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Local rugby team not blinded by Old Alley

14 January 2024



Sutton & Epsom RFC 15 – Old Alleynians 19. Saturday 13th January.

On Dulwich Common at the start of the league campaign the Old Alleynians won an exhilarating encounter 29-25 with a Will Malins hat trick grabbing the headlines. Both sides were much changed for the return fixture at Rugby Lane. After the Battersea Ironsides defeat Sutton and Epsom had mixed blessings from the physio hut as Tom Lennard had recovered from his back injury to make his first start at 10 but Willem Ratu's knee failed the fitness test. History repeated itself at Rugby Lane as the OAs again triumphed by four points but this time they had to come from behind to win 19-15.

On a cold but thankfully wind free afternoon Freddy Bunting initiated proceedings. Alleynians put themselves under pressure from the kick off as a forward met the kick with a technique better served for volleyball than rugby union. The unforgiving ball was spiked backwards and snatched by the Black & White pack from the retreating visitors. Encouraged by this immediate success Sutton stormed into the opposition 22 in search of the opening score. Excellent work by the forwards saw Tom Boaden carry to within a couple of strides before the ball was knocked on a couple of phases later. However, the backpedalling defence of the visitors had incurred the wrath of the referee and Sutton had the bonus of a five-metre penalty. The simple kick at goal was declined and the attacking option was chosen. Matt Whitaker rewarded the faith of his captain with a vintage score as he stepped past the first defenders before his telescopic reach stretched for the line. Freddy Bunting's conversion drifted wide but Sutton led 5-0.

Alleynians went in search of an immediate reply and imitated the hosts by regaining the restart. The men from Dulwich eagerly went through their phases and quickly entered the 22 and looked likely to make amends for their early reverse. The determined defence of S&E managed to prevent an equalising score as the visitors spilled the ball in contact with the line at their mercy. Sutton failed to adequately clear their lines and moments later the OAs were attacking once more. Again the referee awarded a penalty to the attacking side but on this occasion the kick at goal was the more obvious option being some distance from the try-line. The attempt fell short and the Black & Whites were able to clear their lines.

Buoyed by their early success Sutton were playing with confidence and a high tempo with the halfback combination of Munford and Lennard orchestrating the attacks. The hosts were faster in thought and deed than the visitors who were struggling to find their familiar rhythm. S&E on the front foot were impressive as forwards and backs combined and they took advantage of a penalty awarded at a scrum to kick to the corner. The hosts failed to capitalise dropping the ball but a poor clearance from the subsequent scrum led to another S&E lineout on the 22. Excellent continuity was matched by robust defence lthat ed to Tom Lennard floating a kick to the corner where Ciaran Mohr under scrutiny just failed to catch the ball a metre from the line. Fortune favoured Sutton as they were awarded a free kick for foot up in the scrum. Matt Whitaker carried the ball to the line and Tom Boaden was rewarded for his support play to receive the ball and score. Freddy Bunting converted for a 121-0 lead at the end of the first quarter.

A vocal Old Alleynians XV huddled behind the posts and called upon a greater collective effort after the second try and urged the team to match the S&E team's pace at the breakdown. From the restart Number 8 Gillam Crouch caught the ball and advanced at pace into the Sutton half. From the next scrum they drove the Black & White pack off their ball. The OAs looked favourites to score but tremendous tackling not only denied them but won Sutton & Epsom a relieving penalty. The match ebbed and flowed as the clock entered time added on in the first period. OAs continued to press for a vital score and belatedly got on the scorebioard. They kicked a penalty to the corner and secured the ball at the lineout. Though the forwards were denied the ball went wide and Robert Outram chose the perfect line to carve through the defence to score. Josh Winduss added the extras as Alleynians trailed 7-14. All their good work was nearly undone as they failed to kick the ball to touch on the final play of the half and conceded a penalty for an accidental offside. Freddy Bunting failed to compound their misery as his penalty attempt went narrowly wide and Mr Richardson blew for half-time with Sutton leading 12-7.

