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Sutton & Epsom go under at Gravesend

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Gravesend v Sutton and Epsom RFC. Saturday 21st October. The last occasion that Sutton & Epsom ventured to the Rectory Field was during Gravesend's triumphant title-winning season of 2013-4 as the host's mighty pack and Italian international half-backs secured a 41-3 victory. Much has changed in the last 10 years and George London was the sole Sutton survivor from that torrid afternoon. Gravesend have recovered from their harrowing opening day of this campaign against the Ironsides and came into the contest with a couple of wins including an impressive success at Medway who had defeated S&E the previous round. After a match of fluctuating fortunes the home team secured a bonus point win by 36-29.

To the relief of all concerned Saturday's torrential rain coincided with S&E's coach journeys to and from Kent. On a mild afternoon, the sun shone but there was a stiff breeze that favoured Sutton when captain Freddy Bunting kicked off the fixture. Keen followers of the Surrey men often feel that a strong drink is a prerequisite to watching the first quarter but on Saturday they made a wonderful start. Australian debutant Josh Pulvirenti soared into the air to secure the first lineout on the opposition 22 and the ball was spun wide for Luca Shaw to be denied in the corner by the touch judge's flag. Consolation for the visitors was immediate as the referee bought the game back for a penalty. It was kicked to the corner, the lineout was secured and a few carries later the Sutton pack was over the line and Matt Whitaker had the try. Freddy Bunting chipped over the simple conversion for a 7-0 lead after 5 minutes. A couple of minutes later the first of many penalties for high tackles provided Freddy Bunting with the opportunity to increase the lead. Making light of the distance and angle he extended the lead to 10-0.

The home XV soon were pressing for points with a lineout in the visitor's 22 but a technical infringement gave Sutton a scrum near their line. Perhaps expecting a long clearing kick on the wind the Kent men were taken by surprise as Number 8 Whitaker took off down the blindside swatting away tacklers with disdain on a 60 metre rampage. Sadly for players and spectators alike the potential entertainment was disrupted by the frequency of the whistle with Gravesend incurring the early wrath of Sir before he transferred his attentions to S&E's infringements.

Freddy Bunting added impressive penalties from distance in the 17th and 22nd minutes and Sutton led by 16-0. The Rectory Field supporters finally had something to cheer when fullback Ben Kite, grandson of club legend John Moxham, burst into the 22 to create a try for centre Chris Brady. The touchline conversion failed but Gravesend were on the board trailing by 5-16. The penalty pendulum now swung violently against the visitors. Soon the referee was beckoning over the Sutton skipper for a word and some cautionary advice. Everyone knew that the next offence would result in a yellow card. True to his word he brandished a yellow card to Josh Glanville on Gravesend's next sortie into the Sutton 22. The ball was kicked into the corner and the hosts had the 5-metre lineout and the opportunity to exploit their strong suit against the numerically reduced opponents. The catch and drive was illegally impeded and a penalty try was awarded. To rub salt into the visitor's wounds a second yellow was flourished and another Josh departed, this time the Antipodean version, Mr Pulvirenti.

The lead was reduced to four points and S&E to 13 men as Gravesend were 12-16 down but with everything in their favour. Sutton & Epsom dug deep and defended with great determination to make it to the interval with no further points conceded and no more men sent to the dug out. The hosts were in the ascendancy despite trailing 16-12 at the break. However, Sutton would only have a couple of minutes of the second half to survive before being returned to their full compliment.

The game resumed with the Rectory Field men eager to take advantage of their numbers and not only reduce the deficit but also take the lead for the first time in the match. Remarkably not a single point was gained against the 13 men. Perhaps Gravesend thought it unsporting to score against a Sutton side in reduced circumstances because no sooner were Sutton back to 15 the Kent side took the lead. Kicking a penalty into the corner their efficient catch and drive produced the points as flanker Samraj Chahal was ushered over the line. The conversion faltered but the home team had clawed back a 16-point gap and now led 17-16. The crowd barely had time to savour this success as Sutton's riposte was immediate. Excellent play got S&E into the 22 and Gravesend on the defensive. A long pass found winger Lawrence Elliott in splendid isolation and on the 503 rd anniversary of Ferdinand Magellan's discovery of his eponymous Straits he had a considerably simpler journey to the try-line to score. Freddy Bunting converted with aplomb as Sutton regained the advantage to lead 23-17.

