

## Sutton & Epsom Keep The Wind In Their Sails

Sutton & Epsom 40 Old Colfeians 24 Saturday 4th October. The cheeky aside that last Saturday's break from league action was to commemorate Sutton winning their opening three fixtures of the campaign is untrue but has some historical merit. It was only the fifth time, in the league era, that such a start had occurred – the last being in 2012-13. Meanwhile, their opponents Old Colfeians had sounded a klaxon call of intent with the notable scalp of Sidcup in the previous round of fixtures. A tough tussle was expected at Rugby Lane between two sides that had shared the honours in this fixture last season. The hosts maintained their perfect start in a magnificent match between two quality teams, winning 40-24.

There was a welcome return for captain Freddy Bunting, as Euan McTaggart rejoined the ranks with a proud 100% winning record as caretaker captain. He was joined by Rob Hegarty, Michael Bennion and Ben Tame, as ailments and absences ruled out Finney, Ghumra, Lennard and O'Brien. The visitors were missing the mountainous figure of their captain and powerhouse, Andy O'Malley.

Storm Amy had created testing, blustery and unfavourable conditions. Sympathy immediately went out to the full-backs and hookers as a sense of foreboding descended upon Rugby Lane with expectations of a scrappy and error-strewn contest. Perhaps the only point of interest would be whether the Bunting boot might set a personal distance record for a successful penalty kick. How wrong we were. Both sides produced a thrilling exhibition of running rugby, combining for ten tries to the delight of all assembled.

Captain Bunting kicked off with the benefit of the gusting gale that fortunately blew across rather than down the pitch. After an impressive opening by Sutton that was thwarted by sterling defence, Bunting lofted a kick towards the wing. With perfect timing, Josh Rea arrived and, after an initial juggle, secured the ball to coast home under the posts. Bunting gratefully accepted the simple conversion for 7-0.

Five minutes later, the S&E pack exploited a perfect attacking position to advance towards the posts and Sam Lennie was unstoppable from short range. With the extras added it was 14-0 as the hosts made light of the conditions. The first quarter concluded with Sutton's third and finest score. Exploiting a generous narrow side, Archie Fitzgerald and friends interchanged passes from halfway for Laurence Wise to streak home under the posts. The conversion established an impressive 21-0 lead.

Old Colfeians, aided by a flurry of penalties, enjoyed their best passage of play and were rewarded with their opening try. Control and continuity in the hosts' 22 stretched the defence and the powerful presence of Estefan Ellis scored in the corner. The comeback was short-lived as Sutton exploited a penalty from ten metres in front of the uprights. Dan Jones ran wide, the ball was recycled, and a few carries later that man Jones was on hand to score. Bunting judged the wind to perfection for 28-5 as the Black and Whites secured the bonus point for their fourth try.

As the crowd discussed how many points the wind was worth, Sutton and Epsom pressed for more. For the final ten minutes of the half, S&E were frustrated by quality defence and an abundance of infringements. Referee Mr Edwards concluded the first moiety with the scoreboard showing Sutton & Epsom 28, visitors 5.

There had been a surprising lack of kicking and a refreshing desire to run the ball. The Sutton handling had been impressive with a minimal error count as forwards and backs combined to great effect. Old Colfeians, when given the opportunity, also looked to get the ball to their backs and showed enough to suggest there was still plenty left in this contest.

It did not require the wisdom of Solomon to imagine the coaches stressing the importance of the opening ten minutes of the second half: for Colfeians, to get an early score and a foothold in the game; for Sutton, to extinguish all hope and force the visitors into damage-limitation mode.

The men from Horn Park could not have asked for a more encouraging start as the powerful running of centre Louis Baker contemptuously brushed aside potential tacklers for a stunning solo score from halfway after barely a minute. Ryan Napper's conversion appeared to be perfection until the wind had the final say, leaving his team trailing 10-28.

A couple of minutes later, the exceptional Laurence Wise was forced from the field having been squashed beneath a considerably heavier opponent. As the pessimists trawled their memories for record reversals, the hosts responded in classical fashion. Sam Lennie made an eye-catching break, marauding into the opposition half and leaving tacklers in his wake or dumped on their behinds. Agu Benson continued the attack, cutting inside, and prop Dan Johnson arrived in support to score. The conversion never threatened, but Sutton had the comfort of a 33-10 lead with 25 minutes to play.





Old Colfeians were not deterred by this reverse and threw themselves at the Sutton defences with fury. Inches from a try they were penalised, and as hard as they tried it appeared that the home defences would not be breached. In the final ten minutes OC's full-back Chris Harris changed the game with individual brilliance. A mesmerising run from 40 metres deserved a try; he was denied by the last man, but Ryan Napper was in support to cross the whitewash. The No.10 converted his score for 17-33.

Five minutes later, the elusive Harris was on halfway being pushed towards touch. He caressed the ball between on-rushing tacklers, re-gathered it and disappeared over the horizon for a fabulous score that spoke volumes for his vision. It was one-way traffic and belief was coursing through Colfeian veins as the lead narrowed to 33-24.

Before the Chris Harris show, Sam Lennie had left the field with a knock. The hooker re-entered the fray as Sutton worked their way into the opposition 22. From a perfectly executed catch-and-drive from an attacking lineout, the irrepressible Lennie scored his second try. Bunting converted for 40-24 and Sutton had finally secured the win. Moments later, the contest was over.

Arguably, this was Sutton's best performance of the campaign so far. The tempo, fluency and handling in the first half were exceptional in the conditions as they spread the ball wide at every opportunity. Wingers Archie Fitzgerald and Agu Benson offered a formidable threat on the flanks, avoiding being ushered into touch with their combination of strength, skill and rugby intelligence. The mobile back-row trio of Rea, Jones and Hegarty were always on hand to offer continuity. Laurence Wise provided the tempo at 9 while Freddy Bunting orchestrated the plays from 10.

The front row of Johnson, Lennie and Mount not only provided a stable set piece but also offered a great deal around the paddock, including three tries. It was a superb team effort from 1 to 18.

No team will relish playing Old Colfeians this season. The front-row trio of Rameaux, Holland-Oliver and Agorioge boast over 300 appearances and were a formidable unit. The centre combination of Baker and Storey were the creative hub in an experienced back division. The icing on the cake is the attacking threat of Chris Harris, who countered with great intent. They were unfortunate to be missing some regulars, leaving them short of their usual heft in the back five. In the second period they came back strongly and deservedly were rewarded with a bonus point, coming close to a second as the clock wound down.

Next Saturday, 11 October, Sutton visit the historic Crescent Farm for an encounter with one of their oldest rivals, Sidcup RFC. At this early stage of a long season the Black and Whites lie second in the league behind Beckenham, who also have the maximum 20 points from four outings.

### **Sutton & Epsom:**

Bennion, Fitzgerald, Scott, Bibby, Benson, Bunting (capt), Wise, Johnson, Lennie, Mount, McTaggart, Duey, Rea, Jones & Hegarty.  
Replacements: Boaden, Tame & Munford.

### **Old Colfeians:**

Harris, Ellis, Storey, Baker, Mutongwizo, Napper, Spaczil, Rameaux, Holland-Oliver, Agorioge, Collins, Ramdhan, Amor, Moles & Correa.

Replacements: Bantango, Blythe & Burkett.

John Croysdill

Image credit Robin Kennedy