work from winger Matthew Brady twisting and turning to score in the corner with multiple tacklers in attendance. Josh Smith converted exquisitely from the touchline as they made it a two-point deficit, 12-14. Significantly it had taken ten minutes of siege warfare for the try which must have emboldened the resolve of the hosts whilst equally left the visitors asking what do we need to do to score. From the restart Gravesend were hampered by a yellow card as an instinctive outstretched arm, with no malice intended, caught Kyren Ghumra's head. The winger had to be replaced by Matt Symonds but Sutton had ten minutes to play against 14 men.

Reacting to the numerical superiority with great urgency the home team went in search of points to extend their lead beyond a solitary score. Soon they were given an opportunity. Despite being awarded a penalty very much within the capabilities of the prolific Bunting boot the captain chose to go for the corner. His bravery was rewarded as the lineout was secured and the pack advanced to the line for Chris Farrell to score. The vital conversion was added by Freddy Bunting and the 21-12 lead meant that Gravesend would have to score twice in the final quarter of an hour.

If Sutton had been under siege before their third try they now endured an all out assault from Gravesend. It was the type of rugby that has every spectator on the edge of their seat living every carry and every tackle. The previous fortitude had transformed to cussed resilience and was on the way to heroic defence. Gravesend opted for scrums but the Sutton pack refused to yield. When the ball went wide the visiting backs opted for solo glory rather than swift passing and were met by scything tackles. The longer the line held the more desperate were the attacks. If the Kent men picked the wrong options to their great credit they did not offer up the knock-ons or penalties to assist the Sutton cause. Eventually centre Chris Brady crossed the whitewash and Josh Smith made it a two-point game once more as Sutton led 21-19. Crucially Sutton had eaten away significantly at the clock and only a couple of minutes were left.

It was now a test of game management and S&E controlled possession with admirable skill advance to the 22. On the attack they put through a speculative kick to the try line. Though it did not result in a score and gave Gravesend the ball it left the visitors with the Herculean labour of scoring from the length of the pitch. Moments later the final whistle blew and Sutton had won a victory of great significance. The manner of the success built on passion, team spirit and determination should hold them in great stead for the remainder of the campaign. For Gravesend they earned a bonus point but they put in a performance vastly superior to the earlier encounter and they certainly have all the assets required to navigate their way to safety.

There is no game next Saturday but the league continues on 17 th February with a trip to Crescent Farm to play the improving Sidcup who like S&E are on 38 points in the league but a place higher on points' difference.

Sutton & Epsom: Gareth O'Brien, Kyren Ghumra, Lawrence Elliott, Freddy Bunting ©, Ellis Rudder, Tom Lennard, Steve Munford, Alex Mount, Chris Farrell, Callum Gibson, Josh Glanville, Ewan McTaggart, George London, Rob Hegarty & Matt Whitaker.
Replacements: Tom Boaden, Tariq Al Khaldi & Matt Symonds.

Gravesend: Jamie Fautley, Andrew Cooke, Chris Brady, Josh Smith, Matt Brady, George Bruce, Ben Kite, Brendan Kelly, Terry Papworth, Jamie Forsythe, Tom Bird, Harry Brooker, Matt Hewitt, Samraj Chahal & Connor Murphy.
Replacements: Stan Dadson, Ben Reeve & Harvey Dean

Image - Robin Kennedy

The Battle of Medway lost

19 February 2024



Medway 37 Sutton & Epsom RFC 26. Saturday 27th January. Sutton & Epsom returned to a most happy hunting ground on Saturday as their only previous trip to Priestfields saw them gain promotion in 2016 with an Andy Matthews hat trick. There were two survivors from that famous afternoon being back row brothers George London and Matt Whitaker. If nostalgia filled the air it was also because it was a red-letter day for Medway stalwart Tom Beaumont who was making his 200th league appearance. For the veteran flanker the hosts obliged with a 37-26 win in a hard fought and entertaining encounter.

Sutton saw a welcome return to Ellis Rudder, last seen four years ago at Westcliff in National 2, and Lawrence Elliott after injury breaks of vastly contrasting lengths of time. The Priestfield playing surface was in excellent condition considering the recent vagaries of the weather as Freddy Bunting kicked off on a dry but chill winter afternoon. S&E were on the attack immediately with a surging break to the opposition 22 from the prolific Matt Whitaker after the initial line break from Gareth O'Brien. An early riposte from the hosts gather the ball on the blindside on halfway with great prospects the ball inexplicably fell to earth. After this entertaining start the opening score was rather more mundane. The visitors conceded a penalty and were penalised for not retreating> The second infringement lead to a lineout in the corner. It was third time unlucky as the referee gave Owen Church-Mills the opportunity to open Medway's account. The Number 10 assuredly bisected the uprights to put Medway 3-0 up after five minutes.

Sutton & Epsom only took five minutes to not only open their account but claim the lead. Another Whitaker carry and support by the forwards led to a penalty. It was the hosts’ turn to defend a lineout near their line. The men from Surrey secured the ball and Alex Mount was the beneficiary of their control as he forced his way over for a try. Freddy Bunting added the extras for a 7-3 advantage. Five minutes later the Black & Whites were celebrating a second try. Advancing into the 22 Freddy Bunting’s probing kick behind the defence was gathered by winger Kyren Ghumra who finished with panache. Captain Bunting made it 14-3 with a relatively simple conversion. At the end of the first quarter the productive opening by the Rugby Lane XV was undone by a fatal self-inflicted wound as a woeful clearance in their 22 was predictably charged down. Medway took advantage of the retreating defence as Captain Antony Clement’s perfectly timed pass gifted his centre partner, Sean Marriott, a try. Owen Church-Mills conversion made it 10-14.

The Black & Whites had a chance to reprise their opening score but Freddy Bunting overcooked the penalty and instead of a 5-metre lineout his team set up to receive a drop out. As the half continued to ebb and flow Medway were playing with great continuity and Sutton were indebted to a splendid tackle from Kyren Ghumra and an over-eager forward going off his feet at the ruck.

Medway made their first change as Deji Oyesola replaced Ryan Eastley in the front row. S&E were hampered by poor kicking from hand as two kicks in as many minutes found opponents with perfect precision who gratefully called ‘mark’. As the errors mounted it was a great relief for the travelling supporters when fluency returned from the familiar source of Matt Whitaker. Gareth O’Brien and Tom Boaden continued the move that was only halted by foul play. The result was a yellow card, Medway reduced to 14 and Sutton with the penalty. The forwards took control and Chris Farrell burrowed his way over for his sides third try. Freddy Bunting’s precise kick left the scoreboard reading Medway 10 Sutton & Epsom 21.

In time added on a long clearance kick unfortunately rolled through the dead ball area to the advantage of the home team. Whether you view that as careless or unlucky is up to the generosity of your spirit. However, this territorial penalty was compounded by then conceding a penalty. Owen Church-Mills stepped up to conclude the first period with his second penalty of the afternoon which took some of the gloss off the visitors first half performance but Sutton still led by 21-13 as the teams turned around.

Medway seized the initiative early in the second period. They camped in the Sutton 22 and carried relentlessly with powerful runs ably supported. However, defiant defence by Sutton averted the try that seemed imminent as a frustrated home team decided to opt for the three points at the third time of asking. Owen Church-Mills made it three out of three for penalties and his team were within a score at 16-21. It was becoming one-way traffic in the third quarter with Captain Clement at his influential best orchestrating the backs. But the stoic Sutton defence were a match for each and every carry and it was a mark of their defence that again the hosts opted for a kick at goal. It was rather a surprise when the latest strike slid wide. The despair of the home crowd was immediately replaced by a joyous cheer. The drop kick was taken by Number 8 Todd Johnson and the previously adamant defence dissolved as he broke through a couple of tackles on his way to the 22. Then Deji Oyesola exploded through the ruck to run in untouched under the posts. The easiest of conversions was added and Medway had taken the lead 23-21.

This setback inspired Sutton who finally got some attacking ball having won a penalty at a scrum they kicked to the corner. It was the turn of the Medway defence to face the music. Willem Ratu, Freddy Bunting and the pack advanced to the line. One, two and three penalties were awarded. From the third the irrepressible Matt Whitaker added another try to his record-breaking career tally. The blustering breeze carried the conversion narrowly wide but a resurgent Sutton held a slender advantage at 26-23. Suddenly it appeared to be anyone’s game with ten minutes left on the clock.

