

Sutton and Epsom RFC denied at the death

6 December 2022



BANBURY 12 SUTTON & EPSOM RFC 12 - Saturday 3rd December - saw the start of the reverse fixtures and for both clubs, who are struggling at the bottom of the table, it was a vital encounter. The occasion was shrouded in sadness for Sutton due to the most unexpected and tragic passing of their President during the week. Robert Knight was a magnificent ambassador for the club, an ever-present supporter not only at home but also away and, above all else, a wonderful man and excellent friend to all who knew him. He will be much missed.

The hard fought contest, before a large crowd swelled by the Christmas lunch and the importance of the match, ended honours even, 12-12. S&E gave a debut to Lawrence Elliott at 15 and Brad Meeson had his first outing this campaign since his recent nuptials. On a cold but sunny afternoon on a heavy pitch Jamie See set the game in motion following the minute's silence. The hosts included in their ranks Soane Tonga'uiha, the 40 year-old former Tongan and Northampton prop, who made a predictable impact in the set scrum. With the Black & White pack shunted into reverse and conceding a penalty the early advantage was with the hosts. Indeed they opened the scoring after 10 minutes with an impressive catch and drive as prop James Leonardi was ushered over the line. Scrum half Ed Phillips missed the conversion but Banbury led 5-0.

Sutton and Epsom's riposte was immediate as they stormed into the Oxfordshire team's 22. The ball was spun wide and Angus Findlay passed to Brad Meeson who tried to squeeze in at the corner. The despair was short-lived as the whistle blew and the referee brought it back for an earlier penalty for the visitors. Sadly, Sam Hurley slipped on his approach and the penalty struck the upright. Kyren Ghumra, whose arrival had been hindered by car troubles, was brought onto the wing to replace Angus Findlay. The Black & Whites, with Rob Hegarty and George Drye carrying with great effect, pressed hard to get on the scoreboard.

Another back move concluded with debutant Elliott's grubber rolling into touch by the try-line flag. Though the Bulls cleared their lines Sutton's next attack was successful. A line break by George Drye followed by a floated pass found Brad Meeson who scored in the corner. Sam Hurley's immaculate touchline conversion meant S&E now enjoyed a narrow 7-5 lead. The Bulls went for an immediate response and it came through their sizeable pack and another line out.

As the home crowd urged their pack ever onwards from halfway they were awarded a penalty. The ball went wide and twice Ben Tame's thunderous tackles stopped the hosts. The half ended with S&E in the ascendancy as Kyren Ghumra was twice close to glory. The first time an inside pass from scrum half Austin Bell was adjudged to be forward as the winger was homing in on a try. The second was the final play of the first period as the ball went down the line the last pass went awry and ended in touch rather than being touched down.

The referee concluded the first half with the visitors enjoying a slender 7-5 advantage. The game continued with an instant reminder of the powerful pack of the hosts. Driving Sutton off their own put in on the S&E's 22 they unwisely opted for the boot and did not benefit from the advantageous position. In contrast Sutton threw away three points when under the posts and 5 metres from the Banbury line. The Black & Whites were awarded a penalty that was reversed for an off-the-ball infringement after the whistle.

The Bulls came close to rubbing salt into the wound with an interception but the referee called play back denying an almost certain try. As the heavy home pack tired on the claggy surface space began to appear that S&E looked to exploit. The half back combination of Bell and See both enjoyed a couple of stunning breaks. It was from one of scrum half Bell's bursts that evergreen Sam Hurley broke into the 22. Will Lloyd exploited the blind side and supplied a perfectly timed pass for James Caddy who finished with style with his expertly angled run to the line. Though the conversion drifted wide Sutton led 12-5 with 15 minutes to play.

The visitors pressed for another score to create a cushion that would mean Banbury would need to score twice. Jamie See's burst with the supporting James Caddy put the Black & Whites in prime position. But all came to nought after winning their scrum ball and a couple of phases from the forwards they lost control of the ball with the line at their mercy. Then the Bulls were given a lifeline with a penalty near halfway. A superb kick spiralled towards the corner but Lady Luck smiled upon the visitors as it crossed the touchline in the in-goal area resulting in a 22 drop out. However, the Oxfordshire men soon had their hands on the ball once more and forced a line out 20 metres from the try-line.

Another perfect catch and controlled drive saw the Bodicote boys roll relentlessly ever onwards. The forwards were stopped on the line but in an instant James Miller was presented with the ball and he supplied the finishing touches. Ed Phillips held his nerve to add the extras to level the score at 12-12 as the game entered time added on.

There was enough time for a few anxious moments but it ended honours even. A result that neither side wanted but one that favoured the hosts as S&E stayed in the bottom two. Banbury enjoyed a significant advantage at the set scrum for a substantial period of the game and their two tries came from formidable forward work with catch and drives.

On reflection one might have expected them to have carved out more opportunities to have added to their account. Despite struggling for a solid platform to attack, Sutton & Epsom created enough chances to have won the game but faltered at the crucial moments. For the visitors the back row trio of Tame, Hegarty and Caddy were superb. Austin Bell

had arguably his best game at 9 whilst Jamie See rolled back the years with his breaks from 10 and with a promising debut from Lawrence Elliott there were many positives for S&E if not enough points taken from this encounter.

The action returns to Rugby Lane next Saturday when Sutton & Epsom host Camberley RFC for the first time since September 2012. When the clubs met in September this year at Watchetts Recreation Ground the hosts won 43-21 with Josua Lewan scoring a first half hat trick. The visitors will be keen for a repeat as they are in second place in the table in hot pursuit of leaders Wimbledon. The match kicks off at 2pm.

Sutton & Epsom: Lawrence Elliott, Angus Findlay, Stefan Cooksammy, Brad Meeson, Sam Hurley, JamieSee, Austin Bell, Tom Boaden, Chris Farrell, Will Lloyd, George Drye, Josh Glanville, BenTame, Rob Hegarty & James Caddy.Replacements: (all used) George London, Jack Howes & Kyren Ghumra.:

Banbury: Thomas Gray, Alex Garbett, Quinten Blythe, Matt Goode, Jack Anderson, James Miller, EdPhillips, James Leonardi, Ian Isham, Soane Tonga'uiha, Louis Tooth, Jacob Turner, James Hibbert, George Ding, Callum Horne.Replacements: (all used) Peter Boulton, Alex Nicholls and Dan Kirwin.

Mighty Maids Run Riot

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MAIDENHEAD 61 - SUTTON & EPSOM 24 - Saturday 26th November. Maidenhead started this season with four extremely impressive wins as they surged to the top of the table by the end of September. That was followed by five defeats before they returned to winning ways in the last round against Bournemouth. In stark contrast S&E have only one win and multiple close defeats in the opening ten encounters. The Berkshire club ran in nine tries in a thumping 61-24 triumph that reaffirmed the league standings of the two clubs.

On a chill and overcast afternoon Maidenhead kicked off. It only took a couple of minutes for the hosts to open their account. Pouncing on a sliced clearance they besieged the Sutton & Epsom line before hooker Dan Hostetler forced his way over the line. Greg Smith added the extras. Hardly had anyone had time to digest the early score when Harry Wells made a surging break from the restart and gifted a try to his centre partner Niall Crosley. Greg Smith added the conversion for 14-0. Sutton's pain in the first five minutes increased as they saw fly half Gareth O'Brien departing with an injured ankle. Jamie See went to 10 and Angus Findlay came off the bench for his league debut.

Maidenhead gave the visitors no time to settle and crossed the whitewash for their third try from Number 8 Will Macaulay. Greg Smith added two more points to his tally for 21-0 after only ten pulsating minutes. Sutton hit back as Seb Priest's sublime grubber into the corner set up a 5-metre line out. The pack ushered Matt Harwood over the line from his preferred distance. Sam Hurley added the conversion and the lead was cut to 21-7.

The second quarter may not have provided as many points but was still full of action. S&E lost hooker Alex Mount to injury on the half hour to be replaced by Jack Howes. Both teams squandered chances to add to their score as the first period entered time added on.

The Braywick Park team reasserted their authority with two more tries. Firstly, good carries by the pack culminated in a deft pass from a prop that found winger Scott Prince in space to finish it off. Not to be upstaged fellow winger Alex Turton scored a wonderful solo score from 60 metres to make it five tries. The metronomic Greg Smith bisected the uprights on both occasions as the first half concluded with Maidenhead comfortably placed at 25-7.

The second period began with a brutal reminder of who was in charge. A strong carry by flanker Ed Atkins set up Niall Crosley for a stunning break deep into the Sutton & Epsom half before setting up fullback Jamie Maddern for the try. Greg Smith chipped over the conversion for 42-7. Then Harry Wells was given a yellow card for a breakdown infringement. Sutton & Epsom certainly made their numerical advantage pay as they quickly scored from another disciplined effort from the pack from a 5-metre line out with captain Chris Farrell taking the plaudits. The conversion went awry as S&E trailed 12-42. The Black & Whites were the next to touch down courtesy of a remarkable line out that rumbled 40 metres down the paddock. The ball was finally released and Austin Bell put Seb Priest in at the corner. Sam Hurley converted from the flank for 19-42.

Restored to their full compliment the Berkshire team regained their scoring mojo as a dummy from James Maddern flummoxed the Surrey defences and flanker Jack Norris finished off with a 20-metre burst to the line. Greg Smith perfect afternoon with the boot ended with his only missed conversion with Maidenhead 47-19 to the good. A couple of minutes later it was more stunning play from the brilliant Berkshire backs as replacement Charlie Scott delayed his pass to perfection to put in the returning Harry Wells. Normal service resumed from the boot of Greg Smith to extend the lead to 54-19. Scott Prince raced in for his second and Maidenhead's ninth, and final, try. Greg Smith was on target again to record his sixteenth point as he stretched the lead to 61-19.

The Rugby Lane men gained some small consolation on a chastening afternoon when they secured a bonus point when they scored a fourth try. Once more it was the forwards, and again a catch and drive from a line out. On this occasion it

was replacement Rob Hegarty burrowing his way to glory. Maidenhead's Charlie Scott became the latest victim of the harsh sentence meted out to anyone found guilty of knocking on an attempted interception. With Maidenhead reduced to 14 and Sutton already with the bonus point the game petered out in the last ten minutes in stark contrast to the seismic opening exchanges. The Magenta men celebrated their well-deserved victory as the final whistle blew to conclude proceedings.

The host's victory was based on the power, pace and precision of their first class back division. Having gained the initiative with three early strikes Maidenhead never looked likely to be overhauled. The Sutton cause was not helped by key early injuries to not only their fly half but also their hooker. The home pack had a much harder afternoon. Indeed, the Black & Whites were entirely indebted to their forwards for their bonus point with four tries of similar style based around their improving line out.

