

Sutton & Epsom 33 Thurrock 29

18 November 2024

Saturday 16th November: For Sutton supporters of a pessimistic disposition the arrival of Thurrock, winless after eight matches, would have brought back miserable memories of a trip to Southend in November 2017. The Saxons broke their duck with a last second penalty that gave them a 32-31 first win of the season after eight straight defeats. For the optimists, that was years ago, away from home and the Black & Whites had defeated the league leaders in their last two Rugby Lane appearances. On this occasion the Rugby Gods smiled on Sutton & Epsom as they sneaked home with a last play try to inflict an agonising 33-29 loss on Thurrock who continue their quest for their Holy Grail of a win.

Sutton saw a welcome return from injury for Gareth O’Brien at 15 and for Josh Glanville following his Marrakesh meanderings. On an overcast afternoon Thurrock initiated proceedings attacking the clubhouse end. They were once more into the search for a first win for their dear friends back at Oakfield. It was a scrappy start with a penalty and a free kick awarded at the first two scrums and the S&E line out, that has been a source of strength this season, proving to be unreliable. The Black & Whites opened the scoring with a Freddy Bunting penalty for 3-0. Undeterred the visitors proceeded to monopolise the game. Their forwards went through the phases and advanced steadily. Thurrock opened their account with a moment of the highest quality. Number 10 Charlie Chitty, with immaculate precision, chipped to the flank where winger Elliot Chew timed his leap to perfection to gather the ball under pressure and score in the corner. Harry Reynolds impressively converted from the touchline for a 7-3 lead.

The Black & Whites proceeded to litter the paddock with new and interesting ways to thwart their progress: misjudging a kick; kicking out on the full; gifting penalties and losing line outs. Eventually the visitors were presented with a kickable penalty that was gratefully accepted by Harry Reynolds as the Essex men extended their advantage to 10-3 at the end of the first quarter. A degree of urgency awoke the hosts and Tom Lennard recovered a charge down as Thurrock tried to clear from their 22. Fluent passing found Jac Davies in space and his deft footwork presented Freddy Bunting with a try. The Captain clipped over the conversion to level the scores at 10-10. The flow of the game was negated by errors and no infringement went unpunished under the gaze of Mr Morris. For example, a baffled Sutton pack were halted as they tried to execute a catch and drive from 10 metres out due to one of their fraternity joining in.

With the interval approaching both sides looked to the boot for territorial advantage but more often than not gifted possession to the opposition. Sutton had recaptured their defensive relish and cut down the visiting ball-carriers who barely made a yard despite many phases. They were rewarded with a turnover from a knock on and a subsequent penalty in the middle of the park. The Bunting boot failed to find touch but the captain made amends by collecting the return. The Black & Whites surged into the 22 and won a penalty. Steve Munford pounced with a quick tap and flanker Dan Jones put through Adam Bibby for his first Sutton try. Freddy Bunting added the extras for a 17-10 lead.

From the restart the Tees were awarded a penalty that they kicked to the corner to provide the perfect attacking platform. They secured possession and their advance was halted. The initial thrust was denied but moments later they exploited the narrow side to squeeze in at the corner. Replacement prop Ben Platt’s try was music to Thurrock ears. Though the conversion failed the visitors finished the first period trailing 15-17 with the contest very much in the balance. The second half opened with the first opportunity coming to the hosts after five minutes. Freddy Bunting took a simple three points from a penalty adjacent to the uprights near the 22. Leading 20-15 Sutton were fortunate moments later when Thurrock squandered a huge advantage. Overwhelmingly outnumbered by the visiting hordes who were sweeping into the S&E 22 the hosts were saved by an unforgiving pass that arrived at the bootlaces rather than the midriff. Moments later Freddy Bunting was adding a dollop of sodium chloride to the freshest of wounds. With a fabulous penalty from near to halfway the captain put his side 23-15 up. The Black & Whites appeared to be in the ascendancy and put together their best passage of play. Wonderful interchanges and telling support saw the joyous site of Rugby Lane’s replacement prop,

Callum Hilton, diving over the line to score a fabulous try. Celebrations were cut short as the referee was concerned over the grounding of the ball and awarded Thurrock the drop out. A deflated Sutton suddenly saw a probable 15-point lead snatched from their grasp.