After what had gone before the denouement of the match was most disappointing for the visitors. Great credit must go to Medway who raised their game to play with urgency, accuracy and potency. They declined a kickable penalty for the lineout in the corner. This time the sustained pressure resulted in a try for lock Dan Jackson. Owen Church-Mills increased the gap to 30-26 with the game still in the balance. But the hosts were in no mood to sit back on so precarious a lead. At once they went in search of the bonus point and another try to secure the win. Ewan McTaggart appeared to have won an important lineout steal but the he tapped back bounced cruelly away from the visitors and was gathered by the alert Kent pack. Once more the hosts burst through a ruck but this time it was an assist to Deji Oyesola who was perfectly placed to trot in under the posts for his second try of the afternoon and an impregnable 37-26 lead as Owen Church Mills made his personal tally 16 points. The hosts had no problem running down the clock to secure the 37-26 bonus point win.

It was the third game in a row that Sutton & Epsom had led in the second half but failed to hold onto their advantage. For long periods their defence was of the highest quality but unfortunately errors were punished. Medway, as they had at Rugby Lane, carried aggressively with great continuity created by timely offloads to excellent support players. Antony Clement was at his influential best whilst Todd Johnson and Deji Oyesola impressed in the pack. For S&E there was a great sense of frustration despite a try-scoring bonus point they had the chance for more. For long spells the defence was first rate but there was a sense that more than one of the scores could have been avoided. In attack the Black & Whites conversion rate in the 22 was high and four tries on the road should be the foundation for a victory. There is an urgent need to find a way of seeing out these close finishes to win matches that are in the balance.

Next Saturday Sutton and Epsom entertain Gravesend, at Rugby Lane at 2:30pm, who like the hosts and Sidcup have a 10-6 loss record in the rather congested nether regions of the league.

Sutton & Epsom:

Gareth O’Brien, Kyren Ghumra, Lawrence Elliott, Freddy Bunting ©, Ellis Rudder, Tom Lennard, Steve Munford, Alex Mount, Chris Farrell, Tom Boaden, Josh Glanville, Ewan McTaggart, George London, Rob Hegarty & Matt Whitaker.

Replacements: Callum Gibson, Ben Green & Willem Ratu.

Medway:

Perry Macauley, John Sipawa, Sean Marriott, Antony Clement, Conor Chalmers, Owen Church-Mills, Ben Dance, Ryan Eastley, Josh Knight, Jack Nickalls, Dan Jackson, Jordan Stubbington, Harry Gibbons, Tom Beaumont & Todd Johnson.

Replacements: Deji Oyesola, Joseph Byrne & Robert O’Brien.

Local rugby team not blinded by Old Alley

19 February 2024



Sutton & Epsom RFC 15 - Old Alleynians 19. Saturday 13th January.

On Dulwich Common at the start of the league campaign the Old Alleynians won an exhilarating encounter 29-25 with a Will Malins hat trick grabbing the headlines. Both sides were much changed for the return fixture at Rugby Lane. After the Battersea Ironsides defeat Sutton and Epsom had mixed blessings from the physio hut as Tom Lennard had recovered from his back injury to make his first start at 10 but Willem Ratu's knee failed the fitness test. History repeated itself at Rugby Lane as the OAs again triumphed by four points but this time they had to come from behind to win 19-15.

On a cold but thankfully wind free afternoon Freddy Bunting initiated proceedings. Alleynians put themselves under pressure from the kick off as a forward met the kick with a technique better served for volleyball than rugby union. The unforgiving ball was spiked backwards and snatched by the Black & White pack from the retreating visitors. Encouraged by this immediate success Sutton stormed into the opposition 22 in search of the opening score. Excellent work by the forwards saw Tom Boaden carry to within a couple of strides before the ball was knocked on a couple of phases later. However, the backpedalling defence of the visitors had incurred the wrath of the referee and Sutton had the bonus of a five-metre penalty. The simple kick at goal was declined and the attacking option was chosen. Matt Whitaker rewarded the faith of his captain with a vintage score as he stepped past the first defenders before his telescopic reach stretched for the line. Freddy Bunting's conversion drifted wide but Sutton led 5-0.

Alleynians went in search of an immediate reply and imitated the hosts by regaining the restart. The men from Dulwich eagerly went through their phases and quickly entered the 22 and looked likely to make amends for their early reverse. The determined defence of S&E managed to prevent an equalising score as the visitors spilled the ball in contact with the line at their mercy. Sutton failed to adequately clear their lines and moments later the OAs were attacking once more. Again the referee awarded a penalty to the attacking side but on this occasion the kick at goal was the more obvious option being some distance from the try-line. The attempt fell short and the Black & Whites were able to clear their lines.

Buoyed by their early success Sutton were playing with confidence and a high tempo with the halfback combination of Munford and Lennard orchestrating the attacks. The hosts were faster in thought and deed than the visitors who were struggling to find their familiar rhythm. S&E on the front foot were impressive as forwards and backs combined and they took advantage of a penalty awarded at a scrum to kick to the corner. The hosts failed to capitalise dropping the ball but a poor clearance from the subsequent scrum led to another S&E lineout on the 22. Excellent continuity was matched by robust defence that led to Tom Lennard floating a kick to the corner where Ciaran Mohr under scrutiny just failed to catch the ball a metre from the line. Fortune favoured Sutton as they were awarded a free kick for foot up in the scrum. Matt Whitaker carried the ball to the line and Tom Boaden was rewarded for his support play to receive the ball and score. Freddy Bunting converted for a 12-0 lead at the end of the first quarter.

A vocal Old Alleynians XV huddled behind the posts and called upon a greater collective effort after the second try and urged the team to match the S&E team's pace at the breakdown. From the restart Number 8 Gillam Crouch caught the ball and advanced at pace into the Sutton half. From the next scrum they drove the Black & White pack off their ball. The OAs looked favourites to score but tremendous tackling not only denied them but won Sutton & Epsom a relieving penalty. The match ebbed and flowed as the clock entered time added on in the first period. OAs continued to press for a vital score and belatedly got on the scoreboard. They kicked a penalty to the corner and secured the ball at the lineout. Though the forwards were denied the ball went wide and Robert Outram chose the perfect line to carve through the defence to score. Josh Winduss added the extras as Alleynians trailed 7-14. All their good work was nearly undone as they failed to kick the ball to touch on the final play of the half and conceded a penalty for an accidental offside. Freddy Bunting failed to compound their misery as his penalty attempt went narrowly wide and Mr Richardson blew for half-time with Sutton leading 12-7.

Sutton & Epsom were the first to score in the second period. Ten minutes into the half they were awarded a penalty as the men from Dulwich strayed offside. Captain Bunting stepped up and bisected the uprights to extend Sutton's advantage to 15-7. Both sides looked threatening in attack but equally the well organised defences neutered the offensive play. As the match progressed it was Old Alleynians who began to have the majority of the possession and territory. As the match entered the final quarter S&E were indebted to Gareth O'Brien who made a superb mark in the corner that not only prevented a possible try but allowed the hosts to relieve the siege. Stubborn Sutton defence was frustrating the visitors who conceded a penalty in the hosts'

However, it was becoming one-way traffic and only a cover tackle from Ross Parsons averted a score. But the Black & Whites just could not find the comfort of the opposition half.

With ten minutes remaining after a rather scrappy sequence of rucks with each side turning over the ball Old Alleynians were awarded a scrum less than 10 metres from the Sutton posts in a central position. From the perfect platform winger Rory Holford touched down and replacement Ollie Hobman added the conversion. S&E's lead was now by the narrowest of margins at 15-14. The visitors were in the ascendancy and pressed ahead in search of the victory. Under pressure the Rugby Lane men responded in style as they advanced to the opposition 22 with their best sequence of the half. Sadly for the home supporters, unlike the first period, they did not come away with points after their foray in the opposition 22. As the match entered time added on the Sutton defences were breached near halfway. The visitors swarmed through and Ollie Hobman scored the crucial try. Though the conversion never threatened the posts Old Alleynians had the lead for the first time in the match, 19-15, with precious few minutes remaining.

