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Havant Heartbreak For Battling Black & Whites

14 November 2022



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 Suttonand 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 ascrum 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 a5-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

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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 26 th 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.

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