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Close result in match of fluctuating fortunes

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The Black and White bandwagon descended Saturday 16th upon the Geoffrey Knight Fields for the third round of the Regional 2 South East season. Old Reigatian (OR) are one of three clubs, along with London Cornish and Old Alleynians, who crossed Sutton and Epsom's path during their brief dalliance with Level 7 in 2012-13. For Rugby Lane supporters of a certain vintage there was a link to the club's former glory. The OR captain was Reilly Franklin-Talbot the son of erstwhile Sutton Number 8 Sean who, amongst many Herculean deeds, scored the last gasp try in the 1990 Surrey Cup final to defeat Old Mid-Whitgiftians by 16-11. Now returning to the present from some rose-tinted nostalgia, the hosts had begun the year with impressive wins over Sidcup and London Cornish in sharp contrast to the suburbanites' start. The early form guide was just maintained as OR edged past the visitors 35-29 in a game of fluctuating fortunes.

On another glorious summer afternoon, that had a refreshing breeze that was more sympathetic to the travails of the participants than last weekend's cauldron, the crowd gathered to revel in an afternoon made for running rugby. Freddy Bunting's lofted kick off was superbly tapped back by Michael Davies to initiate an opening period of Sutton control. Following multiple phases and profitable probing by Sutton and Epsom they were awarded a penalty. Freddy Bunting did the necessary and Sutton led 3-0. The Black and Whites returned to the OR 22 looking to build on their early advantage but in a crowded midfield Reigatian centre Tom Allen made a timely intervention to intercept and race away to score under the posts. The unchallenging offering was accepted by Conor Woods as the home crowd applauded their 7-3 lead after an enthralling eight minutes.

An accidental, but avoidable, offside by Sutton and Epsom gave the Reigate team the opportunity to test the visitors' defence as they kicked into the 22. The defence stood firm and won a scrummage that enabled them to exit via Chris Ballard's boot. However, a kick is only as good as its chase. A pitiful challenge encouraged a wonderful counter and in the blink of an eye a try looked to be a certainty until a crucial pass hit the deck with the line at the mercy of OR who compounded their misery by giving away a penalty. Their disappointment was assuaged within scrum they deservedly scored. The backs created the overlap for flanker Finlay Lock to apply the coup de grâce. A sweetly struck conversion by Conor Woods made it 14-3.

The Old Reigatian backs were in full swing and it was a thrilling sight to behold. The combination of pace, evasive footwork and wonderful passing was devastating. In addition, the ubiquitous flanker Finlay Lock linked play with deft touches and was supported ably by captain Reilly Franklin-Talbot's powerful carrying. Attacking once more this potent potion for success was denied on the line by a Will Lloyd tackle. This was only a temporary stay of execution as OR scored from the 5-metre scrum. Winger Max Coyle stood up the defence and stepped past would be tacklers to finish with aplomb. Conor Woods bisected the uprights and the unstoppable Old Reigatian XV had an impressive and deserved 21-3 lead.

Sutton and Epsom tinkered with their front row as Tom Boaden was replaced by Tariq Al Khaldi. Then five minutes later the Sutton pack was forced into another change when Number 8 Kean Orchard injured his knee and the visitors brought Dan Jones off the bench. The Black and Whites now employed the boot to great effect. Firstly, a Bunting kick forced a drop out then an O'Brien effort set up a lineout in the 22. A jinking run by Gareth O'Brien had the hosts in retreat. The Sutton pack recycled the ball and George London forced his way over. Captain Bunting added the extras to cut the lead to 21-10. The next opportunity to add to the score went to the home team.

However, the Rugby Lane men resolutely defended a 5-metre line and the timely intervention of centre Ross Parsons won the visitors a relieving penalty. At the other end the Black and Whites were awarded a penalty and, in a rare demonstration of fallibility, Freddy Bunting's kick drifted by on the crosswind. The kicking machine returned to working order when the Sutton skipper slotted over his next opportunity that concluded the first period with Old Reigatian 21-13 to the good.