The Black & Whites played with desperation trying to attack from deep in their half and Ben Osuntokun charged down a clearance and was only thwarted by the depth of the in-goal area from adding a fourth try. If that had been the case not only would Alleynians have secured a bonus point it would have given them an opportunity to deny Sutton a losing bonus point. In so evenly contested a match it would have been unduly harsh if the hosts had been denied the solitary point for their endeavours. Moments later the referee blew the final whistle. A keenly

contested match concluded with Old Alleynians victorious 19-15 in a fixture that could have gone either way.

If the first encounter in September was entertaining fare enlivened by an excessive error count by both teams Saturday’s match was of a far higher standard reflecting the improved status of both clubs. Old Alleynians gained promotion with a solitary blemish on their 2022-23 league record and are thriving at the higher level rather than struggling to acclimatise as is the case with many an elevated side. Their set piece scrummage was dominant in the first period and arguably had the upper hand throughout. Their back division has pace and quality and from the first minute they looked to play 15-man rugby. Ben Osuntokun was formidable and his ubiquitous presence became more apparent the longer the game continued. For the Black & Whites there was greater fluency and tempo in the first quarter which created the early advantage. In addition the scrambling and committed defence in their 22 frustrated their opponents. It was a match that could have gone either way but OAs finished the stronger side and at the eleventh hour broke through the Black & Whites defences for the vital score.

For Sutton & Epsom next Saturday is a rest weekend before the league campaign resumes on January 27th with the charabanc taking the team to Priestfields. In the reverse fixture an impressive Medway ran away 33-15 victors at Rugby Lane but in this league prior success appears to be almost irrelevant as a guide to form. In contrast next Saturday the Old Boys have to play their postponed fixture against Cobham. The visitors took exception to the playing surface at Dulwich Common and headed back to the Memorial Ground whilst the hosts enjoyed the afternoon watching their 3 rd XV play on the unplayable surface.

Sutton & Epsom:

Gareth O’Brien, Kyren Ghumra, Ross Parsons, Freddy Bunting ©, Ciaran Mohr, Tom Lennard, Steve Munford, Alex Mount, Chris Farrell, Tom Boaden, Josh Glanville, Ewan McTaggart, Rob Hegarty, Josh Pulvirenti & Matt Whitaker.

Replacements: Callum Gibson, Ben Green & Matt Symonds.

Old Alleynians

Josh Winduss, Tom Williams, Robert Outram, Andrew Jones-Davies, Rory Holford, Henry Dewing, Tristram Holden, Jeremiah Manning, Charles Thompson, Tom Weightman, Will Hinchcliffe, James Mair, Ben Osuntokun, Hadley Eames & Gillam Crouch.

Replacements: Cameron Saunders, Brian Lennard & Ollie Hobman.

Photo credit: Robin Kennedy

Battersea power ahead of local rugby team

19 February 2024



Battersea Ironsides 38 Sutton & Epsom RFC 29. Saturday 6th January.

In September at Rugby Lane Sutton & Epsom belatedly gained their first success of their campaign with a last gasp 26-25 win over the then league leader’s Battersea Ironsides. Therefore the return fixture was anticipated with great relish. Before the kick off there was much disruption from the scheduled proceedings. Storm Henk had led to torrential midweek rains resulting in Battersea’s Openview facilities being unplayable. Fortunately an alternative time and venue was found. The match was rescheduled for 4pm at the splendid Grasshoppers RFC venue. The crowd enjoyed the curtain-raiser at 2pm as HAC overcame Grasshoppers 22-14 in the parallel Regional 2 Thames League before settling in for the main event. A thrilling nine-try match ensued with the lead changing hands five times before Battersea Ironsides triumphed 38-29.

Sutton & Epsom suffered a setback in the warm up as Tom Lennard injured his back. The deck was reshuffled and Gareth O’Brien went to 10 and Austin Bell, returning from University, came off the bench to 15. The unfortunate Lennard, with all the mobility of an octogenarian, was ushered to the bench and was unlikely to play any part in proceedings unless some miracle worker happened to be strolling down Syon Lane. The game started under the floodlights with Battersea Ironsides immediately in the ascendancy. A try in the opening minute was denied as the hosts were held up over the line. Five minutes later blindside flanker Ollie Davies made the first of many penetrating breaks. From halfway he broke through the first defender then palmed off prospective tacklers who were scattered like skittles as he raced in to score. Charles Stuart regally added the conversion for a 7-0 lead.

The high tempo opening from the hosts continued as Charles Stuart added a penalty to extend the lead to 10-0. Moments later Sutton were on the scoreboard from the familiar efficiency of Freddy Bunting’s boot as he added another penalty to his ever-increasing season’s tally to make it 10-3. However, the errant Sutton defence yielded another penalty that enabled the hosts to regain their ten-point advantage to lead 13-3 a couple of minutes later. At the end of the first quarter Battersea Ironsides were rewarded for their dominant start to the match with their second try. This time it was Number 8 Tom Jeffs who forced his way past flailing defenders from ten metres out. The ball-carrying of Davies & Jeffs was to be the difference between the sides by the final whistle. Though Charles Stuart’s conversion drifted harmlessly wide the Ironsides had a healthy advantage of 18-3 with the visitors starved of territory and possession.

The early ascendancy of the SW17 outfit was replaced by a sterling Sutton comeback. At last the Black & Whites put together some phases and excellent handling got them deep into the Battersea half. The opportunity looked to have been lost but the referee brought the game back for an earlier offence. With the 15-point deficit Captain Bunting shunned the 3-point option and kicked to the corner. The gamble saw a rich reward. Josh Pulvirenti scored from close-range and Freddy Bunting added the conversion to trail 10-18. Though the S&E revival was soon deflated by another Charles Stuart penalty that saw the score at 21-10 the Black & Whites had a foothold in the game and were looking dangerous when they had possession.

With the interval rapidly approaching Sutton & Epsom enjoyed their best spell of the game as they went in search of a score before the break. Resolute and powerful tackling by the Battersea team held the line. However, under pressure the defence transgressed and they were reduced to 14 men. With the clock counting down in time added on in the first period finally flanker Rob Hegarty forced his way over following a 5-metre lineout. Freddy Bunting’s conversion concluded the first

half with Sutton closing the gap to 17-21.

The second half began with the Black & Whites confident that they could repeat the come from behind win they had enjoyed earlier this season. In contrast Battersea sought to regain the dominance they had enjoyed at the start of the game. As ever the opening score of the half would be vital for the hopes of both sides. Ten minutes into the second period Battersea kicked into the Sutton half. Fullback Austin Bell gathered the ball and looked for an advantageous 50-22 kick. As the ball rolled towards the beneficial touch it trickled to a halt but Sutton’s initial frustration was transformed into delight. Winger Kyren Ghumra arrived with the cover and his boot manage to nudge the ball to the Ironsides 22. He regained his footing gathered the loose ball and ran in unopposed. Freddy Bunting added the conversion and Sutton led 22-21.

If self-doubt had entered into the hosts it was soon dispelled as the redoubtable Tom Jeffs added to his account with his second try of the afternoon. A penalty was kicked to the corner and the 5-metre lineout was secured and ball was quickly transferred to Tom Jeffs who bulldozed his way over. Though the conversion was missed Battersea lead once more by 26-22. Sutton refused to be subdued and five minutes later they had regained lead. From a breakdown 15 metres from the line lock Ewan McTaggart gather the ball, broke through and sidestepped the last defender to score by the uprights. The towering second row is arguably S&E’s most improved player this season and his try was greeted with joyous enthusiasm from the travelling support. With Freddy Bunting adding the extras the Black & Whites led 29-26 entering the final quarter.

Once more the Ironsides went in search of a try. Another penalty was kicked to the corner for a 5-metre lineout. The expectant home crowd bayed for a repeat dose of the medicine. Initially it appeared that the Sutton defences had frustrated the hosts on the line. After much delay and close inspection of the mass of humanity piled in front of him the referee raised his arm aloft to signal the try. Prop Henry Warby was awarded the crucial score. The pendulum had swung back in favour of Battersea and Charles Stuart’s conversion put the hosts 33-29 ahead. A couple of minutes later the confused crowd saw Josh Glanville and a Battersea forward depart with yellow cards. It came to pass that Sir had been unimpressed by some pushing and shoving though the incident was less than what commuters experience boarding a rush hour tube and to onlookers it seemed a rather draconian response.