The homeward stretch of the league season starts next Saturday, 3rd December, with the first of the reverse fixtures against Banbury. Back in September Sutton were forced to play at the neutral venue of Cobham RFC and the Oxfordshire club narrowly won a hard fought encounter by 26-22. If S&E felt downcast on Saturday when the referee brought the game to a close one can only imagine the emotions in the Banbury dressing room as they were thrashed 102-22 by league leaders Wimbledon. Both sides will be keen for redemption when they meet at Bodicote Park as Sutton & Epsom visit another new league venue this campaign.

Sutton & Epsom

Michael Davies, Sam Hurley, Freddie Bunting, Jamie See, Sebastian Priest, Gareth O'Brien, Austin Bell, Tom Boaden, Alex Mount, Will Lloyd, Josh Glanville, Matt Harwood, Ben Tame, Chris Farrell © & James Caddy.

Replacements (all used): Jack Howes, Rob Hegarty & Angus Findlay.

Maidenhead

Jamie Maddern, Scott Prince, Harry Wells, Niall Crossley, Alex Turton, Greg Smith, Archie Dunnill, Elio Mandozzi, Dan Hostetler, Elliott Beattie, Phillip Wells, Brook Harvey-Smith, Ed Atkins, Jack Norris & Will Macaulay.

Replacements: Mike Guida, Levi Meek and Charlie Scott.

Havant Heartbreak For Battling Black & Whites

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SUTTON & EPSOM 27 - HAVANT 30. Saturday 12th November - saw the visit of a familiar foe in Havant. Last season the Hampshire club did the double over the Surrey side. A cursory glance at the league table prior to the kick off would have suggested a continuance of this recent trend. By the final whistle this close fought match evoked memories of the two classic encounters of the 2013-4 campaign as the visitors returned home to Hooks Lane with a narrow 30-27 win but the hosts won many plaudits for their determined comeback.

There was a Sutton and Epsom debut for Sebastian Priest and another appearance for the veteran Steve Munford. Havant were also missing regulars like Elliott Bellman, Harrison Young and Scott Morris. After the silence for the Remembrance weekend the visitors kicked off in glorious sunshine on a mild winter's afternoon. The crowd were immediately on their feet as after a few phases James Caddy, in space on the blindside, gave a wonderfully timed inside pass to Stefan Cooksammy who had come off his wing. A weaving run for 40 metres saw the winger touch down for the opening score. Freddy Bunting duly obliged with the conversion to send the Rugby Lane crowd into raptures and Sutton and Epsom led 7-0.

The Hampshire men bounced back to draw level after ten minutes. This time it was Reuben Knight with the 40-metre break though he was denied just short of the line but support was on hand and a couple of passes later saw fullback Ben Chambers crossing the whitewash. Joel Knight added the extras to level the score at 7-7. It was not long before Havant were pressing for the lead. They drilled a penalty into the corner for a 5-metre line out. Resolute defence thwarted all that was thrown at the Sutton and Epsom line but the referee brought play back for an earlier infringement. Significantly it also meant a yellow card for S&E lock George Drye. The visitors immediately made their numerical advantage pay as hooker Sean Shepherd barrelled over from close-range. Joel Knight added the simple conversion and the Bedhampton boys had a 14-7 advantage. The fourteen men showed great spirit to restrict the opposition to only one additional Joel Knight penalty before parity was restored with S&E trailing by 7-17.

As the teams entered the second quarter the game ebbed to and fro before Joel Knight's boot extended the Havant lead with another well struck penalty for 20-7 after 30 minutes. The Black and Whites stormed back. A quickly taken tap penalty on halfway by Austin Bell saw the hosts burst into the 22 and Ciaran Mohr was bundled into touch five metres short. S&E regained possession as they peppered the line. First, a sublime offload by Jack Howes nearly created a try in the right hand corner. Then the ball swung to the opposite flank as Gareth O'Brien and Stefan Cooksammy tried in vain before it finally went wide for debutant winger Seb Priest to score in the corner. Freddy Bunting converted from the

touchline for 14-20.

The promotion contenders quickly capitalised on a missed clearance to touch and the Red and Whites marauded forward. After sustained pressure it was that man Shepherd again who proved unstoppable near the line. Joel Knight continued his impeccable kicking for 27-14 and the thirteen-point cushion was restored. With the interval fast approaching the hosts were awarded a penalty and Freddy Bunting reduced the deficit and the half-time whistle blew with Havant leading 27-17.

S&E restarted the game as Havant looked for that vital fourth try and a bonus point to maintain their title challenge whilst Sutton were eager for early points to get within a single score. At once the Black and Whites had a penalty and Freddy Bunting made it 20-27. Sutton and Epsom were now in the ascendancy and within 5 minutes Freddy Bunting was standing over another penalty. The kick 10 metres from the touchline drifted agonisingly wide. It was a temporary respite. The visitors failed to clear their lines and conceded a scrum in their 22. The ball was spun wide and a James Caddy tap pass and a wonderful Ciaran Mohr offload had Jack Howes within a metre. The ball was recycled and swung to the opposite flank where Josh Glanville was on hand to supply the finishing touches. Freddy Bunting's conversion was greeted with a tumultuous roar with the score at 27-27. With a little less than 30 minutes to play the game had been transformed.

Not only the bonus point but also the win was under threat for the visitors. They responded in style pressing hard in the home 22. It was Joel Knight's turn to add a penalty and he accepted a simple three points that put the Hooks Lane team back into the lead, 30-27. Buoyed by this success they went in search of that elusive fourth try and a wonderful attack was quelled by scrambling defence. Moments later a surging break by Freddy Bunting had Sutton on the front foot. However, passing and handling errors now began to frustrate the hosts who were thrown back onto the defensive. From a 5-metre line out superb defence held Havant up over the line. Then agony as the drop out went out on the full and more pressure ensued with a 5-metre scrum for the Hampshire men. A chance in the corner went begging as the cover arrived and the ball was passed into touch.

Sutton were now under siege and the next clearance resulted in a yellow card for Seb Priest as he took the catcher out in the air. The home-team would have to survive the vast majority of the remainder of the game with only 14. Moments later a certain score was denied by a terrific tackle. At the death Havant declined a most kickable penalty in the quest for a bonus point. A poorly executed line out resulted in an S&E scrum that soon became a penalty. The Black and Whites valiantly tried to run the ball from 80 metres out but to no avail as at the first opportunity the Red and Whites kicked it off the paddock to end the game. A pulsating performance by both sides ended with Havant winning and remaining in third place snapping at the heels of Camberley and Wimbledon.

Narrow losses have been the story for the Black and Whites this season and, similar to the Oxford Harlequins game, there was much to admire in pushing a top four team to the brink. Their resilience in the final quarter was magnificent. It was a superb team effort from 1 to 18 against a side aiming for promotion that had run Wimbledon very close a fortnight earlier. For the victors 16 points from the metronomic boot of Joel Knight and a brace of tries from the rampaging hooker Sean Shepherd was the foundation for another win. The visitors created more chances, had more territory and possession and on those indicators were worthy winners. However, rugby is not as simple as that and if your defence is organised and tenacious, you are fit, score tries and have a quality place-kicker you will be very competitive as were S&E in this game.

After a weekend of quiet reflection the league season reaches its halfway mark with the resumption of hostilities on Saturday 26th November with Sutton's trip to Braywick Park. Maidenhead after winning the opening four matches topped the table but then lost the next five on the spin before finally recording another win on Saturday. Last season the Berkshire team won the corresponding fixture with a try on the final play of the game. With the Black and Whites penchant for close games this campaign perhaps we might once again get more last minute drama.

Sutton and Epsom: Ciaran Mohr, Stefan Cooksammy, Freddie Bunting, Jamie See, Sebastian Priest, Gareth O'Brien, Austin Bell, Tom Boaden, Jack Howes, Will Lloyd, Josh Glanville, Matt Harwood, George Drye, Chris Farrell © and James Caddy. Replacements (all used): Rob Hegarty, George London and Steve Munford.

Havant: Ben Chambers, Harry Carr, Joel Knight ©, Jacob Knight, Scott Morris, Reuben Knight, Wes Dugan, Armandus Morgan, Sean Shepherd, Jake Waterman, Richard Janes, Sam Vince, Nathan Bellman, Harry Ransom and Dylan Lawley. Replacements (all used): Luke Marks, Jarod Leat and Jonah North.

Sutton & Epsom beaten by table toppers

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WIMBLEDON 41 - SUTTON & EPSOM 10 - 5th November. **Sutton & Epsom** and Wimbledon rugby is always an entertaining Derby match. Last season was a very underwhelming campaign for S& E but it had two glorious highlights with home and away triumphs over their local rivals. This season the teams could hardly be enjoying more contrasting fortunes. After an opening day loss to Camberley the Dons have swept all before them with a magnificent seven wins taking them to the top of the table. In stark contrast Sutton & Epsom have a solitary success over Brighton and numerous near misses.



Images: Courtesy Robin Kennedy - Sutton and Epsom RFC.

The match ran true to the current form book with the dominating Dons triumphant to the tune of 41-10. On a chill afternoon with leaden skies that threatened rain throughout S& E welcomed back Robbie Martey but were missing four forwards who had run Oxford Harlequins so close last weekend. Freddy Bunting kicked off as Sutton had the slope in their favour whilst Wimbledon had the breeze. The game started at a high tempo with both sides probing each other's defences.

First blood went to the hosts as wave upon wave of attacks crashed against S& E's formidable defence until they won a 5-metre penalty. Scrum half Alex Kerr tried to catch the Black & Whites out with a quick tap but moments later Ollie Kitto was scoring in the corner. Ed Morgan's conversion missed as the Dons led 5-0. The visitors replied in an instant, harrying the hosts from the restart they were awarded a penalty and Freddy Bunting made it 3-5. The Rugby Lane team had to be at their resilient best. They were aided on several occasions as the Barham Road boys failed to apply the coup de grâce.

On 20 minutes, it was a forward pass that denied the Dons. Five minutes later they made amends in stunning style. From a scrum near halfway a rapid blindside break was superbly executed as Alex Kerr scored and Ed Morgan added the extras for 12-3. Next it was Ollie Kitto who looked like creating another try but a forward pass by a prop meant another score was chalked off. It was a temporary stay of execution as the SW20 outfit took advantage of a 5-metre line out. A clean catch and a powerful drive ended with Max Freeman scoring and Ed Morgan's boot increased the lead to 19-3 after half an hour. The Cuddington Crescent team brought on Matt Harwood for an injured Ewan McTaggart and tried to gain a foothold in the fixture.

