

Hat-trick hero Lennie inspires Sutton and Epsom success

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Bromley 31 Sutton & Epsom 40. Saturday 17th October.

Sutton & Epsom survived a remarkable second-half Bromley fightback before hooker Sam Lennie completed a hat-trick to inspire the Black & Whites to a thrilling 40-31 victory on the road.

Last season Sutton & Epsom opened their campaign at Bromley on a gloriously sunny afternoon more suited to cricket than rugby, with Hayes CC 2nd XI versus Chislehurst CC 2nd XI providing the genteel backdrop to the physical combat.

Sutton and Epsom won that encounter 49-19, although the result was skewed by the absence of several Bromley first-team players lured away by a golf weekend. At the end of the season Bromley gained revenge with a thrilling 34-30 win at Rugby Lane, a result more reflective of two sides who ultimately finished only four points apart in the league table.

This time Bromley entered the match unbeaten following victories over Battersea Ironsides, Dartfordians and Hammersmith & Fulham. Sutton had also beaten the Ironsides and Hammersmith & Fulham, so a close encounter was anticipated.

Those at the Warman Sports Club were not disappointed.

Tom Lennard and Ben Tame returned to the Sutton and Epsom squad after the previous weekend's delayed start to the season had disrupted their plans. Lennard moved to full-back in the continuing absence of Gareth O'Brien.

Joe Lovatt, despite breaking his nose in the previous round, was named among the replacements, with his fiancée presumably hoping he would not resemble a Picasso portrait by the final whistle.

Bromley's squad contained plenty of experience, including first-team centurions Robbie Brown, George Hawkins, Jonathon Griffiths, James Powell and the Scott brothers.

The Bromley pitch has a significant slope and Sutton played downhill during the opening half, while the hosts had the breeze in their favour.

It took only a minute for the visitors to open the scoring.

Lennard impressively caught a clearance before kicking into open space. The full-back then gathered his own kick and, three passes later, Adam Bibby was sauntering beneath the posts.

Freddy Bunting converted for an early 7-0 lead.

Helped by a flurry of penalties, Bromley applied pressure but twice failed to make the most of five-metre lineouts. Their frustration increased on the quarter-hour when Sutton scored from a lineout inside the 22.

Excellent control by the pack advanced the ball before Sam Lennie burst from the melee to score. Bunting again added the extras to make it 14-0.

Bromley then opted for a penalty attempt but the kick slid past the upright.

Sutton and Epsom immediately travelled back down the slope and scored again. Another attacking lineout supplied the platform before scrum-half Euan Findlay darted over.

Bunting landed an excellent touchline conversion and suddenly Sutton led 21-0.

Considering their share of possession and territory, Bromley were overdue a response. It came through an impressive move initiated by Harvey Young and finished in style by George Hawkins.

Jonathon Griffiths converted to reduce the deficit to 21-7.

From the restart Sutton and Epsom looked certain to score again when Bunting burst through and charged deep into the 22, only for his pass to be intercepted.

The visitors did not have long to wait for their bonus-point try.

A Bromley counterattack ended in a penalty near halfway. Sutton and Epsom kicked to the corner and, after one lineout was pulled down, kicked another penalty to within five metres.

For the third time the catch-and-drive produced a score and once again Lennie was the beneficiary.

Bunting missed the conversion but Sutton held an imposing 26-7 lead at the interval.

The question whenever rugby is played on such a distinctive slope is how many points the downhill advantage is worth.

Sutton and Epsom were complete novices on the Warman Sports Club's main pitch and, if the visitors believed a 19-point half-time lead represented a winning position, they were about to be corrected.

Bromley levelled the scores in 12 chaotic minutes.

An early home try came after excellent continuity between forwards and backs, with James Powell eventually applying the finishing touch. Griffiths converted and it was 26-14.

Only a few minutes later Bromley struck again.