The topsy-turvy nature of the second half had fifteen minutes to go and the outcome was still in the balance. Sutton & Epsom went in search of the 22 and a platform to launch an attack on the Battersea line. Freddy Bunting’s long penalty kick from hand, intended for the corner, was gathered infield and a mark called. The threat was averted and the Ironsides set out their stall in the visitors’ half. In a rousing finish multiple attacks followed as last ditch tackles frustrated the hosts. Finally, Charles Stuart rounded off a fine performance as he dummied and sidestepped his way over the line for Battersea Ironside’s fifth try of the afternoon. The score resulted in an unseemly fracas in the in-goal area. No further cards were issued with only a couple of minutes remaining but Battersea were awarded a penalty at the restart. For those who revel in the unusual it was rather disappointing that Charles Stuart did not attempt the extra three points but Battersea led 38-29 with a two score cushion.

There was no further addition to the score and the Ironsides had won a most exciting game 38-29. Messrs Davies and Jeffs had been outstanding for the victors carrying numerous times collecting considerable yardage as well as three tries. Sutton had looked dangerous in attack but their defence lacked the excellence of their Cobham away win and ultimately that was the deciding factor in a match played between two sides who were notably better than their earlier meeting this season. Next Saturday Sutton & Epsom host Old Alleynians who have started 2024 in splendid fashion by crushing London Cornish 50-17. When the two sides met at Dulwich Common in September the Old Boys edged out S&E 29-25.

Sutton & Epsom:
Austin Bell, Ciaran Mohr, Willem Ratu, Kyren Ghumra, Freddy Bunting ©, Gareth O’Brien, Ross Parsons, Tom Boaden, Chris Farrell, Alex Mount, Ewan McTaggart, Josh Glanville, Rob Hegarty, Josh Pulvirenti & Matt Whitaker.
Replacements: Callum Gibson & Ben Green. Unused: Tom Lennard.

Battersea Ironsides
George Clair, Will Diamond, Ben Turner, Jacob Donovan, Mike Brennan, Charles Stuart, Jack Moates, Harry Martin, Ollie Lewis, Henry Warby, Archie MacPherson, Sam Reeves, Ollie Davies, Alex Chitan & Tom Jeffs.
Replacements: Harry Batson, Max Trickett & Cameron Baker.

Somewhat resigned by Reigatians

19 February 2024



Sutton & Epsom RFC 21 – Old Reigatian 38. Saturday 16th December.

In the reverse fixture Old Reigatian finally subdued a stubborn Sutton and Epsom 35-29 after a game of fluctuating fortunes. This time the Black & Whites were enjoying a run of five victories whilst the visitors were lying third and snapping at the heels of the leaders. For the hosts it was a red-letter day for hooker Chris Farrell who was celebrating his 100 th 1st XV league appearance. In stark contrast Ben Green was making his debut for S&E and was one of four changes to the starting line-up. Old Reigatian continued their upward trajectory with a very impressive 38-21 triumph.

Freddy Bunting kicked off with the wind favouring the hosts. Moments later he was impressively putting his team onto the front foot with a probing 50-22 kick. It was a fast and furious opening ten minutes as each side were eager to gain the early advantage. It was most competitive at the breakdown and both defences held firm. On the quarter hour Lawrence Elliott was adjudged to have obstructed the OR kicker as the ball rolled off the back of the pitch. The penalty was kicked

into the corner. Sterling Sutton defence halted the visitors but they were brought back for another penalty. The second attempt improved on the dress rehearsal as a perfectly executed catch & drive saw prop Ciaran Nestor touch down for the first try of the afternoon. Lucas Overtoom stroked over the conversion for a 7-0 lead for OR.

#	Team	P	W	D	L	PF	PA	+/-	TB	LB	Pts
1	Beckenham	13	9	0	4	394	322	72	8	3	47
2	Old Reigatian	13	9	0	4	380	300	80	10	0	46
3	Battersea Ironsides	13	9	0	4	395	274	121	7	2	45
4	Reeds Weybridge	13	9	0	4	354	235	119	4	3	43
5	Old Colfeians	13	7	0	6	324	331	-7	5	2	35
6	Medway	13	7	0	6	290	338	-48	5	2	35
7	Old Alleynians	12	6	0	6	321	306	15	6	3	33
8	Sutton & Epsom	13	6	0	7	372	364	8	4	4	32
9	Cobham	12	5	0	7	319	343	-24	7	1	28
10	Gravesend	13	4	0	9	257	382	-125	4	3	23
11	Sidcup	13	3	0	10	283	353	-70	3	4	19
12	London Cornish	13	3	0	10	280	421	-141	4	2	18

England Rugby Regional 2 South East table

Top image: Chris Farrell playing in his 100th 2st XV league match. Credit Robin Kennedy.

Though the hosts pressed hard to get back on terms with a couple of visits to their opponents’ 22 the men from the Geoffrey Knight Fields stood tall with an impregnable defence. S&E got to the line but were denied the chance to level the score as they lost possession at the critical juncture. In fact it was the team from Reigate who lifted the temporary siege and scored their second try with their second visit to the Sutton 22. On the half hour mark a sweeping play with great continuity provided by adept passes out of tackles saw Reigatian centre Gareth Stephens chip over the defence re-gather the ball and complete a stylish score. Though the conversion never threatened the uprights Old Reigatian had a healthy12-0 advantage.

Sutton & Epsom were in need of a score to get a foothold in the game and despite Willem Ratu charging ahead like Jehu support was not at hand to benefit from the break. Sutton did not aid their chances by conceding penalties and from one given for a high tackle the Reigate side kicked into the corner. Despite spoiling the lineout the loose ball was touched down in the host’s in-goal area resulting in a 5-metre scrum to OR. A fine tackle by Josh Pulvirenti and a knock on appeared to have saved S&E but once more the referee brought the sides back to an earlier infringement by the Rugby Lane XV. Following another scrummage and multiple carries Max Coyle popped over from short-range. Lucas Overtoom added the extras for a 19-0 lead.

A thoroughly downcast home team restarted and promptly conceded a soft score. The kick was taken and returned with a vengeance through apologetic tackles. Gareth O’Brien’s attempt to clear the ball from his 22 was impeded and the voracious hands of the visitors collected the loose ball. It was relayed to lock Jack Baart who powered in at the corner. The touchline conversion bisected the uprights and Old Reigatian led 26-0 with a bonus point already in their back pocket. Timely words were uttered under the Sutton posts and the hosts desperately attempted to get a score before the interval but to no avail. OR turned around 26-0 ahead leaving S&E with an Everest-like challenge to maintain their winning run.

It is the modern vogue for coaches and pundits alike to highlight the conversion rate for teams when visiting their opponents’ 22. For sorry Sutton the first half recorded 0% whilst Old Reigatian were on 100%. In addition the normally faultless Bunting boot had erred twice. The 26-0 deficit may not have accurately reflected the balance of the game but it highlighted that one side was ruthlessly clinical whilst the other was most profligate. The Black & Whites held back on making changes at the break no doubt planning to get an early score to exert maximum pressure on the visitors. They would have to reverse the trend of the first period and take every opportunity to score if they were going to get anything out of this fixture.

An early score for the hosts was not only essential to make a contest of the match but also for Sutton’s self-belief. However, within five minutes the visitors were crossing the whitewash for a fifth time. A kick through, a ricochet and a helpful assist from a Black & White boot gifted Gareth Stephens his second try. Despite the missed conversion Old Reigatian looked over the horizon and far away leading 31-0. Sutton & Epsom rang the changes as Alex Mount returned to the fray and Ross Parsons had his first taste of action replacing Chris Ballard. A few minutes later George London was the last pair of fresh legs as Isaac Lea took a breather. Two penalties on the bounce to the home team propelled the Rugby Lane team to a lineout 10 metres out. Though they were thwarted this time another penalty meant they had a second chance from a 5-metre lineout. The forwards controlled the ball and the try was scored. It could not have been a more popular try as it was the outstretched arm of Chris Farrell on his 100 th appearance who touched down. Freddy Bunting added the conversion for 7-31.

Ten minutes later Sutton & Epsom were again benefiting from Reigatian indiscipline as they kicked a penalty into the corner. From the five-metre lineout the visitors defiant defence thwarted initial attempts until Alex Mount side-stepped would be tacklers to score. Freddy Bunting added the extras as the home crowd dared to dream of a miracle at 14-31. Those dreams swiftly became a nightmare as the Black & Whites conceded an interception try just outside their 22 a minute later. Max Coyle had his second try and Lucas Overtoom his fourth conversion and the visitors had the healthy cushion again leading 38-14.