Wimbledon was not content with their healthy lead and attacked at every opportunity as the Black & Whites' tackling had to be at its resilient best and they scrapped for every ball at the breakdown. Twice more the home supporters groaned when first another forward pass and then an errant delivery undid their best efforts. The first half ended with Sutton trailing 3-19. For S& E it was vital to score early in the second period to resurrect memories of the jinx that afflicted the league leaders last season. If the visitors could score perhaps all those missed chances in the first half would weigh

heavily on the minds of the hosts. The match resumed with Wimbledon piling on the pressure down the hill. It only took five minutes for Ollie Kitto to add the finishing touches for 24-3 and his second try.

The hosts were in no mood to ease up and replacement prop Malek Touilzak broke from halfway but a delayed pass gave the Sutton cover the opportunity to escape and Tom Boaden was on hand to steal and the danger was averted. However, five minutes later Malek Touilzak made amends as he powered over from close range. Despite the conversion failing the lead was now 29-3 in deteriorating conditions. S& E finally got their hands on the ball and a well-angled run by Robbie Martey was only halted by a high tackle and Wimbledon were reduced to 14 men for 10 minutes. Sutton opted for the scrum and turned the screw winning a penalty and taking it quickly advanced into the 22.

With the hosts on the retreat with an overlap S& E inexplicably kicked the ball. But despair turned to delight as soon after replacement Jack Howes, only just on the pitch, scored from a well executed line out. Freddy Bunting chipped over the conversion to reduce the margin to 10-29. With fifteen minutes remaining the game opened up. A quick penalty in their own 22 saw replacement Rhys Morgan make a thrilling break deep into the opposite 22 where Ollie Kitto was on hand to score and collect yet another league hat trick for the lethal winger this season. Ed Morgan's aim was true to make it 36-10.

As the Rugby Lane men went searching for a late consolation try the Beverley Meads men threatened to cut loose. Ed Morgan rounded off a fine afternoon at 10 as he dummied his way through the defence to score his team's sixth and final try. Though he failed to add the conversion to his try the Dons were now 41-10 to the good. In the final ten minutes Sutton's chances for an additional score were undone by errors, no doubt due to understandable weariness after the draining effects of so much defence and tackling. The hosts were not error free as the familiar forward pass returned and probing kicks came to nought.

The final whistle blew and the 41-10 result meant that the hosts collected another bonus point win to stay in pole position whilst the visitors contemplated life at the other end of the table. Wimbledon thoroughly justified their lofty status atop of the league. Slick passing in the backs with plenty of pace and skill, robust ball-carrying forwards and a hard tackling defence is a potent cocktail for success. Sutton were, to a man, unflinching in defence making tackle after tackle as they tried to stem the flow but were second best on the day.

The league programme continues next week, Saturday 12th November, as Sutton host Havant who beat S& E home and away last season. The Black & Whites will be looking to redress the balance this time. The kick off will be 2:30pm at Rugby Lane.

Sutton & Epsom: Mike Davies, Stefan Cook, Freddie Bunting, Jamie See, Robbie Martey, Gareth O'Brien, Austin Bell, Tom Boaden, Alex Mount, Will Lloyd, Josh Glanville, Ewan McTaggart, George London, Chris Farrell & James Caddy.

Replacements (all used): Jack Howes, Matt Harwood & Jack Butt.

Wimbledon: Alastair Duddell, Ollie Kitto, Paul Hendry, Henry Peuble, Bradley Pinkham, Ed Morgan, Alex Kerr, Tom Boot, Harrison Scoble, Bradley Ugodulunwa, Christopher Dalley, Jack Cooke, Max Freeman, Jacob Farnworth, Zane Dallinger.

Replacements: Malek Touilzak, Mark Scott & Rhys Morgan.

Fortune Not Favouring The Bold

6 December 2022



SUTTON & EPSOM 19 OXFORD HARLEQUINS 22 - Sunday 30th October - With the clocks going back in the morning it was the last of the 3pm kick offs before the seasonal variations and Rugby Lane welcomed another new opponent, Oxford Harlequins. At the end of Round 5 the Oxonians were the league leaders having thumped the previously indomitable top dogs of Maidenhead but a duo of defeats in the last two weeks have left them in fourth place. Meanwhile the Black & Whites have attracted the label of 'Close But No Cigar' with a trio of narrow defeats and a draw leaving them in the drop zone. It appeared to be a question of whether the visitors could get their season back on track or whether the hosts could finally see out a close encounter of the frustrating kind. For the home supporters it was unfortunately the former as the visitors hung on to record a 22-19 victory.

It was selectorial swings and roundabouts for S&E as they welcomed back their influential ten, Gareth O'Brien, and gave a debut to Joe Reid but lost impressive centre Archie Fitzgerald to injury. The visitors initiated proceedings on a sunny and mild autumnal afternoon with S&E favoured by the breeze. From the outset the game was played at a furious pace. James Caddy gathered the kick off and countered with Tom Brooker and George Drye to the fore before a booming clearance from Gareth O'Brien sent the opposition scurrying back deep in their 22. The Quins won the ensuing line out and ran the ball hither and thither before being awarded a scrum 30 metres from the Sutton line. Excellent passing and

rapid recycling overcame staunch Sutton defence as Andrew Jarvis touched down in the corner despite the tackle of Michael Davies. Ethan Fox failed with the challenging conversion but Oxford Harlequins led 5-0.

Hardly had the Rugby Lane crowd had time to digest another early and unpalatable offering when lightning struck twice and Andrew Jarvis repeated the dose in the far right corner. A scything line break and slick passing saw full back Jack Antoniou marauding towards the line only to be dragged down 5 short by a tremendous tackle by Freddy Bunting. However, support was on hand and with a superb Ethan Fox touchline conversation the visitors were 12 up in ten pulsating minutes. The tenor of the game was then illustrated by two penalties awarded. Firstly, the Oxonians declined a simple kick in front of the posts and then S&E attempted one from near halfway. Neither side garnered points and at this stage it seemed unlikely that OH would rue the gift of three points. In contrast from the Sutton miss Tom Brooker caught the drop out and returned the ball with interest deep into the 22. The ball went right and prop Will Lloyd, standing in at stand off, supplied an exquisite pass for Tom Boaden to power over. Freddy Bunting added the extras as Sutton trailed 7-12.

The Horspath Sports Ground men responded to the effrontery of the Sutton score and returned to the Black & White 22. The hosts conceded a penalty as a defender lay prone by the ruck, the gentlemanly opponents declined the skulduggery of throwing the ball at him as is the fashion in the elite game and spun it wide. Following a few phases it was brought back for the offside any way. A tap-and-go penalty reaped the reward and from the ruck near the line prop George Primett found the perfect line to receive the pass and score under the posts. Ethan Fox chipped conversion made it 19-7 on the half hour. With the approaching interval Sutton had to stem the tide and make an impact on the scoreboard. A bone-shaking tackle by Ben Tame on the influential 15 Jack Antoniou demonstrated Sutton's defensive resolve. Then in the dying embers of the half O'Brien and Brooker combined to put S&E in prime position. However, the opportunity for a morale-boosting score and a shift in momentum was squandered by a technical infringement at the scrummage. The visitors proceeded to clear and Mr Rodwell blew for half time with Oxford Harlequins 19-7 to the good.

Freddy Bunting got the action underway once more as the former league leaders looked to replicate the start. Sumptuous back play with sublime offloads brought the visitors within touching distance of glory. Yet it was S&E who turned over the ball and won a relieving penalty. Prop Will Lloyd had been replaced by debutant Joe Reid, 36 years young, who was to be influential from the next scrum onwards. Sutton's advantage at the set-piece now became complete dominance. The decimation of Reid's first scrummage was like a shot of adrenalin in the body of the home XV as confidence coursed through their veins. Soon the crowd were on their feet as Ollie Baptiste-Wilson sprinted down the touchline in front of the Memorial Grandstand, passed inside and Freddy Bunting sauntered home only to be denied by the winger's foot being in touch. S&E bulked up their pack as the Brobdingnagian lock Ewan McTaggart replaced Josh Glanville. As more destructive scrummaging followed the referee offered a cautionary word to the Oxfordshire pack but the inevitable yellow emerged at the next set-piece. The numerical advantage soon saw a second Sutton score. Bunting kicked to the corner, Captain Drye caught the throw and the pack remorselessly advanced over the line for Tom Boaden to score his second try. Freddy Bunting converted to trail 12-19.

In stark contrast to the first period the visitors opted to kick at goal from near halfway from a penalty awarded after the restart. Ethan Fox impressively extended the lead to 22-12. S&E made another change as Ross Parsons replaced Austin Bell at 9. But the significant change occurred when Quins' prop George Primett was injured at the next scrum. The referee explained the intricacies of the laws and briefly uncontested scrums were on the menu. The Black & Whites took full advantage as Ollie Baptiste-Wilson replicated his touchline tightrope tap dance on the opposite flank. To the delight of the crowd he dived into the corner. Freddy Bunting converted magnificently from the touchline as OH led by 22-19. Five minutes later amid great concern from both physios Tom Brooker was forced to retire having put in a thunderous performance and Josh Glanville returned to the fray.

The closing stages were utterly compelling as the Oxford Harlequins tried to force Sutton & Epsom back into their half whilst their opponents attempted to manufacture one final chance. The status quo was maintained in the arm wrestle for supremacy until deep into time added on. Finally, Sutton had a foothold in enemy territory and advanced towards the 22 only to be halted by foul means rather than fair. The penalty was eminently kickable to those who know the burgeoning reputation of Bunting's boot. The expectant crowd anticipated seeing the kicking tee being ferried onto the paddock but no. The hosts opted to kick for touch and go for the win. The first hurdle was overcome as they caught the throw. The forwards were now a mass of desperate bodies as the Sutton trundled forward in search of glory. Then a shrill blast of the whistle and despair for S&E and delight for OH as the visitors were awarded a final scrum. With Joe Reid off nursing an injured knee this was a far easier challenge and the ball was dutifully kicked off the park. The jubilant visitors, arms aloft, celebrated a very tough 22-19 win.

For Sutton there was much to admire. Through necessity Alex Mount was pressed into service as hooker and revelled in his new role and the line out was markedly improved. The triumvirate of Brooker, Caddy and Drye were outstanding ball-carriers in the pack. The ace up the sleeve was Joe Reid's appearance off the bench who was a wrecking ball in the set scrum. Meanwhile Ollie Baptiste-Wilson enhanced his reputation as a lethal finisher. However, it was a superb team performance against one of the prominent teams in the league. For the visitors it was a joy to watch the almost faultless handling and creativity of their back division with one-handed offloads commonplace. In an era of ever-increasing size it was a delight to see the rather diminutive centre Toby Haines buzzing around taunting the defence like the most annoying of mosquitoes being a constant pest with jinking runs and telling passes.

