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Epsom rugby scrape a point lead over Gravesend

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Gravesend 22 Sutton & Epsom RFC 23. Saturday 30th November.

Sutton and Epsom RFC visited Gravesend RFC in October last season at the height of the high tackle hysteria. In a match not so much punctuated by penalties as strangled by draconian enforcement Freddy Bunting collected five penalties. However, the hosts won 36-29 outscoring the visitors 6-2 in tries with a brace of penalty tries and a double from the totemic Samraj Chahal. The Black & Whites returned to the delightful Rectory Field facility that rather contrasted the unflattering portrayal of Gravesend in Andrea Arnold's recent film "Bird". One hopes the council were well compensated for the depiction of their town that raises the question: Is all publicity good publicity? S&E absquatulated again with the points sneaking home 23-22.

Sutton fielded the same starting XV that had snuck past Thurrock in the previous round, apart from an esoteric switch for the wingers. Tom Boaden returned to the bench and was joined by debutant Sam Lennie, the last arrival of the Christchurch triumvirate, who had flown in from New Zealand and not Dorset. An accident in the environs of Clackett Lane delayed the Sutton arrival but their blushes were spared as Mr Goksaran's tardiness that meant the kick off was delayed until 3:15pm. Finally, Freddy Bunting kicked off to the petanque end. Gravesend, belying their lowly league status, dominated the early exchanges. However, they struggled to cross the gain line owing to S&E's resolute defence. They squandered two opportunities in the opening ten minutes. Firstly, losing an attacking line out deep in the 22 and secondly knocking on with the line in sight.

Captain Bunting settled the visitors' nerves with an immaculate 45-metre strike for 3-0. His side now impressed with excellent continuity as rapid recycling aided forwards and backs alike. Gravesend, under severe pressure, conceded a penalty 10 metres out. The ball was prodded to the corner. The perfectly executed catch and drive ushered hooker Dan Jones over the whitewash for the opening try. Freddy Bunting's pin point accuracy made it 10-0. Five minutes later the Kent side found themselves in similar travails when they were not only turned over in their 22 but compounded the error by conceding a penalty. Another kick to the corner, another line out, another catch and drive … another outcome. The home pack halted their adversaries so it was spun wide to winger Angus Findlay whose sublime footwork left the defender grasping thin air as the second try was scored. The metronomic Bunting converted for 17-0.

The Gs looked for a rapid response and the inspirational Samraj Chahal went blind from a scrum. Rhys Betts then chipped ahead and a try was only thwarted by magnificent cover by Tom Lennard. Moments later Sutton provided the opposition with some degree of consolation when they conceded a penalty under the posts. Rhys Betts accepted the gift and the hosts trailed 3-17. The first half concluded shortly afterwards with no further addition to the scoreboard.

The second period started inauspiciously for the hosts when they kicked the restart out on the full. This was to be a rare blemish as they proceeded to besiege the Sutton 22. Following ten minutes of intense pressure it was centre Zac Filmer's perfectly angled run that opened the second half scoring with a try by the posts. Rhys Betts added the simple conversion and the home team trailed 10-17. Within five minutes a raucous Rectory Field sensed an equalising score but their team conceded a penalty one yard from glory. Undeterred by that misfortune the revitalised hosts continued to press for points. Finally, on the hour mark they levelled the scores. Sutton debutant Sam Lennie received a yellow card for a high tackle. The 3-point easy option was declined. They were rewarded when the redoubtable Samraj Chahal forced his way over. With Rhys Betts converting the scores were level 17-17 as Gravesend had scored 17 unanswered points. With S&E reduced to 14 the pendulum had swung dramatically in the favour of the Kent side.

Despite the numerical inferiority Sutton were the next to score. With Mr Goksaran hovering like Azrael the visitors were awarded a penalty and Freddy Bunting recaptured the lead at 20-17. A minute later following excellent work from Jordan Huie S&E had another penalty for a late tackle. A simple 3 points for a 23-17 lead, meaning Gravesend would need a goal to regain the lead, was declined and the penalty was run instead. The forwards approached the line and thought they had scored via Rob Hegarty. The referee adjudicated that he had been held up over the line. A relieved home XV cleared long.

Sutton were returned to their full complement but only momentarily. Ben Tame cleared out a ruck and was issued a yellow for high contact. Sensing blood Gravesend also declined an easy kick and went for glory. From the ensuing penalty their bravery was rewarded as replacement Nathan Fouche powered over. To add salt to the wounds of the Sutton Society For Kicking All Penalties Rhys Betts conversion drifted wide and Gravesend led 22-20. However, a couple of minutes later Freddy Bunting was given a long-range attempt from the sidelines to recapture the lead. Demonstrating as few nerves as a false tooth he bisected the uprights for 23-22 as the game entered time added on.

Gravesend immediately had a chance following a fabulous 50-22 kick that nestled in an ideal spot for an attacking line out. Sutton set themselves for the catch and drive and did not contest the ball. Remarkably the throw was not straight. The hosts cleared to halfway but then they conceded a penalty which saw them retreating back to the corner to defend another close-range line out. This time, roared on by the Rectory Field faithful, the Gs pack secured the ball. Numerous phases saw the hosts crab their way under the posts. The heroic Sutton defence refused to be breached and turned over the ball. From the scrum they secured the ball and dismissed it from the paddock for a very hard earned 23-22 victory.

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Sutton played some of their most effective rugby of this campaign in the first half. Their defence was miserly, they were quick to capitalise on errors and impressed with ball in hand. They were clinical in the opposition 22 when scoring two tries. The second half transformation said more for the attributes of Gravesend than Sutton's deficiencies. Rob Hegarty's dynamism was a focal point throughout, Jordan Huie's running out of defence was exhilarating and Tom Lennard's all around game won plaudits. Close games come down to small margins and in Freddy Bunting S&E held all the aces in all the decks.

For Gravesend this was an unwanted hat trick being their third loss in a row by a solitary point to add to a single point defeat on the opening day to Old Reigatian, not to mention a 2-point deficit to Reeds. Such a run would make Jonah feel fortunate by comparison. The hosts defended aggressively denying Sutton time and space. They varied their game with forwards, backs and some astute kicking. They were undone by missed opportunities as more than one vital line out was lost and overlaps in the 22 were not perceived. In addition, they were up against a formidable kicker who missed nothing as he made the challenging look elementary.

Next Saturday December kicks off at 2pm with a visit from Reeds Weybridge who are proudly perched third in the league. The equivalent fixture last season culminated the campaign with Sutton winning with a Rob Hegarty try on the final play for a 12-7 success.

Sutton & Epsom
O'Brien, Huie, Bibby, Bunting ©, Findlay, Lennard, Munford, Johnson, Jones, Gibson, Glanville, McTaggart, Tame, Davies & Hegarty.
Replacements: Boaden, Lennie & Hilton.

Gravesend
White, Huckle, Cooke, Filmer, Bruce M, Bruce G, Betts, Alderson, Dadson, Brooker, Bird, Brett, Stener, Chahal & Hewitt.
Replacements: Fouche, Hampshire & Fisher.

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