Sutton were not finished and it was Alex Mount who scored again. If the prop’s first try owed much to nimble footwork his second was from brute force and determination as he muscled his way over the line. Freddy Bunting did the necessary to trail 21-38. With ten minutes remaining there began the game within the game as the Black & Whites went in search of bonus points as one more try would secure at least one consolation point. Though the hosts dominated territory and possession they failed to add to their tally. The resolute Old Reigatian defence were in no mood for any charitable Christmas presents for their opponents. The final whistle concluded the contest with OR victors by the commanding margin of 38-21 and excellent value for their success. Old Reigatian played splendidly with a ruthless efficiency. Once again their three-quarters were of the highest quality playing with confidence, fluency and an enviable slickness with Max Coyle a constant threat. Their pack had the edge in the set scrum and were disruptive at the breakdown with Finlay Lock, like all good 7s, a constant irritation. In defence they tackled forcefully and closed down Sutton rapidly. However, it was their ability to convert pressure in the 22 into points that was the key difference. For S&E too often their breaks by Willem Ratu et al lacked support. Most frustratingly speculative offloads were lured into the hands of their opponents as if they were victims of sirens without an Odysseus to rescue them. The result had far more to do with the quality of the play of the Old Reigatian team than the failings of Sutton and the win has put the visitors very much in the title race.

The league enters its festive break and returns with Sutton’s trip to Battersea Ironsides on 6th January. If one is looking for a barometer for how competitive this league has become there is no other league in England that is topped by a team with four defeats but in Regional 2 South East there are four clubs with a nine-four win-loss record. For S&E lest we forget that their campaign has been transformed with five wins from the last six starts and the Rugby Lane faithful should approach 2024 with cautious optimism.

Sutton & Epsom:
Gareth O’Brien, Matt Symonds, Willem Ratu, Tom Lennard, Lawrence Elliott, Freddy Bunting ©, Tom Boaden, Chris Farrell, Alex Mount, Ewan McTaggart, Ben Green, Isaac Lea, Josh Pulvirenti & Rob Hegarty.
Replacements: Callum Gibson, George London & Ross Parsons.

Old Reigatian:
Conor Woods, Harrison Mitchell, Gareth Stephens, Max Coyle, Finn Coyle, Lucas Overtoom, Alex Skinner, Ciaran Nestor, Harry Plowman, Toby Collister, Oli Brooks, Jack Baart, Sam Foreman, Finlay Lock & Ryan Travers.
Replacements: David Niven, Ed Cox & Ben Holder.

Top dog toppled in windy contest

19 February 2024



Beckenham RFC 22 – Sutton & Epsom RFC 26. Saturday 9th December.

Saturday marked the start of the home stretch with the first of the reverse fixtures. In Week 2 both teams endured testing temperatures in the crucible of Rugby Lane to produce an extraordinary game of extremely fluctuating fortunes. The denouement included the ecstasy of a penalty try to Beckenham and the agony of a last second penalty drift wide for Sutton as the visitors won 42-41. At least the teams were spared Arctic weather for the rematch at Balmoral Avenue. Many players had crossed the whitewash since that September Saturday and the Kent Club sat atop of Regional 2 South East whilst the men from Surrey arrived with four consecutive wins under their belt. After an enthralling contest Sutton gained their most impressive scalp of the season as they won 26-22.

Sutton & Epsom offered a warm welcome back to Tom Lennard after his highly successful jaunt in the Antipodes. The playmaker not only starred for Melbourne University gaining representative honours but also encouraged Josh Pulvirenti to join him at S&E. If Tom was the Australian addition New Zealand was represented by the returning Willem Ratu. So the domestic unions did not feel overlooked Sutton even selected a Welshman in Ross Parsons. The weather once again played a significant role in the fixture with a tremendous wind billowing down the pitch. Freddy Bunting kicked off with the gale behind him and Sutton went on the offensive from the very start but their swift attacks were matched by the swarming defence of the hosts. Though the leaders gave up an early penalty in front of the uprights. With a prostrate player holding the ball in place and the posts swaying in the wind Captain Bunting made it 3-0.

Beckenham gave an early warning to the visitors of the quality of their back play as Tom Bateman linked with Matt Lovell to bring the leaders deep into the Sutton 22 but their efforts were thwarted by conceding a penalty. After ten minutes S&E had doubled their lead to 6-0 with another Bunting penalty but they were frustrated that a fine attack had not resulted in a try. At the end of the first quarter Matt Whitaker’s desperate bid to force his way over by the posts was held up by resilient defenders. The elements made it extremely difficult for the hosts to exit from their 22 but their well organised defence frustrated the Black & White backs. On the half hour Tom Lennard hacked through a loose ball and gathered it up and a couple of strides short of glory he was tackled. The referee ruled it a high tackle and with no other defender in view he awarded a penalty try and Sutton led 13-0.

The leaders then enjoyed their best passage of play as their forwards and backs combined with multiple phases to get into the Sutton 22. Impressive offloads in the tackle maintained the momentum and then they opted to kick ahead. On any other afternoon it would have been a worthwhile gamble but the ball was gathered by Freddy Bunting and despatched on the wind 60 metres back down the paddock. The visitors pressed hard to extend their lead and thought they were about to score again from a 5-metre scrum when Gareth O’Brien was penalised. With time running out in the first half Willem Ratu countered towards the 22. His run earned another penalty which Freddy Bunting readily converted to conclude the half with a 16-0 lead.

As both sides retired to the warmth of the dressing rooms for directions from their coaches everyone pondered just how many points the wind was worth. In addition to the elements Beckenham had survived 10 minutes with 14 men after a yellow card to stand off Gary Dipple. The leaders had done extremely well to frustrate the Black & Whites who, for all their territory and possession, only scored a solitary try. Sutton knew that they would need to be at their very best in the second half to withstand the inevitable siege to come.

The Blamoral Avenue crowd did not have long to wait to cheer the success of their local heroes. A Sutton fumble on their 22 from the restart put the hosts in prime position to chip away at the lead. S&E conceded a penalty at the scrum and Geordie Boyce stepped up to chip over the conversion for 3-16. Beckenham pressed hard for further additions. A Gareth O’Brien tackle thwarted one attack and the pack stole a scrum ball on their 22. However, the clearance kick was run back with a vengeance. The Kent side were within 5 metres and flung out a long pass. Lock Ciall Kirwan was hugging the touchline and did superbly to take the pass on his laces to score in the corner. Unsurprisingly the touchline conversion was blown off course but the Sutton lead was now 16-8 with 30 minutes remaining.

With errors mounting in the Sutton play and confidence surging through the veins of the league leaders the momentum had definitely shifted. It was now that Sutton & Epsom demonstrated not only great character but also their best play. The howitzer boot of Bunting thumped a penalty into the 22 to give his team a promising lineout. The catch and drive advanced the ball into threatening territory. Following multiple phases and admirable control by the pack finally Matt Whitaker was ushered over the line for the try. The kick adjacent to the uprights was converted and S&E led by 23-8. The men from Rugby Lane continued to attack in search of another try. As per the first period the Beckenham defence held firm but once again the referee brought play back for a penalty. Once more the irrepressible Bunting extended the lead to 26-8 as the game entered the final quarter.

Considering the playing conditions this was a most impressive phase of play from the visitors who continued on the offensive not only carrying well but when required kicking penalties into the 22. At this stage centre Tane Feldhaus-Davies gave voice to his frustration with the number of offside penalties that his team were accumulating as he let fly with colourful language as he enquired to the heavens as to the precise number of offences. With ten minutes remaining Beckenham scored a quite outstanding try as fullback Francesco Pennacchia made a stunning break from his own half and linked with his support. A wave of Beckenham shirts burst into the Sutton 22 and captain Hans Laud-Anderson, like every quality 7, was on hand to add the finishing touch. Geordie Boyce added the extras for 26-15.

Roared on by a sizeable and passionate crowd the game was now turned on its head and it was the Surrey team who had to show their defensive mettle. It was the turn of the visitors to concede penalties. Beckenham opted for a 5-metre scrum and the result was another penalty and a yellow card not to a prop but to flanker Rob Hegarty and the leaders opted for the tap penalty. The ball was given to replacement prop James Cleverly with his mane like Samson, the beard of a lumberjack and a physique that shuns the modern figure-hugging apparel he bounced off the first tackler, sidestepped through a gap and strode over for a most accomplished solo effort. With Geordie Boyce chipping over the conversion the Sutton lead was only 26-22.