Following a trio of new league opponents the Black & Whites face familiar opponents in local rivals Wimbledon next Saturday 5th November. For those of you making the annual pilgrimage to Barham Road please note the kick off will be at 2:30pm.

Sutton & Epsom

Mike Davies, Stefan Cooksammy, Freddie Bunting, Jamie See, Ollie Baptiste-Wilson, Gareth O'Brien, Austin Bell, Alex Mount, Tom Boaden, Will Lloyd, George Drye ©, Josh Glanville, Ben Tame, Tom Brooker & James Caddy.

Replacements (all used): Joe Reid, Ewan McTaggart & Ross Parsons.

Oxford Harlequins

Jack Antoniou, Josaia Ratulaveta, Toby Haines, Adam Field, Andrew Jarvis, Ewan Fox, Harry Burn, George Primett, Josh Archer, Joel Hopkins, Harvey Tricker, Alan Purchase ©, Titus Waldock, Callum Fitzpatrick & Ross Toward.

Replacements: Jorn Voegtli, Paco Estaban, Ralph Jones.

The Agony and the Ecstasy

6 December 2022



ROYAL WOOTTON BASSETT RFC 31 - SUTTON & EPSOM RFC 29 - 22nd October. This was **Sutton & Epsom's** first ever match against **Royal Wootton Bassett RFC**. Both clubs were desperately in need of a victory with S&E's solitary victory only just better than their host's winless start to the campaign. In front of a large crowd swelled by Ladies' Day at Ballards Ash, a euphoric home crowd roared on their team to a 31-29 victory in a match of fluctuating fortunes.

Under cloudy skies but spared of any rain Freddy Bunting kicked off the contest for Sutton and Epsom. It has become an unfortunate this season that S&E are slow out of the blocks when on the road. The opening fifteen minutes of this match was sadly no exception. After five minutes not only had RWB lock Josh McCaffertey scored a try from close-range converted by Troy Cusack but also they had been reduced to 14 with a yellow card issued to Number 8 Tom Brooker. In addition prop Alex Mount had departed injured to be replaced by Will Lloyd.

Inspired by the early score the Wiltshire All Blacks pressed hard to make the most of their numerical advantage. The Black & Whites defence was rather too porous as first Number 8 Kyle Lovell and then winger Jone Waqadanidrola made significant breaks. The first Sutton & Epsom attack ended with Kyren Ghumra departing with a torn hamstring and Stefan Cooksammy entering the fray. Approaching the quarter hour mark the hosts won a 5-metre line out and this time the ball was spun wide and full back Sam Williams ran a superb line to scythe through the defence and score under the posts. Troy Cusack made it 14-0 in as many minutes.

S&E finally awoke from their slumber and began to claw back the deficit. The reliable boot of Freddy Bunting immediately got them on the scoreboard with a perfectly struck penalty for 14-3. It was RWB's turn to concede a penalty and be punished with the familiar 5-metre line out resulting. The scrappy S&E line out fortunately ended with a knock on providing Sutton with a scrum. A slick set move resulted in Ollie Baptiste-Wilson taking the aerial route to score in the corner. Freddy Bunting converted from the touchline to make it 10-14. Five minutes later the ugly Lane kicker bisected the uprights for another penalty success to reduce the gap to a solitary point, 13-14.

The Malmesbury Road men were starting an unfortunate trend of conceding penalties at the breakdown, a first half trickle that was to turn into a torrent in the second period. Cheered on by the sizeable crowd the home team rallied and were indebted to a sublime 50/20 kick by Troy Cusack as he rolled the ball into the far right corner. The RWB line out, which was possibly their greatest strength in this contest, provided clean ball and centre Daniel Hale supplied the finish. Troy Cusack added the extras to extend the lead to 21-13. There was time for one more Freddy Bunting penalty attempt but it was blown wide and the half concluded with the hosts enjoying an interval advantage of 21-33. Both camps had plenty to reflect upon in a contest that was far from over.

The weather held and Royal Wootton Bassett restarted the game defending their 8-point advantage. From the outset they were on the back foot. It was their turn to be defending a 5-metre line out after a penalty and moments later to be reduced to 14 men. The referee was exceedingly consistent in his punishments. The difference was that unlike the Wiltshire line out which was very secure the Sutton version was totally unreliable. Ten minutes of pressure and numerous opportunities in the left hand corner were squandered.

Finally, tactics turned to Bunting's boot and another three points were added for 16-21. The S&E cause was being aided by an outbreak of penalties that had reached epidemic proportions that was infecting the Ballards Ash XV. After a quarter of an hour in the second period after carries from Boaden and Harwood the backs took over. Archie FitzGerald muscled over the gainline, the ball was recycled and Ollie Baptiste-Wilson finished with aplomb. Though the conversion from the flank failed it was all square 21-21 as the game entered the final quarter.

The one-way traffic was halted when RWB on their next visit to S&E territory won a penalty just outside the 22 adjacent to the posts. Effortlessly Troy Cusack regained the lead with the hosts 24-21 to the good. A minute later the visitors scored their best try as Ollie Baptiste-Wilson completed his hat trick. Tom Brooker burst down the blindside from halfway, sold one dummy and then passed to the speeding winger who did the rest.

Despite the errant conversion Sutton and Epsom led by 26-24. From the restart Tom Brooker took the catch but fell heavily and was forced to leave the pitch. The Black & Whites continued to press hard to extend their lead and with the frequency of penalties conceded by the hosts it was unsurprising when an opportunity within Freddy Bunting's range arrived. Once more the Rugby Lane kicker's aim was true and the visitors led 29-24 with five minutes left on the clock.

Indiscipline now hit the Surrey team's ranks. Ominously the ball was kicked into the corner from a penalty. Valiant defence was matched by infringements resulting from sustained pressure. Finally, the ball went wide and the space was exploited as the Wiltshire All Blacks' hooker Scott Parry touched down for their fourth try and a bonus point. Troy Cusack was the man of the moment and put the Malmesbury Road team ahead 31-29 with the conversion. Sutton moved ever onward into the host's half. Archie FitzGerald burst into the 22, was tackled and the whistle blew but it was a penalty to the home team against the centre for rolling on the deck. With great relief the ball was kicked to touch, the whistle blew and the celebrations began for Royal Wootton Bassett.

It was a demoralising day for the Black & Whites as, once again, they failed to overcome the significant handicap of a dreadful start. With defeats by 4, 3 and 2 points and a draw in their first seven matches it is a serious case of 'what might have been' as they now join their hosts in the relegation zone. The lethal Ollie Baptiste-Wilson had the unusual feat of scoring a league hat trick for S&E but still ending up on the losing side. For RWB their line out was excellent, the kicking of Troy Cusack superb and the running of Man of the Match Daniel Hale was enough to engineer their first win of the campaign.

Once again Sutton will be breaking new ground in terms of league opposition when they host Oxford Harlequins next Saturday 29 th October. It will be last of the 3pm kick offs at Rugby Lane before switching to the seasonal variations. After reaching the giddy heights of topping the table consecutive defeats to title rivals Wimbledon and Havant has seen the Quins drop to fourth in the league but they will still provide stiff opposition for the Black & Whites.

Sutton & Epsom

Austin Bell, Kyren Ghumra, Archie FitzGerald, Freddie Bunting, Ollie Baptiste-Wilson, Jamie See, Owen Clemett, Alex Mount, Chris Farrell ©, Tom Boaden, Matt Harwood, Josh Glanville, Ben Tame, Rob Hegarty & Tom Brooker.

Replacements: Will Lloyd, George London & Stefan Cooksammy.

Royal Wootton Bassett

Sam Williams, Mark Trowbridge, Daniel Hale, Connor Tomley, Jone Waqadanidrola, Troy Cusack, Rhys Higginson, Harry Daynes, Scott Parry, Jake O'Neill, Epi Druavesi, Joshua McCafferty, Jack Daynes, Gavin Ougan & Kyle Lovell.

Replacements:

Phillip Bardwell, Oliver Craig Baycroft & Iwan Floyd.

Epsom's Rugby Lane draws a crowd

6 December 2022



SUTTON & EPSOM 15 - LONDON WELSH 15. Saturday 15th October. It had been many years since **London Welsh** had visited Rugby Lane. In fact, it was 1958 and their side despite containing four full internationals only narrowly won a highly entertaining contest by 13-8. Fast forward to Saturday afternoon and both sides arrived with a meagre one win from five league matches and were much in need of a morale boosting victory. The visitors would argue that the fixture computer had not been kind as they had already faced four of the top five and perhaps their lowly status in the bottom three did not reflect their potential. At the final whistle the sides could not be separated, and it ended 15-15.



Freddy Bunting initiated proceedings as the Black & Whites kicked off in bright sunshine with a notable crosswind and ominous clouds looming on the horizon. From the outset London Welsh's intentions were clear as they spread the ball wide and all their backs got their hands on the ball. Sutton and Epsom held firm and demonstrated a steely defensive reserve. Not surprisingly in the wind played havoc with many of the early line-outs. There were many early scrums from the throws blown awry. In the scrummage the hosts were encouraged by early dominance as they shunted the Welsh pack, depleted by injuries and absentees, into reverse. Despite their dominance in the set-piece scrums twice Sutton and Epsom were penalised for driving upwards, much to the irritation of the front row triumvirate of Mount, Craig and Boaden. In contrast in the loose the visitors were in control providing their backs a stream of possession as the back row trio of Davies, George and Williams burrowed and scavenged to great effect.

London Welsh had the first scoring opportunity but their endeavours were scuppered when they were penalised for crossing near the Sutton line. A swift riposte by Sutton and Epsom saw them take quick tap penalty with the ever-alert Ross Parsons breaking downfield. This led to a series of attacks with James Caddy prominent but the visitors' defence was resolute and organised and the crowd continued to wait patiently for an opening score. The Old Deer Park XV sought to convert their favourable possession statistics into points. First of all their pack's relentless advance to the line was halted as they were held up over the line. Freddy Bunting's drop out from the Sutton line was a temporary respite. A moment later it required a superb collective effort to bundle the speeding Jonathan Ilori into touch by the corner flag. There followed relentless red shirts besieging the Sutton line. Finally, the Welsh dropped the ball in the left-hand corner stretching for the line. Sutton's heroic defence was rewarded with a 5-metre scrum and the siege was lifted by a magnificent kick to halfway.

