

Old Tiffinians 41 Sutton & Epsom RFC 19

21 October 2024

The Black & Whites arrived at the Grist Memorial ground having scuppered Sidcup the previous round. That triumph, in a bruising encounter against the erstwhile leaders, came at a cost with the loss of props Gibson and Mount as well as O'Brien and Elliott in the backs. It was not all doom and gloom from the physio's hut as Tom Lennard made his belated first start of the campaign at 10. If there was much to admire last weekend there was plenty to forget this time around. The Old Tiffinians thoroughly deserved their 41-19 success leapfrogging Sutton & Epsom in the league table.

Free from rain, bathed in sunshine and with a gentle breeze upon an immaculate surface the scene was set for a captivating afternoon's entertainment as Freddy Bunting kicked off. The opening Sutton salvos were quashed by forthright tackling by everyone in an OT shirt as the visitors looked to spread the ball wide to their wings. After ten minutes the Old Boys demonstrated their best phases and enjoyed the bonus of a penalty in the 22. As is the modern vogue they kicked to the corner. Their positive approach was rewarded with a perfectly executed catch and drive from the 5-metre lineout that ushered prop Ross Hobbs over the whitewash for the first try of the afternoon. Though the extras were not added the hosts led 5-0. The OTs were soon on the attack again and assisted by S&E transgressions. Their second entry in the visitors' 22 would result in their second try. Unfortunately, Sutton hooker Peter Gordon had to be replaced by Ben Green after a clash of heads in a try-saving double tackle. On the resumption Tiffinians pressed hard and fine handling saw fullback Max Talman score in the corner and double the lead to 10-0 at the end of the first quarter.

S&E responded swiftly to the second score. Like their opponents a kickable penalty was discarded for the greedier option. The Rugby Lane Number 8 Rob Hegarty forced his way over in the corner from the remorseless march of the catch and drive. Freddy Bunting's touchline effort drifted by the uprights as his newly awakened team trailed 5-10. Sutton had shuffled the pack to line up with a front row triumvirate of debutant replacement Dan Johnson, Tom Boaden took over the hooking duties and Callum Hilton. Though this combination is far from the Black & Whites first choice they performed impressively providing a steady platform and did not take a backward step in the set piece. Five minutes later the visitors had a wonderful opportunity to level the scores after a Tom Lennard break but, as would be the case too often during this entertaining encounter, the ball out to the flank was not gathered.

The first period entered its final phase. Any good work by Sutton was thwarted by either the defensive solidity of Tiffinians or critical errors by the visitors. As the half entered its dying embers the hosts went blind exposing defensive frailty. It looked as if Old Tiffinians would run it in from halfway. Though undone by some S&E scrambling defence they had the consolation of having a scrum deep in the Black & White 22. Centre Tim Fawcett ran an excellent line and evaded a double tackle to score under the posts. It was an example of third time lucky as Sharif Dougramaji slotted the conversion to stretch the lead to 17-5 as Mr Kelvin Pryor's shrill blast of the whistle terminated the first half with OT leading S&E by 17-5.

Any hope for the travelling supporters looked a rather forlorn one as the second half began with more errors. As the hosts attacked towards the S&E 22 it was their turn to concede an unnecessary penalty. Steve Munford took it quickly, Tom Lennard made a searing break with Austin Bell in support who progressed in the OT half and Alfie Baker sped away to the corner to score. The crowd gazed on admiringly at the pulchritudinous Bunting conversion from the touchline. Was this the start of a classic game of two halves and the Sutton revival? A minute later the answer to that hypothetical query was a resounding "No". Poor play at the restart handed the initiative to the Tiffinians who set out their stall in the S&E 22. Three phases later and winger Seb Sabania was bursting through tacklers to score. Sharif Dougramaji's sweetly struck conversion added to the demoralising impact of the rapid retort to restore the margin to 12 points at 24-12.

The omens continued to point to a home victory. Another Sutton free ball could not rekindle the earlier magic. A kickable penalty was declined and a lineout in the corner was not found. Then the most deflating moment of all was Seb Sabania picking off an interception and running back a fifth try, and his second, from halfway. Sharif Dougramaji accepted the salubrious offering for a 31-12 advantage with a dozen minutes having elapsed in the second period. To epitomise the Sutton decline the restart failed to go ten metres. However, despair was transformed into hope as the pack won a penalty at the set piece. Naturally, the Black & Whites took off lickety-split and were soon in the opposition 22. OT's scrambling defence not only picked off an interception but countered through an enormous clearance kick. Alfie Baker's cover was immediately undermined by fellow wing Arun Watkin's injudicious counter. Sutton were fortunate to escape as Sir reversed a penalty under their posts.

The game was now very open and tries at either end were a probability rather than a possibility. Sutton benefited from a magnificent 50 22 from Tom Lennard to set up their next attack. The home defence rebuffed a couple of sorties before Austin Bell's grubber nestled under the posts. The scuttling full back arrived with the cover and his attempt to nudge the

ball forward was viewed as dangerous play as he made contact with the defender who had stoically fallen on the loose ball. This was the first of a string of penalties that throttled potential attacks for both XVs. The next score came from that reliable and fertile source: the penalty kicked to the corner. It was S&E's turn to demonstrate their catch and drive efficiency with flanker Dan Jones the beneficiary. The Bunting boot made it a two-score game at 19-31. Old Tiffinians set out to restore their supremacy and a bullocking Sabania run hinted at his hat trick before he was eventually forced to pass inside but the ball was knocked on. Sutton cleared their lines but were soon under the cosh. Josh Glanville received a yellow card endeavouring to turn over the ball. Very sensibly Sharif Dougramaji opted for the kick for goal adjacent to the uprights. The successful kick meant that the hosts led 34-19 with three minutes of regular time left. Not so much as a comfortable points' cushion but more like a massive beanbag occupying most of a living room floor. The contest was over. In time added on Old Tiffinians added an extra layer of gloss to their fine performance. They kicked into the corner for the 5-metre lineout. The unstoppable juggernaut advanced ever onwards and Ross Hobbs collected his second catch and drive try. Sharif Dougramaji celebrated the victory with the conversion and Mr Pryor ended the match with the home team triumphant by 41-19. A week is a long time in politics but it must seem like an eternity for the Rugby Lane faithful as this performance bore no resemblance to their Sidcup success. However, the most significant factor was the quality of the Old Tiffinian performance. Their forwards carried aggressively and effectively with Ross Hobbs and Robert Myddelton in the vanguard. Their defence offered Sutton neither time nor space. When they got to the 22 they were clinical whether with the catch and drive or handling in the backs. The pace and power of Seb Sabania gained the plaudits with a brace of tries in a thoroughly deserved bonus point victory. The Black & Whites created opportunities out wide but poor passing handicapped their progress on numerous occasions. Sutton & Epsom will lick their wounds and look forward to the visit of league leaders Medway to Rugby Lane. Meanwhile the Old Tiffinians departed their Clubhouse to descend upon the 18:24 to Waterloo and serenade the passengers on their way to a night of celebrations.

Sutton & Epsom

Bell, Watkins, Scott, Bunting ©, Baker, Lennard, Munford, Boaden, Gordon, Hilton, Glanville, Tame, Rea, Jones & Hegarty.

Replacements: Johnson, Green & Findlay.

Old Tiffinians

Talman, Segun, Dougramaji, Fawcett, Sabanaia, Taylor, Fowler, Hobbs, Howard-Clarke, Turner, O'Connell, Noeh, Myddelton, Graham & Marshall.

Replacements: Corcoran, Dore & Freeman.