



Rare rugby draw for Epsom side

30 September 2024



Battersea Ironsides 19 Sutton & Epsom 19. Saturday 28th September

A year ago the 2023-4 Ironsides vintage were on top of the table having opened their account with 80 points against Gravesend and followed that up with bonus point wins over Sidcup and the Cornish. This current Battersea brew have been battle hardened and forged into steel by a trio of nail-biting finishes. Unbeaten at Garratt Green with a one-point and a three-point victory over Thurrock and Beckenham but bettered by three on the road at Reeds Weybridge. For the high scoring visitors it was a case of wanting to return to winning ways. At the final whistle, after a gripping match, the sides could not be separated as the scoreboard read 19-19.

Players and spectators alike palavered peacefully onwards into the unclouded jollity of the afternoon. Sutton with the slope and the wind in their favour were unleashed by Freddy Bunting’s perfectly flighted kick off. The first foray to the Battersea 22 was led by Ewan McTaggart who is fast becoming a most prominent feature in the S&E pack. The lock forward might be lacking in steatopygia, that comforting feature for Number 8s of yesteryear, but he makes up for that deficiency with his athleticism around the park. In reply a penalty and subsequent lineout provided the hosts with their first attacking platform. Outside centre Charles Jacobs’ break was supported by hooker Oliver Lewis before Jacobs carried again. Battersea spun it wide and looked favourites to score in the corner but a wonderful covering tackle by captain Bunting led to a hopeful offload inside which was poached by Gareth O’Brien who was felled by a high tackle. It would not be the only occasion that the Black & White line under severe pressure would be relieved by the impatient hosts conceding a costly penalty.

On the quarter hour Battersea Ironsides were again guilty of failing to convert pressure into points. Awarded a brace of penalties in quick succession from a scrum and then a lineout they were in prime position five metres from the Sutton line. The Rugby Lane forwards refused to yield and the ball was sent to the flank. With defenders dwindling in numbers the hosts were stopped agonisingly close and the ball-carrier executed the most unsubtle of double movements to reach over the line. The observant Mr Howe again awarded Sutton the sweet succour of a penalty. From a certain try conceded, a moment later, Freddy Bunting was pouring a sack load of salt into the gaping wound by calmly notching his first penalty of the afternoon to give Sutton a 3-0 lead. Buoyed by this success Gareth O’Brien made a stunning strike to the Home XV’s 22 . The ball was recycled and sent wide where Ironsides’ 10 Charles Stuart nearly intercepted and both sides were left to rue their chances.

With the half hour fast approaching Gibson replaced Mount in the S&E front row and made an immediate impact with a rampaging carry from a lineout. Soon after Freddy Bunting was admiring his second success of the afternoon as his team extended their advantage to 6-0. The effrontery of the lead despite having less territory and possession spurred the Garratt Park team to greater heights. For the third time an error, with a try looking a distinct possibility, ended an attack but this time the knock on was not fatal as Battersea were brought back for their penalty. The green shirts piled in under the Black & White’s posts before releasing the backs and winger Ewan Magee scored in the corner. Charles Stuart regally converted from the touchline to take a 7-6 lead. To pile pelion on ossa S&E lost Matt Whitaker to injury and Ben Green entered the fray. There was still time left in the first period for Sutton & Epsom to restore their lead when Freddy Bunting opted for a kick at goal from within his own half with the final play. It had perfect direction but just lacked the yardage. The sides turned around with Battersea leading 7-6. For the second period the hosts would enjoy not only the topographical advantage but also any favours from the wind. There was the possibility that the cultured boot of Charles Stuart might be the significant factor for the remainder of the contest and that Sutton’s superb defensive resolve might be tested in extremis during the second half.