In the last ten minutes of the half the hosts found their rhythm and gained some possession. Kyren Ghumra had a run, Archie Fitzgerald muscled his way through and Robbie Martey continued to impress in his new role at 15. The best opportunity came from a wonderful break by Ross Parsons but a couple of phases later a very unforgiving long pass led to a knock on. The half ended with a penalty awarded to the visitors that was within kicking range. Dafydd Manley's effort was blown wide. There was time for one last Welsh flurry as Elliot Hopkin jinked down the touchline before finally being bundled into touch. The first period finished 0-0 but the game was anything but boring as both defences had found immense reserves of resilience and defiance to prevent any score.

The match resumed with Robbie Martey prominent in defence and attack for the hosts. Sutton & Epsom opened the scoring in spectacular fashion after five minutes. Stealing the line out ball in their 22 they ran the ball from defence, wonderfully timed passes saw them break into the Welsh half where the ball was transferred to Ollie Baptiste-Wilson who finished in style evading all challengers in a 40-metre burst. The redoubtable Bunting added the conversion from the flank for a 7-0 lead. Ten minutes later, roared on by their numerous supporters, London Welsh levelled the score. From a line out on the S&E 22 the Welsh pack advanced remorselessly towards the posts, finally halted on the line the ball was released and scrum half Hywel Williams scored. Dafydd Manley added the simplest of conversions for 7-7.

The weather worsened as an initial drizzle transformed into driving rain in a ferocious wind. The more the weather deteriorated the more prominent the visitors became. The talismanic Rohan Pixley was introduced on the hour by London Welsh as S&E switched props with Will Lloyd replacing Alex Mount. The visitors were awarded a penalty that they kicked to the corner and the crowd anticipated another catch and drive score but the Sutton pack held firm to win a 5-metre scrum. Relief was short-lived as the Red shirts battered the Black & White line as viciously as the rain swept the pitch. Rohan Pixley was denied but passed to Tololima Savainaea who was held up near the line before Dafydd Manley popped over for the try. The centre failed to add the extras to his try but London Welsh led 12-7.

Sutton stormed back at once and encamped in the Welsh 22. Awarded a 5-metre penalty they battered the line but the forwards could not breach the defiant defence. The ball went wide and Archie Fitzgerald forced his way over in the corner. The conversion from the flank drifted wide but the scores were level, 12-12. The storm abated and the ground was bathed beneath a spectacular rainbow as the game entered its final 5 minutes. With the game in the last minute of normal time the hosts were awarded a penalty. Despite the 50-metre distance Freddy Bunting stepped up to put S&E into a 15-12 lead that was greeted with a deafening roar of approval. Joy turned to agony in time added on when London Welsh were awarded a penalty of their own in front of the uprights on the Sutton 22. A calm Dafydd Manley sent the Old Deer Park supporters into raptures levelling the game at 15-15 and a minute later it was all over. It had been a magnificent occasion, in no little part due to the wonderful and numerous London Welsh supporters, and a draw was a very fair result. The visitors will reflect on their first half dominance and multiple chances that were denied by the parsimonious S&E defence.

The hosts will rue their naïve game management after taking the lead at the death. However, both teams can take great heart in immense defence in a contest where every yard had to be earned. For Sutton sporting their livewire back three, Robbie Martey was magnificent and Ollie Baptiste-Wilson, once again, scored a spectacular try. The hosts not only kept a clean sheet in the first period despite having so little ball but showed real character to retake the lead in the dying moments. Meanwhile, despite so many absentees, the visitors adapted to the situation with aplomb to put in a performance that would have swept aside a less cussed opponent. Their pack was tireless and particularly effective at the breakdown.

Next Saturday, **22nd October**, Sutton and Epsom play Royal **Wootton Bassett**. It will be the first time in the club's history that they will play the Wiltshire club. The kick off will be 3pm at Malmesbury Road and any supporters might like to avail themselves of the team coach.

Sutton & Epsom

Robbie Martey, Kyren Ghumra, Archie Fitzgerald, Freddie Bunting, Ollie Baptiste-Wilson, Jamie See, Ross Parsons, Alex Mount, James Craig, Tom Boaden, Matt Harwood, George Drye ©, Tom Brooker, Rob Hegarty, James Caddy.

Replacements: Will Lloyd & Chris Farrell. Austin Bell (not used)

London Welsh

Dylan Casella, Elliot Hopkin, Tololima Savaiinaea, Dafydd Manley, Jonathan Ilori, Osian McAvoy, Hywel Williams, Andrew Black, Jack Burnett, James Buncle, James Downing, Charlie Bramble, Ben Davies, Rhydian George & Tom Williams.

Replacements

Max Brewer, Rohan Pixley & Adam Nixon.

Sutton and Epsom Rugby Just Fall Short

6 December 2022



BOURNEMOUTH 28 SUTTON & EPSOM 25: Sat. 1st Oct. Sutton & Epsom travelled to Chapel Gate with confidence following their opening win of the season against Brighton the week before. The revolving door of selection was again in evidence as the Black & Whites lost influential fly half Gareth O'Brien and Ben Tame to injuries sustained at training on Thursday night but Messrs Craig, Glanville and Clemett returned from the sick list.

Freddy Bunting kicked off in bright sunshine playing against the significant wind and up the slight slope. From the outset both teams were keen to spread the ball wide and a thoroughly entertaining contest had begun. The host's early dominance was assisted by S&E conceding far too many penalties. It was from one of these infringements that Grant Hancox opened the scoring after five minutes for a 3-0 lead. Moments later they had the chance to extend the lead but opted to kick the penalty into the corner for the attacking 5-metre line out. The Sutton defence repelled the first couple of strikes before the ball was spun wide for Brad Law to score. Grant Hancox added the extras from the flank to lead by ten points in as many minutes.

#	Team	P	W	D	L	PF	PA	+/-	TB	LB	Pts
1	Oxford Harlequins	5	5	0	0	144	97	47	2	0	22
2	Wimbledon	5	4	0	1	216	88	128	4	1	21
3	Maidenhead	5	4	0	1	193	106	87	5	0	21
4	Havant	5	4	0	1	147	96	51	4	1	21
5	Camberley	5	4	0	1	151	83	68	3	0	19
6	Bracknell	5	3	0	2	123	117	6	3	0	15
7	Bournemouth	5	2	0	3	109	136	-27	1	0	9
8	Brighton	5	1	0	4	128	182	-54	3	2	9
9	Sutton & Epsom	5	1	0	4	124	155	-31	1	2	7
10	London Welsh	5	1	0	4	105	159	-54	0	1	5
11	Banbury	5	1	0	4	105	171	-66	1	0	5
12	Royal Wootton Bassett	5	0	0	5	48	203	-155	0	0	0

<https://www.englandrugby.com/home>

Emboldened by their fine start the Lions ran the restart from the 22 and only an errant pass prevented Josh Wickens from the opportunity to make a telling contribution. In fact the ball was recovered by Freddy Bunting and the Black & Whites had their first attack. Once more the visitors were thwarted by conceding a penalty and were soon on the back foot in defence. Following sustained pressure a long pass was thrown out to Jordie Wayman who was hugging the touchline. The bounce favoured the Chapel Gate team and the wing touched down in the corner. The challenging conversion failed but Bournemouth had a significant 15-0 lead in the first quarter.

George Drye, relishing in the role of captaincy, led the riposte that saw the visitors have a line out deep in their opponent's 22. Unfortunately Mr Long spotted an infringement and Sutton's hopes of getting on the scoreboard were thwarted by a careless technical error. However, five minutes later it was a case of 'Action: Take 2'. Great control by S&E was matched by superb defence until Bournemouth conceded a penalty near the uprights. The visitors opted for a scrum, the ball went wide and after a powerful carry by Archie Fitzgerald the ball was transferred to Kyren Ghumra who squeezed home in the corner. Freddy Bunting's touchline conversion went agonisingly close as Sutton trailed by 5-15. With the interval fast approaching the next score went to the hosts as Grant Hancox chipped over a drop goal as the Dorset side stretched their advantage to 18-5 with the elements.

The hosts pressed hard to add to their account and secure a sizeable buffer before they faced the strong wind. Dogged Sutton defence repelled a 5-metre line out that was followed by the Lions conceding a penalty at the scrum. Freddy Bunting cleared to halfway as the clock ran down. But on the final play of the half the alert scrum half Harry Warr intercepted and raced away to score. With Grant Hancox successful conversion the whistle blew with Bournemouth leading 25-5. The home team had dominated the breakdown and had been on the front foot for the majority of the contest and were worthy of their 20-point advantage. The Sutton cause had not been helped by the early departures of Ciaran Mohr and Dan Jones who were replaced by Sam Hurley and Luke Halford but many of their wounds were self-inflicted with the penalty count far too high.

The question on the lips of the crowd was whether a 20-point cushion was enough to counter the wind in the second period. Obviously the Black & Whites needed an improvement in quality and an early score. Having hardly made a mistake in the first half Bournemouth knocked on Ross Parsons clearance kick on halfway. An emboldened S&E spun the ball out to Kyren Ghumra who punished a weak tackle and ran in to score from distance. Freddy Bunting added the conversion and Sutton grasped the lifeline to now trail 12-25 and were back in the contest. The Lions looked for an immediate reply but the Sutton defence held firm before a penalty enabled them to clear. From a perfect catch and drive George Drye secured the ball and the pack marched to the line and Alex Mount added the finishing touches. Freddy Bunting did the necessary for 19-25 and the match was now very much in the balance with 25 minutes still to play.

The Surrey men were playing with confidence and in their next sortie Owen Clemett broke into the 22 but the scrambling home defence intercepted his inside pass that would have resulted in a try. As the game entered the final quarter S&E lost their hooker, James Craig, and the front row was re-organised with Alex Mount taking over throwing duties as Will Lloyd returned to the fray. Both teams looked more than capable of adding to the score. An error by the hosts, kicking the ball out on the full, gave the visitors a prime attacking position. Kyren Ghumra charged into the 22 with his hat trick in the offing but he was brought down by a superb tackle. Sutton had the consolation of a penalty and Freddy Bunting cut the deficit to three points as the Lions led 25-22. Within five minutes the Sutton centre had levelled the scores at 25 apiece with another calmly executed penalty. Trailing by 20 points at the break Sutton had overcome the significant deficit with ten minutes to play.

Bournemouth stormed back desperate to turn the tide. They were rewarded with a penalty of their own and Grant Hancox made no mistake to retake the lead 28-25. The Rugby Lane men threw everything at their opponents in search of another score. Rob Hegarty was prominent in the loose linking well with the ubiquitous George draw. Robbie Martey with intelligent angled runs threatened to make the telling strike. But the home defence was superb and once they got possession they managed the clock and closed out the game. A thrilling contest finished with Bournemouth recording their first victory of the campaign since the opening weekend of the season.