The crowd were in full voice and expectations running high as Sutton had five minutes to survive. In recent times the expression game management has not been linked with flattering adjectives for the Black & Whites but they now relentlessly held onto possession through multiple phases near halfway with a prodigious effort by the forwards. Then a shrill blast of the whistle and the hosts were given a lifeline of a penalty. The Gods smiled down benevolently on S&E as the kick went through the in-goal area. A grateful Sutton accepted a scrum on halfway and moments later ran down the clock to gain a fabulous 26-22 victory.

That made it five wins in a row for Sutton and to inflict the first defeat on the table-toppers at Balmoral Avenue this season was a notable achievement. The Beckenham backs are formidable not only in attack but also in defence. The leaders ability to pass out of the tackle is a most potent weapon but S&E matched their lofty opponents and it was their ability to play so well against the wind that was the deciding factor. Freddie Bunting’s accumulation of points is well known but in this game it was the power of his kicking from hand that caught the eye. However, in truth it was a great team performance, as is often the way in harsh weather, that was the backbone for this latest win. It would be remiss not to mention the magnificent hospitality offered at Balmoral Avenue with the clubhouse bar one of the finest locations around to enjoy the traditional pleasures for which rugby is renowned.

Probably with a sense of relief to players, coaches and administrators next Saturday sees the last league match of 2023 and the competition adjourns for the festive break. For those readers who still prefer the High Street to online purchasing but are looking for an excuse to escape the horrors of Christmas shopping I can heartily recommend Sutton’s game against Old Reigatian at Rugby Lane that kicks off at 2pm.

Sutton & Epsom:

Gareth O’Brien, Kyren Ghumra, Willem Ratu, Tom Lennard, Ciaran Mohr, Freddy Bunting ©, Ross Parsons, Tom Boaden, Chris Farrell, Alex Mount, Ewan McTaggart, Josh Glanville, Rob Hegarty, Josh Pulvirenti & Matt Whitaker. Replacements: Callum Gibson, Jack Howes & Matt Symonds.

Beckenham:

Francesco Pennacchia, Tom Bateman, Matt Lovell, Tane Feldhaus-Davies, Geordie Boyce, Gary Dipple, Ben Murphy, Lamar Sinclair, Liam Markey, Graham Murray, Ciall Kirwan, Josh Hiscott, Conor Palmer, Hans Laud-Anderson © & Oliver Stapelton.
Replacements: James Cleverly, Thomas Ward & Jed Hamilton

Unflagging Bunting clinches victory at the end

19 February 2024



Sutton & Epsom RFC 21 Old Colfeians 17 Saturday 2nd December.

Old Colfeians arrived at Rugby Lane as the form team in the league with five victories on the spin. Meanwhile a resurgent Sutton & Epsom had won all their three November fixtures and were equally confident. Both squads were hit by injuries and illness with S&E giving a debut to Matt Symonds on the wing. The last time the Black & Whites played OCs in 2007 the Kent side managed to record the only blemish on James Clark’s perfect season. Fixtures between the two clubs go back 50 years and in the league era the matches have always been keenly contested and Saturday was no exception with Sutton winning 21-17.

There was a serious risk that the freezing weather might sabotage the game but a moderately milder morning, temperatures being above zero, meant that the crowd would not be disappointed. Freddy Bunting set the game in motion and the visitors immediately demonstrated their superlative form with the opening score after five minutes. Having spun the ball wide to both flanks the forwards took over in the 22. Phase after phase they remorselessly advanced under the posts until prop Tom Rameaux powered over. Chris Harris added the simple conversion for a 7-0 lead. In the early exchanges the powerful pack of the visitors initially held the upper hand in the set scrum but the host's lineout was more efficient and also disrupted the Colfeians ball. Both sets of backs looked threatening when they had possession and expectations of a closely fought encounter, that had been anticipated before the kick off, were being fully justified.

In the closing moments of the first quarter Sutton had an attacking lineout. Josh Pulvirenti took the ball and the pack advanced. The referee noted an indiscretion by the visitors but he played the advantage and was soon raising his arm to signal Rob Hegarty's try. Freddy Bunting's conversion cleared the uprights but just drifted wide as S&E trailed 5-7. The game was being played at a furious pace with both sides tenaciously contesting the breakdown forcing turnovers and errors. On the half hour S&E had another opportunity with a 5-metre lineout. The ball was safely secured and Matt Whitaker exploded from the pack powering over the line with would be tacklers hanging off him. Normal service resumed as Freddy Bunting added the extras to put his team into a 12-7 lead.

Old Colfeians reply was immediate and the Sutton lead short lived. With commendable adventure they ran a penalty from halfway and advanced to the S&E 22. The jinking Chris Harris took over to score a stylish solo effort. He was unable to add the conversion to his try but the Kent team were level at 12-12. Before the interval the Sutton back division that had already endured three changes before the start had another set back as Steve Munford was forced off through injury to be replaced by the versatile Jack Howes. The momentum had shifted to the visitors and Chris Harris came off his wing to create the overlap and the OCs surged from their 22 but the Sutton cover forced a knock on. The half concluded with the Black & Whites pressing hard but undone by an error in the opposition 22 and there was no further addition to the score and the sides turned around at 12 apiece.

Sutton & Epsom were fast out of the blocks in the second half from a lineout it was a vintage run from Matt Whitaker carrying the ball 40 metres. Sadly, the talismanic eight had outrun his support but soon had the consolation of a penalty. From a central position near halfway Freddy Bunting thumped the ball between the posts for a 15-12 lead. Once again the visitors responded with an assault on the Sutton 22 with the sidestepping Chris Harris to the fore. Alex Mount conceded a penalty but immediately made amends by winning a turnover from the quickly taken play. S&E replaced Tom Boaden with Callum Gibson, who is a man of considerable 'avoirdu pois' whose 140kg frame might turn a deck-chair to match-wood, to add ballast to the front row. In addition their lineout with the catch and drive was becoming a potent weapon.

The weather began to deteriorate as not only did the temperature plummet but also a fog began to descend and gradually envelop proceedings. As Colfeians sought parity they probed the 22 and were awarded a penalty for a Ghumra knock on. Chris Harris went for the three-point option but hooked his kick. In stark contrast a couple of minutes later Sutton were awarded a penalty on the halfway line on the angle with a distance in excess of 50 metres. With a truly magnificent strike Freddy Bunting bisected the posts. The strike was greeted with rapturous applause from the crowd as much for the 18-12 lead as for the opportunity to warm their hands.

As had been the case throughout the match the men from Horn Park responded at once in the grand manner. Winning a kickable penalty they opted to kick for the corner. They won the lineout and after sustained pressure the ball was transferred to hooker Daniel Orubo who dismissively broke through the tacklers to score. With the conversion going awry there was now only a solitary point in the game with Sutton & Epsom holding the advantage at 18-17. With the game entering the final quarter and so finely poised the hosts now played their best rugby of the match. With a slender lead the key is to play in the opposition's half and they proceeded to dominate the territorial battle.

The game opened up and Sutton scrum half Chris Ballard became more influential making sniping breaks and playing at a high tempo. From one counter the 9 won a penalty and took the quick tap which instigated multiple attacks from the Rugby Lane XV. Colfeians defensive resolve was impressive as they managed to halt Kyren Ghumra in the corner and the hosts were held up over the line. S&E were then gifted a great chance by a careless knock in the 22. From the scrum Matt Whitaker headed for glory. Once more the Horn Park men stood firm and Sutton were held up over the line. The visibility deteriorated and the distant Clubhouse was shrouded in fog. A shrill blast of Tobias Whitney's whistle indicated another penalty for Sutton. Freddy Bunting stepped up and hammered it home for a 21-17 lead with a couple of minutes of normal time remaining.

Up to this point Sutton had been exemplary on receipt of the restarts but at this vital stage they gave away a penalty. The visitors, conscious of the clock, turned down a shot at goal. Now the anxiety of the crowd as much as the fog descended on Rugby Lane as they knew another Colfeians try would see them take the lead. As they tried to work an overlap on the 22 Kyren Ghumra made a priceless interception. From the subsequent Sutton scrum the hosts failed to find touch and invited more pressure on themselves but forced a knock on with thunderous tackle. S&E conceded a penalty from the scrum and OCs turned the screw by opting for another scrum. Their followed a commendable moment of tactical acumen as the home team replaced their hooker with a prop. The beefed up Black & White pack drove their opponents off the ball and were awarded a penalty which was greeted by the loudest cheer of the day. Bunting kicked to touch, the lineout was secured and the clock was run down before the ball was kicked to the grandstand. Sutton had won this epic encounter 21-17.