The tactical kicking game was initiated from the outset with a bout of kick tennis that ended in Sutton’s favour courtesy of a superior offering by Gareth O’Brien. That the boot might have primacy over the running game was amply demonstrated after a couple of minutes when the dangerous Jacobs shunned the opportunity to run the ball back but rifled a marvellous kick to the

- As the forwards wrestled for supremacy, the commitment, intensity of carrying and tackling was ratcheted up another notch by both packs. Equally the back divisions marshalled their defences as both XVs went in search for the vital opening score of the half. After 15 minutes it took an astutely angled grubber from Freddy Bunting that bounced up perfectly for winger Austin Bell to break the deadlock. It was a classic example of sporting vision, that priceless ability to see in a split second what others do not in order to create the sublime moment. A majestic touchline conversion by Bunting bisected the uprights and S&E led 13-7. Sutton held the upper hand for five minutes. The Ironsides forced S&E to their line with a probing kick forcing a lineout ten metres out. Clean ball and a well executed catch and drive saw the hosts trundle irresistibly over the line for their second try. Trailing by a solitary point Charles Stuart’s conversation oversaw the restoration of their lead by 14-13. As is so often the case the opposition were given an early opportunity with a penalty from the restart. The Black & Whites owed their chance for the lead to a thunderous tackle from flanker Ben Tame. There was a moment of confusion when the height of the Bunting kick exceeded the diminutive stature of the Battersea uprights but Sutton & Epsom now inched ahead by 16-14. Perhaps distracted by that uncertainty the restart sailed out on the full and Sutton scrummaged on halfway. Moments later there was another indication of the tension telling. An Ironside queried Mr Howe’s interpretation of the laws in a tone that was not appreciated and the referee ushered the defenders 10 metres back. If loose lips sink ships then loquacious rugby players cost three points. Freddy Bunting added a fourth penalty to his tally for Sutton to lead 19-14 with a dozen minutes to go plus the extras for stoppages.

Battersea now went in search of points. Their first sortie was cut short when they lost possession on the Sutton 22 and Austin Bell cleared magnificently to the opponent's half. S&E were on the attack but were thwarted by a Charles Stuart interception and kick that rolled into their 22. Austin Bell covered well to secure the ball on the deck and the Black & Whites were gifted a penalty as a chasing Ironside naively fell on the prostrate Bell. As the game entered time added on it was one-way traffic in favour of Battersea. The visitors were magnificent in defence and thought they had earned a turnover but the hosts were awarded the scrum. Closer and closer the Garratt Park pack advanced to the posts. Avoiding the risk of being held up over the line, with admirable patience under the circumstances, they finally forced their way over by the right hand upright. 19 all and the conversion was a mere formality for a kicker of Stuart's stature. However, Charles Stuart, endured the type of unexpected misfortune that would have been familiar to not only Aeschylus but also his historical namesake as the conversion was missed. Shortly afterwards the referee concluded proceedings and the sides shared the points for a 19-19 draw.

It was a fitting result for two teams that had given their all. For Sutton Ben Green's performance off the bench was redolent of Ed Burton at Guildford in 2015. Green's previous contributions had been predominantly inconsequential minutes off the bench but he revelled in the opportunity at a serious stint at Number 8. He carried with aggression, tackled powerfully and symbolised an outstanding effort by the Sutton pack. No doubt this Battersea side will be contenders for promotion again this season as they have quality in all departments.

The league now takes a week off and the action returns to Rugby Lane when league leaders Sidcup visit on 12 th October. What a difference a year makes, on their last trip in November 2023 they arrived bottom of the league and level on points with Sutton & Epsom with both clubs having only a solitary win to their names in seven outings.

Sutton & Epsom

O'Brien, Watkins, Scott, Elliott, Bell, Bunting ©, Munford, Mount, Gordon, Boaden, Glanville, McTaggart, Tame, Jones & Whitaker.

Replacements: Gibson, Green & Unused: Symonds.

Battersea Ironsides

Baker, Magee, Jacobs, Roberts, Craig, Stuart, Barnard, Chetwynd, Lewis, Batstone, MacPherson, Walton, Dollard, Chitan & Martin.

Replacements: Borup, Humphris & Diamond.