The 28-25 score reflected the closeness of a contest that could have gone either way or ended honours even. Bournemouth's defence was of the highest quality and they started the contest magnificently and bullied Sutton at the breakdown. However, S&E's response after the break was exceptional to level the scores. Owen Clemett playing out of position at 10 led the line with aplomb. George Drye was outstanding, securing the ball at the line out, leading his team and being at the heart of all Sutton's best moments. The returning Kyren Ghumra with a brace of tries was a potent threat. Once again the Sutton fitness shone through in the last quarter and Rob Hegarty was tireless. Ultimately the Lions shaded the contest with cool heads and fine match management in the final stages of a game that had the crowd on the edge of their seats.

Next Saturday the league goes into abeyance and the players can have a deserved weekend of rest and recuperation. Hostilities resume on Saturday 15th October with, perhaps, the highlight of the season being the visit of the historic London Welsh RFC. The Exiles have been making a rapid ascent of the league pyramid following the financial difficulties that led to an enforced reset in the lower leagues. The kickoff will be 3pm at Rugby Lane and it might be wise to arrive in good time as a sizeable crowd is anticipated.

Sutton & Epsom

Ciaran Mohr, Robbie Martey, Archie Fitzgerald, Freddy Bunting, Kyren Ghumra, Owen Clemett, Ross Parsons, Tom Boaden, James Craig, Will Lloyd, Matt Harwood, Josh Glanville, Dan Jones, Rob Hegarty, George Drye ©.

Replacements: (all used)

Alex Mount, Luke Halford & Sam Hurley

Bournemouth

Antony Fitch, Jordie Wayman, Brad Law, Grant Hancox, Josh Wickens, Mike Pope, Harry Warr, Tom Napier, Conrad

Carkreet, Alan Manning ©, Matt Warwick, Joe Desmond, Ben Kimber, Ciaran Smyth, Jake Guildford.
Replacements
Luca Firetto, Connor McCaffery & Jack Young.

Epsom's rugby team beat Brighton

6 December 2022



SUTTON & EPSOM 42 - BRIGHTON 24. Saturday 24th September. Rugby returned to Rugby Lane, Epsom on Saturday after a temporary weather induced hiatus. Brighton arrived on the back of a fabulous 39-38 triumph against Havant whereas S&E were still striving for their first victory of the campaign. The Black & Whites made a further eight changes to last week's roster and gave a debut to Ollie Baptiste-Wilson. There was also a notable return for veteran Steve Munford who spends his days with the coaching unit on the touchline rather than engaged in the action. In a high-scoring and thoroughly entertaining affair Sutton won 42-24.



Bathed in glorious sunshine but with a stiff breeze Freddy Bunting set the ball in motion with S&E playing towards the clubhouse but Brighton having the elements in their favour. The opening exchanges set the tone for a match that was to be played at a high tempo with plenty of scoring opportunities. The hosts were the first to threaten as debutant Ollie Baptiste-Wilson was bundled into touch five shy. Moments later a superb sweeping counter set up the visitors in their opponents 22. A try in the corner looked a formality but the scrambling Black & White cover forced Aled Edwards to put a foot in touch as he grounded the ball. Sadly after 10 minutes Isaac Lea was forced off with a serious shoulder injury and was replaced by Ewan McTaggart who went into the second row as Ben Tame retreated to the flank. It was not long before the Blues were again pressing hard for the opening score. They declined a kickable penalty and opted to kick to the corner. Sterling S&E defence was capped by Rob Hegarty seizing on the loose ball enabling Ross Parsons to clear.



Not to be outdone the Black & Whites set out their stall in the Blues 22. The visitors' defence was just as miserly as the hosts and was combined with a stunning counterattack. A spectacular score was only thwarted by the excellent cover by Munford and friends. As the first quarter concluded there was moment of controversy as Gareth O'Brien's attempted interception 10m from his line was knocked on and all eyes fell on the referee. He gave a penalty to Brighton that was the least draconian outcome for the fortunate hosts. The familiar kick to the corner meant another 5m line out. To add to the Sussex men's sense of injustice Sutton turned over the ball and cleared to touch. As the half hour approached S&E made

probing breaks by Mount and Drye whilst a wonderful Sean O'Hagan kick sent Sutton scuttling back to their line.

Finally the try came and it was the hosts who opened their account. From a quickly taken free kick on the opposition 22 Ross Parsons set up the pack and despite heroic goal line defence Tom Boaden forced his way over near the uprights. Freddy Bunting added the simplest of conversions for 7-0 to Sutton. The south coast men were close to an immediate reply as a subtly placed restart away from the pack only just evaded the wing and nestled into touch. However, it was the Rugby Lane team who were next to score as Freddy Bunting thumped over a penalty from 45m to make it 10-0. The visitors redoubled their efforts to get on the board but swarming Sutton defence kept them at bay. As the interval approached Brighton must have thought the fates were against them as a fabulous clearance from their 22 rolled over the opposition dead ball line. From the Sutton and Epsom scrum back on the Brighton 22 it looked as if a set move had stalled badly but Archie Fitzgerald juggled the ball and weaved through prospective tacklers to score under the posts. Freddy Bunting concluded first half proceedings with the conversion for 17-0.

The scoreline flattered S&E but the Blues had created enough chances for the crowd to realise this match was by no means over as a contest. The comeback would have to be made against a strengthening wind and an early score was a priority for the visitors. The Sussex men did exactly what was required having won a penalty from the re-start they established the attacking platform in the 22 and after concerted pressure it went wide with winger Nesi Onwabile, with neat footwork, touching down. The conversion from the flank drifted wide but Brighton were on the scoreboard and trailing 5-17. The visitors' tails were up and a fine Ciaran Mohr tackle stymied the next attack. Then came the turning point of the match. For all the world it looked like the visitors would score and be knocking on the door at 12-17 but the Surrey men turned over the ball deep in their 22. Declining the clearance kick Steve Munford threw a long pass out to Ollie Baptiste-Wilson who did wonderfully well to sprint the length of the pitch to score. Freddie Bunting added the conversion for a 24-5 lead.

If that score had given Brighton the blues in contrast it filled the Black & Whites with confidence. Maintaining their fast and wide approach Ciaran Mohr cut back inside from his wing near halfway and superbly set the ball back after being tackled. Swiftly the ball was in Gareth O'Brien's hands and he burst through a gap and headed for the posts before selflessly popping the ball to the supporting runner, Ross Parsons, to score under the posts. Another Freddie Bunting conversion made it 31-5 to a rampant Sutton who had secured the bonus point. Within five minutes Brighton had a second try as sustained pressure from their forwards saw flanker Nick de Brett squeeze in at the corner. A brilliant touchline conversion by Sean O'Hagan and it was 31-12. Moments later S&E had a penalty and the referee did not appreciate the quizzical nature of the offenders and advanced the kick by ten strides. Freddie Bunting thumped the ball over for 34-12.

As the game entered the final quarter an inch perfect 50/20 kick by Gareth O'Brien gave the hosts a line out on the opposition line. The catch and drive led to a penalty and the forwards inched their way towards the posts. Finally it was released to the backs and a set move was perfectly executed. Replacement Joe Lovatt, on for the veteran Munford, scored in the corner with his only touch of the game. Freddie Bunting's conversion from touch missed by inches as Sutton stretched their advantage to 39-12. A victory might have been beyond the visitors but the 4-try bonus point was an achievable target and they threw everything at the Black & Whites in pursuit of that goal. In a pulsating finale Ollie Baptiste-Wilson was denied another stunning strike by a tap tackle. Not only was a try prevented but Sean O'Hagan set off on his own bouncing off tackles he broke into the Sutton half and roared into the 22 before passing to Nesi Onwabile for his second try. The creator O'Hagan nonchalantly drop kicked the conversion for 19-39.

In time added on Freddie Bunting endorsed his growing kicking reputation by hammering over a penalty from 50m to make it 42-19. There was time left for one last Brighton assault while Ross Parsons received a yellow card for time-wasting. Despite valiant defence the Blues made the extra man pay and replacement Giles Westgarth scored to earn Brighton the reward of a bonus point that was entirely warranted. The conversion drifted wide and the referee blew the final whistle and Sutton had prevailed 42-24.

This was a highly entertaining game of nine tries with thrills and spills throughout. Brighton were not at their best and were hampered by untimely errors but S&E deservedly won the contest. For the Blues it would have been harsh to have returned to Waterhall pointless and bonus point try reflected accurately on their attacking intent throughout.

After three defeats this was a most welcome upturn in fortunes for Sutton & Epsom. Gone was the lethargic and error-strewn opening that had undermined their last two attempts. This was a new high tempo S&E playing a mobile game and eager to give the ball to their back division. Ollie Baptiste-Wilson had a debut of dreams with the score that transformed the game. Gareth O'Brien led the backs astutely with the centre combination of Bunting and Fitzgerald being equally impressive in defence as well as attack. The forwards were superb with their tireless efforts relishing the open game, making vital turnovers and keeping the pressure on their opponents. Freddy Bunting's boot, that garnered 17 points, maximised Sutton's efforts.

October opens with a trip next Saturday to Chapel Gate for the match against Bournemouth. Sutton and Epsom were denied their inaugural league encounter here in 2020 due to the corona virus so it has been a much anticipated, if belated, match on the fixture list. The Black & Whites will hope that they will carry forward this fine performance into next week and gain their first win on the road this campaign.

Sutton & Epsom

Steve Munford, Ciaran Mohr, Archie Fitzgerald, Freddie Bunting, Ollie Baptiste-Wilson, Gareth O'Brien, Ross Parsons, Alex Mount, Tom Boaden, Will Lloyd, Ben Tame, George Drye, Rob Hegarty, Isaac Lea & Chris Farrell.

Replacements: (all used)

Dan Jones, Ewan McTaggart & Joe Lovatt.

Brighton

Maxx Morris, Nesi Onwabile, Ben Carson, Arthur Robinson, Aled Edwards Sean O'Hagan, Harry Alexander, Declan Peake, William Fitzpatrick, Oliver Smith, William Harvey, Richard

Neil, George Orchard, Nick De Brett, Brennan Edwards.

Replacements: (all used) Andrew Rowlandson, Giles Westgarth & Peter Sowerby.

Sluggish Start Fatal For Sutton & Epsom RFC

6 December 2022



CAMBERLEY 43 - SUTTON & EPSOM 21, Saturday 17th September.