To mimic the visitors the hosts instantly replied with a try of their own in the corner. The ball was spun wide and a powerful burst by winger Andrew Cooke saw him touch down in the corner. Rhys Betts could not replicate Sutton's touchline conversion and Gravesend trailed by a solitary point, 22-23. The second period had seen three tries in seven minutes and the expectant crowd were hungry for more. S&E were next to score and it was from that most familiar source…the boot of Bunting. The captain's fourth penalty of the afternoon increased the Rugby Lane team's advantage to 26-22. The Kent men surged into the 22 after an excellent probing kick had Sutton scrambling near their line. From the Gravesend 5-metre scrum replacement Junior Rocket went close to scoring but a few phases later and Samraj Chahal picked up his second try of the afternoon. Rhys Betts ended his kicking drought bisecting the uprights to regain the lead

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by 29-26.

Entering the final 10 minutes the game was very much in the balance. Junior Rocket's explosive entry into the game now turned into a damp squib as he was not only penalised for his covering tackle but also given a yellow card due to its height. Numerical disadvantage once again proved to be no obstacle for the team suffering the man in the bin. As Sutton pressed hard for the next score and to keep the ball alive they rather naively got bundled into touch. A grateful Gravesend had a lineout near halfway and fell back on their tried and tested routine of the catch and drive. They advanced down the paddock and won a penalty. They knocked the ball into the corner with the prospect of another try. For the second time the referee ruled that foul play had prevented a certain try from the lineout and awarded the penalty try, Chris Farrell departed with a yellow card, the teams were 14 each as the Rectory Field XV could reflect on the 36-26 advantage in time added on. For the visitors it looked as if they would be returning to Surrey with nothing to show for their efforts. However, a penalty at the restart enabled Freddy Bunting to increase his personal tally to 19 points and reduce the deficit to a single score thus earning a valuable bonus point. A minute later the match concluded with Gravesend victorious by the score of 36-29.

Any side that outscores the opposition by 6-2 in tries deserves to win any game and Gravesend's clinical efficiency in the attacking lineouts made all the difference. Sutton & Epsom were much improved from last week. The tackling, the lineout and the fluid passing in the backs were better than at any time in the season. Josh Pulvirenti had a fine debut as looks to be a valuable acquisition. Even by his remarkably high standards, Freddy Bunting's kicking was quite exceptional as he landed 5 penalties and 2 conversions from his magnificent seven kicks at goal. Both XVs suffered with discipline and endured a hefty penalty count in an evenly matched and entertaining contest. Ultimately it was the hosts with their formidable catch & drive that held the trump card in this match and they exploited it to the full.

Next Saturday there are no league fixtures in deference to the Rugby World Cup final. The campaign continues on 4th November at Rugby Lane when Sidcup are the visitors. The Kent side recorded their first win of the season on Saturday by defeating London Cornish by 28-21 at Crescent Farm. It will be a basement battle as these two clubs with proud histories sit at the bottom of the league table. The kick off is at the earlier time of 2:30pm.

Sutton & Epsom:
Ciaran Mohr, Luca Shaw, Ross Parsons, Freddy Bunting ©, Lawrence Elliott, Gareth O'Brien, Chris Ballard, Callum Gibson, Chris Farrell, Alex Mount, Ewan McTaggart, Josh Glanville, George London, Josh Pulvirenti & Matt Whitaker.
Replacements: Tom Boaden, Rob Hegarty & Steve Munford.

Gravesend:
Ben Kite, Harry Tasker, Chris Brady, Jamie Fautley, Andrew Cooke, Rhys Betts, Matt Brady, Brendan Kelly, Terry Papworth, Harry Brooker, Tom Bird, Andrew Hampshire, Matt Hewitt, Samrat Chahal & Connor Murphy.
Replacements: Jamie Forsyth, Stan Dadson & Junior Rocket.

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