Within five minutes of the restart Freddy Bunting had reduced the deficit to 5 points with his third penalty of the afternoon. Sutton were playing with control and with astute application of their kicking game. The key to their improving fortunes was the set scrum as Messrs Al Khaldi, Howes and Lloyd were utterly dominant. Indeed it was from a scrum that Sutton and Epsom took the lead.

The Black and White pack marched back their opponents by 10 metres in a ruthless demonstration of power and control. Michael Davies took advantage of the back-peddling defence and the visitors were halted on the line. Sutton were not to be denied and hooker Jack Howes was able to reach over to score. Bunting's conversion put Sutton ahead by 23-21. They had overturned the 18-point margin by starving the Reigatian team of possession.

Sutton and Epsom extended their lead when the scrum was awarded a penalty in front of the posts and Freddy Bunting

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chipped it over to stretch the lead to 26-21. OR awoke from their slumber in startling fashion. From the restart Chris Ballard cleared to the host's half and the ball was gathered by Max Coyle who set off on a scything run that exploited Sutton's poor cover. Scrum half Alex Skinner was on hand to finish off the sweeping move and Conor Woods added the simplest of conversions. Reinvigorated by regaining the lead at 28-26, with a bonus point in the bank, OR's struck again moments later. Skipper Reilly Franklin-Talbot marauded into the 22 and passed to winger Harrison Mitchell who dotted down. Conor Woods made it five conversions from five attempts as Old Reigatian led 35-26 as the game entered the final quarter.

Sutton and Epsom were soon gifted a way back into the game with a penalty in front of the posts. However, Chris Ballard took a quick tap penalty trying to exploit the defensive disarray. The gamble did not go to glory and the Reigate men survived. Soon after a wonderful chance to extend their lead was butchered when centre Tom Allen's passing let him down following his brilliant break that denied the home crowd a third try in a devastating ten minute spell. With the game in time added on Dan Jones was manhandled at the breakdown and Sutton and Epsom had a penalty. This time the points were taken to give the visitors a potential losing bonus point as the lead was reduced to 35-29. A minute later the Rugby Lane supporters were crestfallen when Old Reigatian were awarded a penalty in front of the posts. The previously perfect Conor Woods erred and the score remained the same. Despite frantic efforts from the Black and Whites there was no eleventh hour drama and the game concluded moments later with OR triumphant by 35-29.

Old Reigatian's backs played some thrilling rugby on a perfect day in the wonderful setting of the Geoffrey Knight Fields. In addition, the tireless Finlay Lock excelled on the flank as OR outscored Sutton and Epsom by five goals to two. In a game of contrasting styles the hosts certainly monopolised the highlights package but there are many ways to flay a feline. The Sutton pack with Tariq Al Khaldi making a most significant contribution off the bench made it an intriguing contest.

With 19 points from the bludgeoning Bunting boot the game could have gone either way. For the visitors there were improvements from the previous outing. Ross Parsons in the centres epitomised the improved work at the breakdown. Jack Howes at hooker had a 100% record with his lineout throwing. However, the garlands are reserved for the fabulous front row who created the platform from which all their success came.

Old Reigatian remain unbeaten, second in the table on points difference having garnered the maximum 15 from their three matches. Sutton have now lost to three of the four unbeaten XVs. Next Saturday they host the other unbeaten side, Battersea Ironsides, who top the table.

Sutton and Epsom:

Michael Davies, Jack Briggs, Ross Parsons, Freddy Bunting ©, Max Russell, Gareth O'Brien, Chris Ballard, Tom Boaden, Jack Howes, Will Lloyd, Ewan McTaggart, Josh Glanville, George London, Rob Hegarty and Kean Orchard.

Replacements: Tariq Al Khaldi, Dan Jones and Alfie Baker. XXX

Old Reigatian: Sam Turner, Harrison Mitchell, Gareth Stephens, Tom Allen, Max Coyle, Conor Woods, Alex Skinner, Ciaran Lee, Ciaran Nestor, Toby Collister, Reilly Franklin-Talbot ©, Dan Grant, Seb Courteney-Walker, Finlay Lock and Oli Brooks.

Replacements: Ethan Monk, Sam Lenihan and Max Nichol.

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