Sutton & Epsom had not played a league fixture at Watchetts Recreation Ground since January 2013. They renewed acquaintances with their Surrey rivals on a sunny but chill afternoon. On Saturday Camberley, promoted as London One South champions, were smarting from their first defeat in 11 months at Havant and Sutton and Epsom were still seeking their first win of the season. It was normal service resumed for the hosts with a 43-21 success whilst the wait for a win goes on for the Rugby Lane team.



Images courtesy Robin Kennedy

Sutton and Epsom fielded two debutants Tom Brooker and Archie Fitzgerald. Five minutes before the start the visitors suffered a hiatus as Kyren Ghumra withdrew injured. A hasty reshuffle brought Austen Bell off the bench to 15, Sam Hurley moved to the wing and Ciaran Mohr stepped off the 2nd XV paddock to catch a breather on the bench. Camberley kicked off and the Rugby Lane team dropped the ball near their 22 to concede the set piece. From the scrum the ball went to the left wing, Josua Lewanituva, who strolled over to score. It was the start of a spectacular afternoon for the Fijian flyer that would garner four tries. Liam Prescott added the extras for a 7-0 lead. After a series of infringements the totemic Fijian crashed over by the uprights from a 5-metre ball for his second. Liam Prescott completed the scoring to extend the host's lead to 14 points in as many minutes.

From the restart Sutton and Epsom showed more resolve. A fine line out catch and drive and sweeping movement demonstrated that the S&E machine was up and running. However, on the half hour Josua Lewanituva completed his hat trick with a magnificent 40 metre run weaving through the defence and swatting aside prospective tacklers. Liam Prescott's conversion made the score 21-0. Sutton an Epsom's despondency was short-lived as a superbly controlled advance by the forwards was rounded off by George London touching down.

Freddie Bunting bisected the uprights as Sutton and Epsom trailed 7-21. Sadly the try-scorer was to depart moments later with an ankle injury to be replaced by Dan Jones. There was no further addition to the score before the interval but there was no masking the size of the task facing S&E in the second period. As the teams turned around Sutton and Epsom at least they had the benefit of the slope as they re-started the match playing towards the clubhouse with Will Lloyd replacing Tom Boaden in the front row. The second half started in a depressingly familiar fashion as poor tackling

resulted in full back Vic Hardwicke touching down for the bonus point try for Camberley. The excellent Liam Prescott touchline conversion made it 28-7. The fear of a rout soon became the hope for a memorable win. Sutton and Epsom stormed back playing their best rugby forcing the Watchetts men into defensive duties. George Drye was the first to score for S&E after Charlie Aylward had done well to keep the attack alive and Luke Halford had come close. Freddie Bunting's conversion made in 14-28. Five minutes later a sumptuous break by Freddie Bunting created a score for the supporting Ross Parsons. As Bunting added the extras for 21-28 the game was in the balance with 15 minutes to go. Sadly a minute later Tom Brooker was contentiously yellow carded for breaking his binding.

With the extra man Camberley reasserted their authority and control. Prop Joshua Thundercliffe scored from a catch and drive. Liam Prescott added the extras as well as a penalty five minutes later for a telling 38-21 lead. Returned to fifteen men the Black & Whites went in search of their fourth try in an attempt to record a bonus point. Trying to counter from their 22 in time added on Sutton and Epsom lost possession. The ball was spun wide for the hirsute winger to fittingly conclude the match with his fourth try. Liam Prescott erred for the only time and the match ended with Camberley 43-21 victors.

Camberley deserved the win as they ruthlessly capitalised on a woefully slow and error-strewn start by Sutton and Epsom. Their powerful pack dominated the scrummage. The experienced Liam Prescott calmly orchestrated his back division and kicked 13 points. Man of the match Josua Lewanituva enjoyed a memorable afternoon that included a hat trick in the first half hour and four tries in total. The step up from level 6 to level 5 may well be slightly mitigated by the restructuring but the early season form of Camberley suggests that they will be a force to be reckoned with this season.

Great credit must go to the Black & Whites for a rousing display of immense character in the second period. Unfortunately the comeback was deflated by a yellow card moments after their third goal which scuppered an enthralling finale. Tom Brooker was prominent throughout and his powerful ball carrying will be of great benefit to S&E this season. Fellow debutant Archie Fitzgerald put in several jarring tackles and did not look out of place in 1st XV company. Dan Jones added energy off the bench in the revitalised second half. Jamie See and Freddy Bunting combined to make impressive breaks as the Rugby Lane men rallied and hinted at a memorable success.

The campaign continues with the visit of Brighton next Saturday, 24th September, and the Black & Whites will be hoping for a repeat of last season's 24-12 triumph. However, the Blues enjoyed a thrilling 39-38 over the previously unbeaten Havant in Week 3 and will travel to Sutton and Epsom full of confidence. I am delighted to report that rugby returns to Rugby Lane, after the brief Cobham interlude, and the kick off will be 3pm at the familiar location.

Sutton & Epsom

Austin Bell, Sam Hurley, Archie Fitzgerald, Freddy Bunting, Charlie Aylward, Jamie See, Ross Parsons, Tom Boaden, Chris Farrell ©, Luke Halford, George Drye, Ben Tame, George London, Tom Brooker, & James Caddy.

Replacements: (all used) Will Lloyd, Dan Jones & Ciaran Mohr.

Camberley

Vic Hardwicke, Josua Lewanituva, Alex Young, Chris Laidlaw, Gabe Hills, Liam Prescott, Alistair Walton, Josh Thundercliffe, John Murphy, Nicholas Barry, Sam Voight, Dom Sammut, Chris Bird, Ben Lovell-Smith, Alex Hughes.

Replacements: (all used) Adam Pickett, Ed Grosvenor & Tom Allen.

Saturday's rugby: SUTTON & EPSOM 22 -BANBURY 26

6 December 2022



A two minute silence for the Late Queen was observed before this tightly fought match played out on 10th September 2022. This fixture would have been the first league encounter between these two clubs at **Rugby Lane** [the home ground of **Sutton and Epsom RFC** situated just inside the borders of the **Borough of Epsom and Ewell,**] but the unusually dry summer adversely affected Sutton and Epsom's pitches. Therefore, in accordance with the regulations the hosts found an alternative venue and were most grateful to the generosity and hospitality of Cobham RFC for letting them use their splendid synthetic surface at Fairmile Lane. This was the first time in the league era that Sutton & Epsom had played a home fixture on a neutral venue though the club have experienced this situation on their travels in the past.

There were seven changes to the squad that lost the opener to Bracknell last Saturday. Returning to the fold were Sutton & Epsom's stalwarts George Drye, James Caddy and Stefan Cooksammy. In comparison Robbie Martey (Barnes) was making his debut for the Black & Whites. Meanwhile Ross Parsons, Charlie Aylward and Luke Halford were making their

first appearances of the campaign. Banbury also failed to win their first game of the season as visitors Havant triumphed at Bodicote Park 26-18. Both clubs were eager to get off the mark and record their first points at the second time of asking. It was mission accomplished for the visitors who recorded a 26-22 win and a bonus point to boot.

After the observation of the silence for Queen Elizabeth II Banbury kicked off the fixture. Soon the Bulls were on the scoreboard after solid ball from the scrum it was spun down the line and Quinten Blythe broke away down the flank and passed to supporting full back Tommy Gray to score for the perfect start. Ed Phillips added the extras for a 7-0 lead. S&E came back strongly with a charge down and turn over from the restart. To add to the woes of the hosts Stefan Cooksammy departed injured to be replaced by Sam Hurley.

Having reshuffled their resources the Rugby Lane team pressed hard to draw level. Just before the end of the first quarter the Black & Whites kicked a penalty into the corner. Following a line out and another penalty hooker James Craig forced his way over from a rolling maul for his first S&E try. Freddy Bunting added the conversion to level it at 7-7.

The game ebbed and flowed with Luke Halford closest to scoring when he was held up over the line as the half hour approached. Five minutes later James Craig went from hero to villain as he was penalised for a high tackle on wing Alex Garbett. S&E would have to endure ten minutes without their hooker. Despite some cussed defence by the Surrey men Banbury would not be denied. Recycling the ball quickly they broke through on the blindside and lock Louis Tooth strode over to score. Ed Phillips added the kick to lead 14-7 in time added on in the first period. There was no further score in the lengthy period of injury time. Sutton returned to their full compliment but James Craig remained on the sidelines with tactical substitute George London continuing whilst the sacrificial lamb, Austin Bell, returned to the fray.

The opening quarter of an hour of the second period saw both sides best play undermined by errors. Then the Oxfordshire team knocked on from a Sutton line out. From the scrum S&E went blind and Robbie Martey touched down to score on his debut. Bunting's conversion drifted wide as the home team trailed 12-14. S&E were given a helping hand when the Bulls hooker Nick Agbo saw yellow for a deliberate knock on. Then another penalty gave Freddy Bunting the chance to take the lead and he obliged with a well struck kick for a slender 15-14 advantage with a dozen minutes to go. The lead lasted only seconds as Banbury playing their best rugby put together their phases and made the crucial line break to see winger Alex Garbett score. With Ed Phillips' conversion bisecting the uprights the visitors had a 21-15 lead. A couple of minutes later Tommy Gray pounced on a knock on, scored his second try and the Bodicote Boys had secured a bonus point for a fourth try. Despite the missed conversion the rapid 12-point burst after they had momentarily trailed meant Banbury led 26-15 with five minutes remaining of normal time.

The Black & Whites needed an immediate response and they regathered the restart and forced a penalty. A few phases later and veteran Sam Hurley was through for the try. The conversion was added by Freddy Bunting and Sutton were within a score as they trailed 22-26. The Oxfordshire men pressed hard for the decisive score but stout Sutton resistance prevailed though at the cost of an injured Josh Glanville who was forced off the pitch. In a frenetic finale Luke Halford made a 30 metre break to raise the hopes of the S&E followers but the visitors' line was not seriously threatened.

With no further addition to the score Banbury had earned their first points of the campaign and a win on the road. Sutton & Epsom were unfortunate to suffer early injuries to not only Stefan Cooksammy but also Alex Mount. However, it was their self-inflicted wounds that were their undoing in a contest that could have gone either way. Tommy Gray was the Man of the Match with a couple of tries in a performance that carried a constant threat. For the Black & Whites Robbie Martey rounded off an impressive debut with a try. It was a case of the curate's egg for James Craig with a try and a yellow card to add to the now familiar strikes against the head. Freddy Bunting endorsed his growing reputation with fine place-kicking to add to his already considerable all around game.

Next Saturday, 17th September, will see the Black & Whites visit fellow Surrey club Camberley for the first time for a league fixture since January 2013. The hosts after an impressive opening day win over Wimbledon stumbled at the second Havant hurdle and will be keen to return to winning ways. The kick off will be 3pm at Watchetts Recreation Ground as Sutton & Epsom seek their first success of the season.