The excellence of Freddy Bunting's placekicking had made the vital the difference. The Colfeians powerful forwards with the outstanding Number 8 Conor Gray had an influential afternoon with Chris Harris their creative hub in the backs. However, Sutton & Epsom played with steely determination that bodes well for the rest of the season. Once again they raised their game in the second half with their collective desire epitomised by debutant Matt Symonds' nerveless display. This is the midpoint of the season and the reverse fixtures begin next Saturday with a trip to Balmoral Avenue to take on leaders Beckenham. Back in September on that remarkably hot day the Kent side won 42-41. It will be another stern test for the Black & Whites especially as their hosts will no doubt be smarting from having just lost to bottom of the table Sidcup.

Sutton & Epsom:

Gareth O'Brien, Kyren Ghumra, Steve Munford, Ciaran Mohr, Matt Symonds, Freddy Bunting ©, Chris Ballard, Tom Boaden, Chris Farrell, Alex Mount, Ewan McTaggart, Josh Glanville, George London, Josh Pulvirenti & Rob Hegarty.

Replacements: Callum Gibson, Ben Tame & Jack Howes.

Old Colfeians:

Ryan Napper, Louis Baker, Miles Jones, Victor Spaczil, Chris Harris, Will Smith, Jed Wylie, Tom Rameaux, Daniel Orubo, Lloyd Evans, Andy O'Mailey, Leo Cunningham, Ethan Collins, Jake Carter & Conor Gray.

Replacements: Bamidele Agorioge, Frank Blythe & Ollie Burkett.

Image courtesy Robin Kennedy

Genuine victory on synthetic surface

19 February 2024



Cobham 16 **Sutton & Epsom** RFC 44. Saturday 18th November. Being the last league fixture in November the S&E squad had a rather Edwardian appearance as if they were members of the Epsom Amateur Dramatic Club cast preparing for a performance of 'Journey's End'. However, their Movember charitable generosity did not extend to the rugby pitch as they impressively defeated a more than capable Cobham XV by 44-16. On a gloomy afternoon blissfully free from precipitation Cobham kicked off the match on their pristine synthetic surface.

The hosts had amassed 140 points so far this campaign from their three home victories and were one of a trio of clubs on 27 points looking to close the gap on the top two of Beckenham and Battersea Ironsides. The Memorial Ground men made a confident start as their large, athletic and mobile forwards provided plenty of possession for their quicksilver backs. The home team's high tempo game was matched by excellent defence as Sutton and Epsom's best play was thwarted by an impenetrable wall on the opposition 22. The Fairmile Lane side pressed hard for an opening score as a vital mark five metres from the S&E line denied them a try. Moments later Cobham had the consolation of a scrummage penalty in front of the posts and Jonny Holmes opened their account for a 3-0 lead.

After fifteen minutes the hosts were finally rewarded for their early dominance with a try. Despite valiant defence on their line the Cobham pack would not be denied and hooker Andrew Murphy forced his way over from close-range. Though the conversion drifted wide the home team held an 8-0 advantage. For supporters of the Black & Whites there had been precious little attacking play to cheer but the restart provided them with their first try. The alert Chris Farrell gathered the loose ball and burst into the 22 and a few phases later Josh Pulvirenti exploded from the ruck to run in under the posts. Freddy Bunting chipped over the simplest of conversions to make it 7-8. A couple of minutes later Willem Ratu swooped on the ball and ran it in from 60 metres to score by the uprights. Captain Bunting did the necessary and S&E now led 14-8 at the end of the first quarter.

Cobham might have felt a tad aggrieved that the scoreboard did not reflect the balance of the game. To their credit they responded in the classical manner with a try of their own. A perfectly flighted kick descended from the leaden sky just outside the Sutton and Epsom 22 and Jordan Huie was greeted by the ball and an opponent. It was the hosts turn to scoop up the loose ball and punish the back-peddalling visitors as prop Luke Bliss burrowed his way over the line for the try. The extras were not added but the home team now trailed by a solitary point, 13-14. Sutton made early changes as Ben Tame and Tom Boaden replaced George London and Callum Gibson. The momentum of the match had shifted back in favour of the hosts as their swarming defence harried Garerth O'Brien and won another penalty in front of the posts. Jonny Holmes gratefully accepted the three points and Cobham held a 16-14 lead.

With 10 minutes remaining in the first half Sutton & Epsom enjoyed their best period of play. An impressive catch and drive from the lineout saw them advance to the line and force a penalty. The ball was kicked to the corner for the 5-metre lineout but there was to be no repeat of the forward efficiency and a knock on gave the hosts an opportunity to clear their lines. A lengthy clearance was skilfully trapped by Jordan Huie who ran the ball back and won a penalty. The irrepressible Bunting made it 17-16 for S&E. In the dying embers of the first period Cobham had a lineout on the Sutton 22 and the platform to edge ahead once more. However, Ewan McTaggart stole the ball to initiate a counterattack. The ball went wide and was twice kicked ahead and Lawrence Elliott was on hand to score in the corner. Freddy Bunting made the touchline conversion look anything but challenging and the referee blew his whistle and the teams turned around with Sutton & Epsom leading 24-16.

After a half of high quality rugby that had been most competitive from the first minute none of the assembled crowd would have risked a wager on the outcome as the game was very much in the balance. From the restart Cobham gathered the ball and launched a speculative Garry Owen that resulted in a mid-air collision on halfway and chaos. The ball was hacked forward as S&E struggled to control it until Willem Ratu touched down over his line. After that escape it was Sutton who were the first to open their account in the second period when they were awarded a scrummage penalty. Freddy Bunting knocked it over from 45 metres to extend the lead to 27-16.

The hosts then dominated territory and possession for the next ten minutes. Earlier in the season S&E's defensive frailties would have seen them conceding tries but the defence now on show was unrecognisable from those autumnal days. The tackling was ferocious and forced handling errors in an impressive collective show of cussed defiance. The next visit to the hosts' half resulted in another penalty and another long-range success for the boot of Bunting as the Rugby Lane men led 30-16 with the game in the final quarter.

As determined as the Cobham attacks were they were trumped by the excellence of the Sutton defence. The visitors not only halted the hosts in their tracks but were making turnovers and counterattacking with relish. With pace on both flanks and confidence in abundance the Black and Whites turned defence into attack. The Memorial Ground XV were equally resolute and threw everything at Sutton in an effort to get back into the game. A glimmer of hope was extinguished with another obliterating tackle by Jordan Huie in the corner. The winger then showed his attacking qualities by carrying the ball into the opposition half and won a penalty. Captain Bunting opted for the kick to the corner and he was rewarded with a try. The 5-metre lineout was taken and the forwards muscled their way over the line and Ben Tame emerged as the scorer. Freddy Bunting caressed over the conversion for 37-16 and the Black & Whites had secured the bonus point for their fourth try.

Once again Chris Farrell regained the restart and initiated a thrilling Sutton attack. A crossfield kick was secured by Jordan Huie who strode towards the 22 and linked with Chris Ballard. The momentum was maintained by a superb piece of support running by lock Ewan McTaggart and the ball was spun wide to Willem Ratu who finished with aplomb in the corner. Freddy Bunting maintained his perfect kicking afternoon taking his personal tally to 19 points as his team lead by 44-16. In time added on there was still time for more thrills and spills. Once more a Cobham attack floundered on the Black & White wall in the S&E 22 and a devastating counter ensued. Freddy Bunting ran from his own half down the wing with deceptive pace that left the would be pursuer clutching a pulled hamstring. The Sutton 10 opted to run over the last defender rather than go round him and as he tumbled to the ground and juggled the ball the referee ruled a knock on as he popped the ball up to a supporting player. The game concluded in the Cobham half with no further addition to the score. Sutton had won 44-16 to record their second bonus point success on the road in consecutive weeks and make it three wins on the bounce.