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Sutton & Epsom were the first to score in the second period. Ten minutes into the half they were awarded a penalty as the men from Dulwich strayed offside. Captain Bunting stepped up and bisected the uprights to extend Sutton's advantage to 15-7. Both sides looked threatening in attack but equally the well organised defences neutered the offensive play. As the match progressed it was Old Alleynians who began to have the majority of the possession and territory. As the match entered the final quarter S&E were indebted to Gareth O'Brien who made a superb mark in the corner that not only prevented a possible try but allowed the hosts to relieve the siege. Stubborn Sutton defence was frustrating the visitors who conceded a penalty in the hosts'

However, it was becoming one-way traffic and only a cover tackle from Ross Parsons averted a score. But the Black & Whites just could not find the comfort of the opposition half.

With ten minutes remaining after a rather scrappy sequence of rucks with each side turning over the ball Old Alleynians were awarded a scrum lees than 10 metres from the Sutton posts in a central position. From the perfect platform winger Rory Holford touched down and replacement Ollie Hobman added the conversion. S&E's lead was now by the narrowest of margins at 15-14. The visitors were in the ascendancy and pressed ahead in search of the victory. Under pressure the Rugby Lane men responded in style as they advanced to the opposition 22 with their best sequence of the half. Sadly for the home supporters, unlike the first period, they did not come away with points after their foray in the opposition 22. As the match entered time added on the Sutton defences were breached near halfway. The visitors swarmed through and Ollie Hobman scored the crucial try. Though the conversion never threatened the posts Old Alleynians had the lead for the first time in the match, 19-15, with precious few minutes remaining.

The Black & Whites played with desperation trying to attack from deep in their half and Ben Osuntokun charged down a clearance and was only thwarted by the depth of the in-goal area from adding a fourth try. If that had been the case not only would Alleynians have secured a bonus point it would have given them an opportunity to deny Sutton a losing bonus point. In so evenly contested a match it would have been unduly harsh if the hosts had been denied the solitary point for their endeavours. Moments later the referee blew the final whistle. A keenly contested match concluded with Old Alleynians victorious 19-15 in a fixture that could have gone either way.

If the first encounter in September was entertaining fare enlivened by an excessive error count by both teams Saturday's match was of a far higher standard reflecting the improved status of both clubs. Old Alleynians gained promotion with a solitary blemish on their 2022-23 league record and are thriving at the higher level rather than struggling to acclimatise as is the case with many an elevated side. Their set piece scrummage was dominant in the first period and arguably had the upper hand throughout. Their back division has pace and quality and from the first minute they looked to play 15-man rugby. Ben Osuntokun was formidable and his ubiquitous presence became more apparent the longer the game continued. For the Black & Whites there was greater fluency and tempo in the first quarter which created the early advantage. In addition the scrambling and committed defence in their 22 frustrated their opponents. It was a match that could have gone either way but OAs finished the stronger side and at the eleventh hour broke through the Black & Whites defences for the vital score.

For Sutton & Epsom next Saturday is a rest weekend before the league campaign resumes on January 27th with the charabanc taking the team to Priestfields. In the reverse fixture an impressive Medway ran away 33-15 victors at Rugby Lane but in this league prior success appears to be almost irrelevant as a guide to form. In contrast next Saturday the Old Boys have to play their postponed fixture against Cobham. The visitors took exception to the playing surface at Dulwich Common and headed back to the Memorial Ground whilst the hosts enjoyed the afternoon watching their 3 rd XV play on the unplayable surface.

Sutton & Epsom:
Gareth O'Brien, Kyren Ghumra, Ross Parsons, Freddy Bunting ©, Ciaran Mohr, Tom Lennard, Steve Munford, Alex Mount, Chris Farrell, Tom Boaden, Josh Glanville, Ewan McTaggart, Rob Hegarty, Josh Pulvirenti & Matt Whitaker.
Replacements: Callum Gibson, Ben Green & Matt Symonds.

Old Alleynians
Josh Winduss, Tom Williams, Robert Outram, Andrew Jones-Davies, Rory Holford, Henry Dewing, Tristram Holden, Jeremiah Manning, Charles Thompson, Tom Weightman, Will Hinchcliffe, James Mair, Ben Osuntokun, Hadley Eames & Gillam Crouch.
Replacements: Cameron Saunders, Brian Lennard & Ollie Hobman.

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