

Sutton and Epsom Rugby off to a flying-start

9 September 2024



Sutton & Epsom RFC opened their 2024-25 league account against Old Colfeians, on Saturday 7th September, over whom they had completed an impressive double last season. There were nine changes in personnel from the last time the Black & Whites ran out at Rugby Lane in the concluding fixture against Reeds Weybridge. Among the multiple changes were six debutants: Arun Watkins on the wing; Finlay Scott and Adam Bibby in the centres; Pete Gordon at hooker; and Callum Hilton and Josh Rea ready to come off the bench. It very much had the feel of a new beginning for the Surrey outfit, with not a single player in the same position as in the curtain-raiser from last season. When the final whistle blew, the new-look XV had surpassed all expectations with a thrilling 50-7 victory.

Captain Bunting kicked off the campaign, and after ten minutes it was the hosts who opened the scoring. Pouncing on a clearance that failed to make touch, Sutton advanced into the opposition 22. Debutant hooker Pete Gordon exploited the blindside to race home untouched. Freddy Bunting added the extras for a 7-0 lead. As S&E dominated the early exchanges, the visitors' task became harder when winger Estefan Ellis was awarded a yellow card for a high tackle. The visitors, now a man down, were swiftly punished. Bunting kicked into the corner, and from the platform of the attacking lineout, Rob Hegarty forced his way over from short yardage. The conversion failed, but Sutton & Epsom held a useful 12-0 lead at the end of the first quarter.

The Rugby Lane team pressed hard to maximise their numerical advantage, gathering the restart and running the ball back with interest. Soon, winger Jordan Huie was threatening to add another score. The pack rumbled remorselessly forward before the ball was spun out to Gareth O'Brien, who jinked, stepped, and stretched out to touch down for a try. Freddy Bunting slotted over the kick for 19-0. The visitors were restored to their full complement, but the card had cost them 12 points. Old Colfeians struggled to gain a foothold in the contest, as errors and penalties frustrated their rhythm and gifted territory to the eager hosts. As the interval approached, S&E had another 5-metre lineout. Once again, the forwards controlled the ball and pressured the line before a timely release to the backs offered Gareth O'Brien the opportunity to cross the whitewash again. Freddy Bunting celebrated the bonus point score with another conversion, making it 26-0.

Sutton made personnel changes as debutants Rea and Hilton replaced Jones and Hilton. In the generous time allowed for stoppages, Colfeians started to find their feet and pressed for a morale-boosting score before the break. However, the Black & Whites' resolute defence neutralised the attacks, and the sides turned around with the hosts enjoying an impressive 26-0 lead. It was clear that the men from Horn Park would need an early score in the second period to initiate a comeback and try to sow the seeds of doubt in the confident Sutton squad.

Any hope for the visiting supporters of an early score was denied by a combination of Sutton's intensity in defence and Colfeians' mounting error count. S&E replaced Pete Gordon with Dan Jones as Lawrence Elliott came off the bench to swap with Adam Bibby. As the final quarter approached, it was Sutton & Epsom who recorded try number five. Arun Watkins reacted fastest to a loose ball and burst through a gap to score his first try for the home team. Freddy Bunting made it four from five as the lead stretched to 33-0.

With the score and the clock against them, the Colfeians' mountainous task was approaching Everest-like proportions. However, five minutes later, a flicker of light emerged from the abyss as Captain Andy O'Malley, carrying a couple of Sutton tacklers on his back, scored. Ryan Napper provided the conversion, making it 33-7. Sutton's fatalists were soon relieved when, minutes later, a familiar electrifying break by Dan Jones gifted Freddy Bunting a try. However, to the surprise of many, the usually reliable kicker saw his effort drift wide, leaving the score at 38-7.

Unfortunately, scrum-half Laurence Wise was forced to depart with a shoulder injury after a sterling performance as the game entered the period that Mr Ben Stewart's watch deemed necessary. There was still plenty of time for the Rugby Lane crowd to enjoy a brace of tries from debutant centre Finlay Scott. The first, an unconverted effort, followed two breaks, and Scott was on hand as the beneficiary. The second came after Colfeians' scrambling defence conceded a penalty try and collected a yellow card. A precise cross-field kick opened up the defence for the final try. Normal service was resumed as Freddy Bunting bisected the uprights for a 50-7 win.

There was an air of almost uncomfortable optimism before the kick-off at Rugby Lane, as pre-season had gone well, and there was evident intensity in defence and improved continuity between the forwards and backs. Lest one forget, S&E had conceded an uncomfortable 598 points last league campaign, and as the legendary coach of the University of Alabama football team, Bear Bryant, wisely stated: "Offence wins games... defence wins championships." However, few would have expected Sutton to break two all-time league records. Not only did they eclipse their previous points total of 49 against

Bedford Athletic in 2018 by scoring 50, but they also surpassed the 31-point winning margin of their 2005 45-14 thrashing of Gosport & Fareham. What was most impressive was that the Black & Whites had integrated numerous new combinations at half-back and in the centres, with a debutant hooker in Pete Gordon. For a delighted coaching staff, this performance must bode well for the rest of the season. For the unfortunate Old Colfeians, it was one of those days where things simply did not go right. The first game of the season should never be a barometer for the whole fixture list, as numerous hurdles, from weddings to injuries, can distort the true picture.

The campaign will continue next weekend, Saturday 14th September, with a trip to Balmoral Avenue, where Sutton enjoyed one of their finest games of the last campaign, defeating the then-league-leaders Beckenham 26-22 on an afternoon notable for extraordinary winds.

Sutton & Epsom: O'Brien, Watkins, Scott, Bibby, Huie, Bunting ©, Wise, Boaden, Gordon, Gibson, Glanville, McTaggart, Pulvirenti, Jones & Hegarty.

Replacements: Hilton, Rea & Elliott.

Old Colfeians: Edwards, Chapman, Sleep, Griffiths, Ellis, Napper, Spaczil, Rameaux, Holland-Oliver, Whicello, O'Malley ©, T. Walker, M. Walker, Carter & Gray.

Replacements: Seva, Cunningham & Ramdhan.

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