Sutton & Epsom

Austin Bell, Charlie Aylward, Freddy Bunting, Stefan Cooksammy, Robbie Martey, Jamie See, Ross Parsons, Alex Mount, James Craig, Luke Halford, Ben Tame, George Drye, Tom Brooker, Chris Farrell © & James Caddy.

Replacements: (all used) Tom Boaden, Josh Glanville & Sam Hurley.

Banbury

Tommy Gray, Quinten Blythe, Thomas Burman, Louis Richards, Alex Garbutt, Oscar Triggs, Ed Phillips, James Leonardi, Nick Agbo, Sonny Rowe, Louis Tooth, Jacob Turner, James Hibbert, George Ding & Ed Berridge.

Replacements: (all used) Ian Isham, Jacob Mills & Dan Brady.

Other Results From Round 2

BRACKNELL 14 29 MAIDENHEAD

HAVANT 18 6 CAMBERLEY

OXFORD HARLEQUINS 21 13 BOURNEMOUTH

ROYAL WOOTTON BASSETT 12 22 LONDON WELSH

WIMBLEDON 55 26 BRIGHTON

Rugby opener: Bracknell 34 Sutton & Epsom 14

6 December 2022



With ten changes to the **Sutton and Epsom** squad that ended last season and five debutants, Messrs Benton J, Bunting, Craig, Glanville and Tame, the Black & Whites embarked on the new campaign. Ciaran Mohr kicked off on a sultry afternoon playing towards the clubhouse as the hosts returned to level the lively opening exchanges Sutton & Epsom looked to play with width and **Bracknell** showed panache when countering against clearances. The first opportunity arose in the third minute when the hosts were awarded a penalty. Ollie Radford stepped up to open Bracknell's account for the season to lead 3-0. From the restart S&E countered from the clearance as Freddy Bunting make a break and Jamie See carried it to the 22 before conceding a scrum. The Berkshire club using the blindside and the jinking footwork of captain Ian Burch surged to halfway. A pulsating opening to the match promised tries in the future for the Lily Hill Park crowd.

The Sutton scrummage was reassuringly solid for the visitors and provided the platform for Gareth O'Brien have plenty of time for a probing kick into the 22. However, in the blink of an eye an attacking opportunity turned to desperate defence. Fumbling pin ball at the line out saw the Greens recover the ball and explode out of defence on the narrow side with Ian Burch to the fore.

Jamie See covering back made a splendid try-saving tackle but whilst on the deck tackled the supporting runner. A penalty and a yellow card saw the Black & Whites defending a scrum 10 metres out with 14 men. The home crowd urged on their team who looked to seize the moment. Magnificent defence on their line thwarted multiple attacks until the defenders turned over the ball on their line as the attackers conceded a penalty. Freddy Bunting cleared to the halfway as Sutton survived.

Sutton & Epsom did extremely well to run down the clock whilst they endured the ten minutes of numerical deficiency. Indeed a great scrum led to a penalty and a break from Freddy Bunting got them to 10 metres shy of the line. However, every time Bracknell got the ball they were eager to make the extra man count. A fine James Craig tackle thwarted the first counter. Another powerful S&E scrum won a penalty. In the last minute of the ten on the card it looked like a perfectly timed offload by Alex Fieldhouse had set the hosts free as they sped away from halfway with a wonderful chance to score. The shrill blast of the whistle brought the play back for a forward pass from the referee who was well placed to adjudicate. Jamie See returned as the game entered the second quarter.

A searching kick from Gareth O'Brien was followed by an impressive catch and drive as the visiting pack looked to impose themselves on the game. The well organised Bracknell defence were containing the Sutton backs as they tried to play a wide game and were denying the Surrey club who were starting to enjoy more of the territory and possession. Another Bunting carry led to a penalty and the centre stepped up to arrow the ball into the corner. A fine catch and drive led to a penalty 5 metres out. The forwards went close, Jamie See went even closer before finally George London forced his way over under the posts after formidable defence by the hosts. In the turmoil on the line the influential Bracknell Number 8 Ken Hodgson was issued with a yellow card.

Sam Hurley added the easiest of conversions as Sutton took a 7-3 lead on the half hour. It was Bracknell's turn to survive with 14 men and Sutton brought on Will Lloyd and Jack Benton for Alex Mount and George London during this phase hoping that fresh legs would increase their chances to extend their lead. The hosts absorbed not only the visitors attacks but also scored a splendid try. Once again they exploited the narrow side but on this occasion the always dangerous Ian Burch rounded the cover and joyously touched down near the uprights. Ollie Radford added the extras as the 14 men regained the lead by 10-7. Moments later Kyren Ghumra was forced off with a groin injury and Jack Butt came off the bench as the first half concluded with no further addition to the score. Both sides retreated to the dressing rooms to receive the wise words from their coaches as the crowd replenished their glasses.

The players returned and the hosts restarted play. Sutton made one change at the interval as Mount replaced Boaden in the front row. The Bracknell pack who had struggled at the set scrum in the first period improved after the interval and after 5 minutes won a penalty as the scrum collapsed. Ollie Radford's aim was sound once more and the lead stretched to 13-7. Sutton pressed hard to get back on terms in the next ten minutes. Promising breaks were snuffed by the impressive Berkshire defences but at a cost as they lost Alex Fieldhouse and Liam Wood to injuries. Despite the visitors' pressure a solitary penalty miss from Sam Hurley was the closest they came to reducing the deficit.

In contrast Bracknell scored on their first visit to the S&E 22. A sloppy line out saw the loose ball re-gathered by the hosts, a tackle was missed and moments later the powerful Ken Hodgson had scored under the posts. Ollie Radford made no mistake as the men in Green led 20-7. The S&E response was immediate. They won a penalty at the restart and Freddy Bunting rifled his kick to the corner. From the line out 10 metres from the line Sutton patiently mounted a series of attacks against the miserly home defence. Eventually Alex Mount squeezed in by the posts. Sam Hurley chipped over the conversion to trail 20-14. The see-saw nature of the second period had another twist minutes later. Simon Bayliss found space and his powerful well angled run scythed through the Black & White's defences for a wonderful try. The reliable boot of Ollie Radford increased the gap as Bracknell led 27-14.

Moments later saw the visitors awarded a 5-metre scrum and it was the Lily Hill Park team's turn to thwart their opposition on the line. The turnover ball and the scrum allowed Bracknell to clear the danger. Ten minutes remained but it felt like a pivotal moment when Sutton had to score. The Black & Whites failed to create any further chances and it was Bracknell who ended the contest in style. With the lengthy time added on nearly complete the man of the match, Simon Bayliss, received the ball in space and charged through neatly sidestepping the last man to score. The bonus point secured, the conversion added by Ollie Radford and only time for the restart kick it was a job well done by Bracknell as they eased to a 34-14 victory.

The score-line probably did not reflect the closeness of the game. A keenly contested first half where S&E edged territory and possession had given Bracknell a slender lead. In the second period the hosts took their chances with clinical efficiency. The wingers, Bayliss and Burch, were a threat throughout and collected a trio of tries. In the pack Ken Hodgson rounded off an impressive afternoon with the other try. Perhaps key to the hosts success was their disciplined and organised defence that contained Sutton's attempts at an expansive game. For the Black & Whites Freddy Bunting had a strong debut in attack and defence as well as kicking well from hand. Austin Bell, in the absence of the usual incumbents at 9, was in no way overawed by the occasion. The Sutton pack scrummaged and mauled impressively and had periods of dominance though the line out faltered too often. The trio of debutants in the starting pack, Craig, Glanville and Tame, all showed promise for the future on an afternoon that was not as doom-laden as the final score might suggest. Bracknell were worthy winners and great credit must be given to those concerned with preparing the pitch in testing conditions many hours of hard work and dedication resulted in an excellent playing surface.

Continuing with the topic of pitches an early decision was made not to use the pitch at Rugby Lane next Saturday due to its condition. Various alternative scenarios were explored before deciding upon playing the 10 th September fixture at Cobham RFC. It will be the first occasion in the league era that Sutton & Epsom have played a home fixture at a neutral venue though we have been shunted to alternative surroundings several times as the visitors. Apologies in advance for those spectators who turn up at Rugby Lane next Saturday expecting to see Sutton & Epsom v Banbury but they really should read the Epsom & Ewell Times, the club website or their email communications.

Sutton & Epsom

Sam Hurley, Ciaran Mohr, Freddy Bunting, Jamie See, Kyren Ghumra, Gareth O'Brien, Austin Bell, Alex Mount, James Craig, Tom Boaden, Josh Glanville, Matt Harwood, Ben Tame, George London & Chris Farrell ©.

Replacements: (all used) Will Lloyd, Jack Benton & Jack Butt.

Bracknell

Will Field, Simon Bayliss, Alex Fieldhouse, Ollie Radford, Ian Burch ©, Alex Frame, Matt Outson, Jasper Miranda, Bradley Waters, Jake Hodge, Callum Russell, Tom Scott, Liam Wood, Tom Field, Ken Hodgson.

Replacements: (all used) James Gregory, George Milligan & Noah Cannon.

NOTE:

The RFU have restructured the league pyramid in a desire to reflect the trends of the game in the current era. Following a lengthy survey it was decided to reduce the number of league games and the travelling involved for many clubs. Last season's London & SE Premier fourteen clubs were released to the four winds and were distributed into two 12-team leagues. Sutton & Epsom are in Regional 1 South Central and have seven new opponents for this campaign. From the London & SE structure are the newly promoted London 1 South champions Camberley who are joined by the historic London Welsh. Promoted from the South West Premier come champions Oxford Harlequins, Banbury and Bracknell. Finally, through a formula only known by the chosen few at the RFU, Bournemouth and Royal Wootton Bassett are transferred from the West.

Just when the rugby fraternity thought that normality had returned after the interruptions of covid the clubs were faced with the more traditional hurdle of weather-related impediments. As people of a certain vintage reflected upon the summer of '76 there was a flurry of communications between the RFU and League secretaries concerning the state of pitches and match preparedness of playing squads whose pre-season might have been inadvertently affected by conditions. The final RFU missive was despatched on 30 th August with eleven points that hoped to cover every scenario. Fortunately S&E opened their account at Bracknell RFC whose facilities at Lily Hill Park were in good order and their team primed for the initiation of hostilities. The last occasion that the Black & Whites visited the Berkshire club it was a day for club masochists as the hosts put Sutton to the sword to the tune of 76-0. Saturday's encounter bore no resemblance to that thrashing but Bracknell did record a 34-14 triumph to start their season with a win.