The game entered the final quarter with Sir reminding the hosts that the mounting penalty count in their 22 had reached the point of no return and he would be reaching for his pocket sooner rather than later. The Oakfield team took their chance. Despite dogged defence in the corner flanker Ben Timson forced his way over. Harry Reynolds made it a one-point game with another fine conversion as Thurrock trailed 22-23. Not for the first time, and certainly not for the last time, the Rugby Lane fans were delighted to applaud another Bunting penalty as he made light work of a 45-metre effort from the middle of the pitch. The hosts were 26-22 up with ten minutes on the clock. Sutton pressed hard to put away their stubborn opponent. Another quickly taken penalty looked like paying dividends again but the stunning break ended when a speculative inside pass in the 22 that came to nought.

Tension rose and the momentum switched to Thurrock as they entered the Black & White

A combination of careless play and poor discipline undermined the hosts and resulted in a Thurrock line out 10 metres from the line. The catch and drive was halted but at a cost as the referee lost patience and removed Josh Glanville with a yellow card. Now it was a 5-metre line out. The Thurrock forwards threw themselves time and again against the Sutton line. It was classic defence against patient and controlled attack with every inch being contested to the full. Finally, it went to flyhalf Charlie Chitty who dummied and skipped through the gap to score. Harry Reynolds added the extras and Thurrock led, in time added on, by 29-26.

Right on cue the Black & Whites produced their best rugby of the afternoon. The Bunting restart descended with the pack perfectly just outside the 22 and the ball was regained. The referee awarded Sutton a penalty but they declined the opportunity to level the scores. It was all out attack against heroic defence. The referee indicated a penalty advantage and S&E pressed on and spun it wide. The crowd roared as Jordan Huie sprinted down the touchline in classical style to score but there was a forward pass. Back for a penalty in front of the posts and again the kick was rejected. From the tapped penalty flanker Dan Jones exploited a tiny gap in the defensive wall and lock Ewan McTaggart was on hand for the glory of the winning try. Freddy Bunting, having wrapped up his half century of caps at Dartfordians last week, notched his century of points for the season with the last kick of the game. Sutton had won 33-29.

At present for Thurrock it must feel like they have offended the Goddesses Tyche and Fortuna with clowders of black cats haunting their every turn. The team are no doubt exhausted from taking the positives from every game. However, this match brought their first bonus point for

four or more tries and saw their highest points tally to date. Their effort and spirit could not be faulted as illustrated by taking the lead in time added on whereas despondency and a ‘here we go again’ feeling would have been understandable. Their pack carried well, the Chitty brothers at halfback offer great potential and in Harry Reynolds they have a quality kicker. Hopefully the tide will turn for them sooner rather than later.

Sutton have started to get into that pleasing habit of winning close games which speaks volumes for their fitness, camaraderie and determination. Adam Bibby was outstanding in defence with his ability to make the tackle and be back on his feet in a instant being invaluable and his try was a fitting reward for an excellent afternoon. On a day when the team struggled to find their rhythm they still found a way to win because their defence was again of the highest quality. Next Saturday is another rest from the hurly-burly of league action. The campaign continues on 30th November when the charabanc heads for the Rectory Field for a match with Gravesend.

Sutton & Epsom

O’Brien, Findlay, Bibby, Bunting ©, Huie, Lennard, Munford, Johnson, Jones, Gibson, Glanville, McTaggart, Tame, Davies & Hegarty.
Replacements: Hilton, Rea & Wise.

Thurrock

Frear, Reynolds, Poole, Clifford ©, Chew, C. Chitty, S. Chitty, Miles, Percival, Catchpole, Libby, Watts-Adams, Orr, Timson & Jennings.
Replacements: Flatt, Aminu & Giroud.