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Knights give Sutton & Epsom a hard day

19 February 2023

Havant RFC 50 – Sutton & Epsom 5. Saturday 18th February.

The traditional close encounters of the rugby kind between Sutton & Epsom and Havant had a Rugby Lane resurrection in November when the Hampshire men secured a hard fought 30-27 success. The Hooks Lane faithful are enjoying a splendid campaign this season having eight wins out of nine at home with only the table-topping Dons have downed their colours to the tune of 16-11 in a game where the hosts suffered four yellow cards. It was always going to be a mighty challenge for the Black & Whites against the club sitting second in the league and there was to be no underdog story as Havant enjoyed an 8-try triumph by 50-5.

On a cold, overcast afternoon with the sound of the rattlers in the grandstand Freddie Bunting kicked off the match. The opening five minutes was one-way traffic and the blue sign with the white arrow was pointing towards the Sutton try-line. Eschewing thoughts of kicking the ball Havant were keen to stretch the legs of their stylish back division. The initial sparring ended with the ball being brought back for a penalty that the hosts kicked to within 15 metres of the visitors' line. Ross Parkins caught the lineout and the forwards advanced. The backs were released and a long pass introduced fullback Cam Smith into the line and relishing the gap in the defence he opened the scoring. Though the conversion drifted wide it was 5-0 to Havant and moment later it would be 12-0. Following concerted pressure Reuben Knight was stopped under the posts but a dextrous backhanded pass out of the tackle gifted brother Joel the simplest of scores and he added the extras to boot.

Sutton & Epsom are not unfamiliar with trailing matches in the first quarter this season. Finally, they had some phases but having made little progress they were advanced by a well-placed Freddie Bunting kick. Soon after they won a penalty and chose to decline the 3-point option and they kicked into the corner. The disappointment at losing the 5-metre lineout was replaced instantly by euphoria. Havant tapped the ball into their in-goal area and Tom Brooker reacted the quickest for a Sutton try. Though the conversion from the flank drifted narrowly wide the Black & Whites only trailed 5-12. From the restart problems began to mount for the visitors. They were penalised under pressure at the scrummage. The ball was kicked into the corner and the initial triumph of halting the Havant catch and drive was tempered by James Caddy being shown a yellow card. The hosts took advantage of their numerical superiority with Try Number 3. The next 5-metre lineout was overthrown but recovered by Reuben Knight and from the ruck the ever-alert Ben Holt sniped from close-range. The errant conversion meant that it was now 17-5 to the Bedhampton boys at the end of the first quarter.

In the Rugby Lane fixture Havant were denied the bonus point being tryless in the second period. Invoking that spirit Sutton set forth to reduce the deficit. The pressure from the Surrey men saw Havant receive a yellow card as Will Brock left the fray. Just before that Mr Tompkins was very busy with his notebook when James Caddy returned S&E emptied their bench as Messrs Bell, Boaden & Tame were replaced by Messrs Farrell, Parsons & London, though the latter had temporarily switched with Baptiste-Wilson for an earlier scrummage. This was tactical rather than injury-induced. Though Sutton Mark 2 fared little better against the Hooks Lane XV who were not prepared to rest on their laurels. Robust running from flanker Wes Dugan saw him swat away would-be tacklers and touchdown

under the posts. Joel Knight added the easiest of conversions for 24-5 and a bonus point was deposited into the bank. The hosts had not finished and rounded off the first half with their fifth try. The ball found Harry Carr on the flank who used his speed and strength to

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score in the corner. The conversion failed but the hosts led 29-5 and soon after the half concluded and the teams retreated to the warmth of their dressing rooms for words of encouragement.

The hosts were in no mood for charity and extended their lead within five minutes of the restart. The Sutton cause was not helped by dropping the kick-off that gifted territory and possession to the Havant XV. After sustained pressure Joel Knight forced his way over from short distance for his second, and Havant's sixth, try. The centre converted his try for a 36-5 lead. The Hooks Lane coaches rang the changes in personnel in a more singular fashion than the visitors. Firstly, the sizeable lineout presence of Ross Parkins was replaced by Matt Whitehead and five minutes later Jonah North was swapped for Rory Penfold on the wing. The Black & Whites started to enjoy more possession but their improving efforts were undone by poor passing. The Hampshire scrum-half, Ben Holt, fell victim to white line fever and ignored Richard Janes to be heldup over line by excellent S&E cover. Moments later the errant Holt made amends and finished clinically from a metre. Joel Knight bisected the uprights for 43-5.

The game entered the final quarter with the result beyond doubt but plenty to play for in terms of pride. Whether it was going to be a case of damage limitation or a spirited finale with consolation scores for Sutton remained to be seen. George London, as he has done so often before, took the game to the opposition, driving his tackler back yards in contact he sought to inspire the Black & Whites. Their followed a bizarre passage of play when the visitors turned over the ball four times in just over a minute. To be fair drizzle and dropping temperatures had made handling increasingly challenging as the game became somewhat scrappy.

Inside the last ten minutes winger Harry Carr produced a moment of brilliance with a blindside break at express pace. Though he was denied the individual glory replacement Matt Whitehead was on hand for the final flourish to score Havant's eighth try. Joel Knight made it five from eight from his boot that added to his brace of tries brought his personal tally to 20 points in the 50-5 scoreline. Soon after Ben Holt added a yellow card to his entertaining afternoon and retired to the sidelines and Wes Dugan stepped in at 9. Sutton, with the extra man, pressed hard for a consolation try. Teams do not sit second in the table if they have a porous defence and the hosts defended their line as if they led by a solitary point rather than 45. Time and again thumping tackles repelled the S&E pack. The ball went wide and the adamantine line stood firm as the Rugby Lane men knocked on. Havant cleared and the Black & White army retreated with renewed sympathy for Sisyphus. In the last knockings it was the hosts who looked like ending with a final score. A fine break by Joel Knight saw the inside pass blocked. Then Harry Carr was denied a try as he just failed to reach his chip ahead. The referee blew his whistle and Havant had deservedly won with a bonus point by 50-5.

The combination of robust ball carrying forwards and dynamic backs spearheaded by the trio of Knights was more than enough to defeat the visitors. For the Black & Whites it was the third Saturday on the trot against top three opposition and once more it was a case of spirited resistance in adversity. Their cause was not helped by early scotomata in their

defensive alignment. Though they had to make do with limited territory and possession they were too often undone by errant passing.

Next Saturday S&E head to the coast to fulfil the Brighton fixture that succumbed to the freezing temperatures before Christmas. At Rugby Lane in September the Black & Whites enjoyed their finest hour with a thrilling 42-24 triumph and would dearly love a repeat performance.

Sutton & Epsom
Alex Mawdsley, Kyren Ghumra, Sam Hurley, Lawrence Elliott, Ollie Baptiste-Wilson, Freddy Bunting, Austin Bell, Tom Boaden, Alex Mount, Will Lloyd, George Drye ©, Josh Glanville, Ben Tame, James Caddy & Tom Brooker.
Replacements: (all used) Chris Farrell, George London, & Ross Parsons.

Havant
Cam Smith, Harry Carr, Joel Knight ©, Jacob Knight, Jonah North, Reuben Knight, Ben Holt, Luke Marks, Sean Shepherd, Tam Lindsay, Richard Janes, Ross Parkins, Will Brock, Wes Dugan & Dylan Lawley.
Replacements: Jez Smith, Matt Whitehead & Rory Penfold.

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