The dangerous Hawkins initially fumbled the ball backwards but recovered to create the opportunity. Hooker Harry Milne gathered possession with plenty still to do and powered over with defenders hanging from him.

The touchline conversion failed but suddenly the deficit was only five points at 26-19.

Then came the equalising score — and one that Sutton supporters will not remember fondly.

Bromley opted for a kick at goal. It missed, bounced loose and flanker Tom Scott reacted quickest, catching the ball and falling across the line.

Whether viewed as opportunism, superb awareness, comedy or calamity depended largely on one's allegiance.

Griffiths converted and, astonishingly, it was 26-26.

The sizeable Warman crowd was now in full voice, anticipating a continuation of the Bromley onslaught.

Sutton steadied themselves, with prop Dan Johnson leading the way through a couple of powerful carries. His second ended with blood pouring from his nose and Eric Duey entering the action.

Once more Sutton and Epsom punished a Bromley penalty by kicking into the corner.

The resulting drive was disrupted and Bromley hacked clear, apparently denying Lennie the opportunity of completing his hat-trick.

Perhaps the hooker took that personally.

Following Tipene Maxwell's initial break, Lennie carried on the attack and simply refused to be stopped, powering over near the posts for his third try.

Bunting converted and Sutton and Epsom were back in front at 33-26.

Soon afterwards Bromley were reduced to 14 men and, with 15 minutes remaining, the heavens opened.

Momentum had swung back towards the visitors and the inspired Lennie again swept all before him as he rampaged towards the line in search of a fourth try.

He was denied, but Sutton earned a penalty and turned down the kick at goal in favour of exploiting their lineout superiority.

Bromley resisted the first attempt but conceded another penalty. Sutton opted for the scrum and, a couple of phases later, Josh Rea selected a devastating line to cross from close range.

Bunting added the simple conversion and the Black & Whites had restored a substantial 40-26 advantage.

Those accustomed to supporting Sutton & Epsom, however, were not counting their chickens with ten minutes still to play.

Their caution was justified when Bromley scored a fifth try shortly after returning to 15 men.

A sweeping move ended with centre Griffiths crossing in the corner. His conversion attempt into the blustery breeze fell short, leaving Sutton 40-31 ahead.

There was still time for further drama.

Tom Boaden departed with cramp and the bloodied but unbowed Johnson returned to the pitch. Sutton replacement Ben Tame was then shown a yellow card as the visitors dug in to defend their advantage.

For all Bromley's late endeavour, however, the hosts could not fashion another scoring opportunity and Sutton & Epsom held on for an absorbing 40-31 victory.

For spectators there are few greater thrills than watching sweeping attacks and backs finishing flowing moves.

The aficionado, however, can revel equally in rugby's more physical contest — the route-one attack confronted by a defiant "they shall not pass" defence.

For a period early in the second half Sutton appeared to have run up the white flag as Bromley erased their 19-point advantage.

Nobody, however, had told Sam Lennie.

The hooker grabbed the contest by the scruff of the neck and took the battle back to Bromley, dragging his teammates with him.

It was a stunning performance encapsulating some of rugby's oldest qualities.

Next Saturday Sutton's tour of Kent continues when they travel to Rectory Field to face Gravesend, who sit second in the

table with three wins from four matches.

Sutton & Epsom are fourth, one point behind, also with three victories.

Beckenham are now the division's only unbeaten club after defeating Medway and top the table with the maximum 20 points.

John Croysdill

Sutton & Epsom: Lennard, Scott, Bibby, Maxwell, A Findlay, Bunting, E Findlay, Johnson, Lennie, Boaden, McTaggart, Glanville, Rea, Jones, Hegarty (c).

Replacements: Duey, Tame, Lovatt.

Bromley: Hawkins, Powell, Weekes, Griffiths, Lovell, Young, Friday, McFarland, Milne, Hosie, Brown, Elliott, T Scott, Gray, Child-May.

Replacements: Carroll, Harding, G Scott.

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