This was by a margin the finest match of the Sutton season so far. The Cobham side from the first minute to the last carried a serious attacking threat. The front row triumvirate of Messrs Murphy, Bliss and Lippiatt were mightily impressive at the set piece. The home forwards carried with pace and aggression and the backs spread the ball well. However, the deciding factor in the contest was the excellence of the Sutton defence which not only stopped numerous attacks but forced errors and countered with great effect. It was truly a marvellous team performance with the side relishing their defensive duties as much as they enjoyed running with the ball. The second half effort to shut out the quality Cobham XV and to win it 20-0 was most impressive.

Next Saturday is another rest weekend and the campaign continues on 2 nd December when Old Colfeians visit rugby Lane for the 2pm kick off. It promises to be a splendid match as the visitors are enjoying a purple patch having won their last five fixtures. It will also be the 50 th anniversary of the first time the clubs met and their first league meeting since 2007.

Willem The Conqueror brings victory to local rugby side

19 February 2024

London Cornish 24 Sutton & Epsom RFC 53, Saturday 11th November. It had been a decade since these two clubs had met in a league fixture and only a point separated them this season in the nether regions of the table. Having defeated bottom club Sidcup the previous Saturday Sutton travelled with optimism and were buoyed by the arrival of centre Willem Ratu from New Zealand who was making his debut. The hosts after weeks of hampered availability were also content that they were fielding their best combination so far this campaign.

At the final whistle it was Sutton & Epsom who took the spoils with a 53-24 bonus point victory. This ended a winless streak of 16 away league fixtures for the Black & Whites stretching back to the thrilling Tring 21-20 triumph of March 2022.

On a chill but still afternoon Freddy Bunting initiated proceedings in sunshine under a bright blue sky following a minute's silence for Remembrance Day. London Cornish have endured a hideous run of injuries and their misfortune continued after the first ruck that forced them to bring on Mathew Hand for Tony Pellow and reshuffle their front row. London Cornish's attempt to clear from their 22 was spoiled by Ewan McTaggart using all of his Brobdingnagian stature to charge down the kick then he adroitly transferred the ball to Robbie Martey who offloaded to Josh Pulvirenti to score his first 1 st XV try. Freddy Bunting added the extras for a 7-0 lead. S&E barely had time to reflect on their perfect opening before the hosts drew level. Having forced their way into the 22 they were awarded a penalty that was quickly taken and scrum half Findlay Tweedie scored by the uprights. Michael Edworthy added the simple conversion for 7-7.

Sutton pressed hard to regain the advantage and seemed to have wasted an opportunity but the referee brought play back for a penalty in front of the sticks and Freddy Bunting made it 10-7. Moments later they extended their lead with their second goal of the afternoon. Another kick clipped Black & White hands foreshortening the clearance enabling Gareth O'Brien to gather the ball in centre field. The ball was transferred to Willem Ratu who ran it in from 40 metres with clinical efficiency and devastating pace. Captain Bunting bisected the uprights for a 17-7 lead.

Moments later he was caressing another penalty over the bar for 20-7 to end the first quarter. In the next ten minutes the men in Black & Gold had a chance to get back within a score. Fly half Michael Edworthy was successful with his first penalty but his second attempt drifted wide so London Cornish trailed 10-20 with ten minutes remaining of the first period as they enjoyed their best spell in the game. Sutton broke the shackles courtesy of another erroneous kick. A penalty failed to find touch and Robbie Martey returned it with interest. Soon Willem Ratu was offloading to Chris Farrell and the hooker set off for the line only to be denied by a wonderful covering tackle and the observant visiting touch judge who spotted he put a foot in touch when diving for the corner. It was then the Surrey men who suffered a charge down in their 22 but they escaped unpunished. In the dying embers of the first half Sutton secured their third try. Willem Ratu released Jordan Huie who showed great strength in the 22 before Ewan McTaggart advanced it to the line. The recycled ball came to Gareth O'Brien five metres out who stepped inside and was tackled but managed to reach for the line and score. Freddy Bunting concluded the half with the conversion and Sutton & Epsom led 27-10.

This was familiar territory for London Cornish, in the previous round they trailed at the break by 22-0 at Cobham before a storming 4-try second half brought them to the verge of a classic win. However, it was not long before the Rugby Lane team were extending their lead as they secured a bonus point with their fourth try two minutes into the second period. Willem Ratu n a flurry of surging limbs swatted away touchline tacklers and ran the ball in from his own 22 and the Bunting boot made it 34-10. As with the first half the hosts swiftly replied. This time it was a forward effort rounded off by captain Alex Davey from short-range. Ciaran Johnston took over the kicking duties from the injured Mike Edworthy and reduced the lead to 34-17.

For the Rugby Lane followers of a pessimistic disposition their fears were immediately allayed. Sutton claimed the restart and carried the ball to the Cornish 22 where Alex Mount made the telling break before passing to Rob Hegarty to do the honours. The simple conversion was completed and the scoreboard indicated S&E were 41-17 up within ten minutes of the second half.

The Black & Whites replaced Steve Munford at 9 with Chris Ballard and Tom Boaden swapped with Alex Mount at prop. London Cornish were far from subdued and threw everything at their opponents with winger Rob Mackay a constant threat coming off his wing numerous times zigzagging his way through would be tacklers. The Sutton & Epsom defence held firm with Matt Whitaker's magnificent tackle holding up his opponent over the line.

The next score went to Sutton and Willem Ratu completed his hat trick. He ran into the 22 and appeared to be halted as he stumbled but he rolled over regained his feet and ran in to score.

There followed a collector's item... a missed kick by Bunting as the visitors held a 46-17 advantage. The visitors were now at full throttle. They were held up over the line, a kick ahead was cleared by the scrambling defence and Matt Whitaker was halted from a five-metre scrum. But with ten minutes remaining it looked as if Rob Mackay was going to get his reward for his afternoon's endeavours. He strode towards the corner but was brought down with glory within his grasp by Jordan Huie. In years gone by it would have been acclaimed as a great cover tackle but in this season of the experimental new law it was a high tackle, yellow card and a penalty try.

S&E's penchant for the penalty try has seen five in eight outings and has now reached epidemic proportions as the Cornish trailed 24-46. With the numerical advantage they eyed the opportunity for a bonus point for a fourth try before the match concluded.

Once more the Rugby Lane XV regained the restart and advance to the 22. A tremendous scrummage provided the perfect platform to exploit a generous blindside. Matt Whitaker picked up at 8 drew the defender and Chris Ballard waltzed in for his first Sutton try. Normal service resumed as Freddy Bunting converted to bring his personal tally to 18 points and the score to 53-24. For the remainder of the game the hosts went in search of the valuable bonus point but the visitors showed the same determination in defence as they had in attack. Despite the extra man London Cornish were not able to create a clear cut opportunity and the game ended with no further addition to the score. Sutton & Epsom had finally ended their away day woes and won handsomely 53-24.

Willem Ratu was outstanding on debut not only scoring a hat trick but also his passing and tackling were of the highest quality. As is often the case when an exceptional player is added into the mix it elevates the players around him. Ewan McTaggart had his finest game, Chris Farrell revelled in his role out wide and Robbie Martey racked up impressive stats for players passed and metres made. The travelling supporters were delighted to see the Black & Whites playing once more with pace, power and confidence and are now relishing the remainder of the season. London Cornish never took a backward step but were hindered by losing two of their front five within the first 10 minutes. Notable in a losing cause were Number 8 Adam Wheeler who carried relentlessly and Rob Mackay who was dangerous whenever he got the ball.

Next Saturday Sutton are on the road again when they visit the Memorial Ground to play high-flying Cobham who are fourth in the league only trailing Reeds Weybridge on points difference.

Sutton & Epsom:

Gareth O'Brien, Robbie Martey, Willem Ratu, Lawrence Elliott, Jordan Huie, Freddy Bunting , Steve Munford, Callum Gibson, Chris Farrell, Alex Mount, Ewan McTaggart, Josh Glanville,****George London, Josh Pulvirenti & Matt Whitaker.

Replacements: Tom Boaden, Rob Hegarty & Chris Ballard.

London Cornish

Ben Boorman, Robert Mackay, Kyle Hughes, Peter Brogden, George Bromage, Michael Edworthy, Findlay Tweedie, Tony Pellow, Oscar Cruz, Rory Ling, David Chalkey, Tom Carr, Alex Davey ©,****Jack Waving & Adam Wheeler.

Replacements: Mathew Hand, Mark Osei-Tutu & Ciaran Johnston.