EPSOM & EWELL TIMES
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26th November 2026

ISSN 2753-2771

EPSOM & EWELL TIMES

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Sutton & Epsom Leave It Late to Stay on Top

29 November 2026



Sutton & Epsom 24 Cobham 12 Rugby Lane Saturday 28th November.

In 2025-26 the results of Round 6 conspired to catapult Sutton & Epsom into the limelight as they rose to the summit of the league. They were instantly knocked off their perch and spiralled into oblivion, only to find salvation by defeating the unwanted Pilgrims on the last day of their season. The Rugby Lane supporters will be hoping that, having reached the zenith in the grand manner by downing the colours of the erstwhile leaders, Beckenham, in Round 8, the remainder of their campaign this time around will be significantly better. The first club to take aim at their lofty status was Cobham, who had inflicted the first defeat upon Beckenham earlier this season. After a tenacious battle, the Black & Whites secured a bonus-point win, 24-12, to extend their lead at the top to three points.

In these times of global warming, it might be prescient for there to be the equivalent for antediluvian, as this Saturday was originally earmarked for rest, relaxation and recuperation before the drought. Additionally, it corresponded with autumn internationals and perhaps Sutton & Epsom were fortunate only to be missing Messrs Bunting and Lennard through the siren calls of the calamitous cliffs of the calendar. Niall McCormack and Joe Lovatt returned to the squad with Ben Tame. In contrast, the Cobham Director of Rugby, Billy Davison, had lamented the previous Saturday that Cobham had already used 45 players during the campaign. Who knows what he thought of the numerous changes of personnel for this game? From the outset the weather was going to be a significant factor, as driving rain and a bitterly cold wind greeted the teams at Rugby Lane. It was the ideal recipe for knock-ons, scrummages and general frustration.

Cobham kicked off playing towards the Cabbage Patch and against the elements. The opening exchange set the tone. A promising attack from the visitors ended as a grubber was blocked and gathered by Tipene Maxwell. Soon it was in the hands of Gareth O’Brien, who kicked it down the park. The pursuit ended in the opposition 22. A dire clearance lacked the necessary altitude and struck an innocent passer-by. The ball, like a bar of soap, was not secured by several players and was bundled into touch. Sutton & Epsom proceeded to lose the lineout, which sadly became the norm in the first period. It was the start of a very underwhelming half of rugby by the leaders. Things did not improve when lock Josh Glanville received a yellow card after ten minutes, reducing S&E to 14 men. The men from the Memorial Ground were playing with a high tempo and their swarming defence neutered the hosts’ attacking intentions.

On the half-hour Sutton & Epsom scored the opening try after dominating territory and possession with the benefit of the wind. They appeared to have squandered a five-metre lineout as the ball slithered around on the deck. But a moment later Gareth O’Brien pounced and squeezed over to score. The conversion drifted wide but the leaders led 5-0. This score did not open the floodgates. As the half wore on, the crowd contemplated how much the elements were worth and the considered opinion was a lot more than five points. Things did not improve for the Black & Whites as the visitors ended the first period in the ascendancy. The Sutton & Epsom line was under siege and the Cobham pack was halted numerous times on the line. Belatedly it was spun wide, where winger Ben Cox was ideally placed to score in the corner. The attempted conversion was blown backwards, as several Cobham box kicks had suffered a similar indignity in the wind, which only highlighted the task ahead for Sutton & Epsom. Mr Gregor MacDonald concluded the half at 5-5.

The interval saw a rather sombre-looking Sutton & Epsom squad receiving their instructions from the coaching team. One can imagine there was much optimism in the Cobham camp as the elements were now in their favour. Whatever was said to S&E, the crowd was certain that kicking the restart out on the full was not included. A woeful start did not augur well for the Rugby Lane supporters. Things did not improve as the Black & Whites were woeful in handling the ball that was sensibly kicked into their territory. There would be more communication in a Trappist monastery than was seen on the pitch as the ball was allowed to unnecessarily hit the turf. After a concerning 15 minutes, S&E awoke from their slumber and demonstrated the character and quality that had produced seven wins from eight this campaign.

As the game approached the final quarter, Sutton & Epsom produced a moment of the highest quality. They went through the phases with great control at a slick tempo, but the excellent Cobham defence held firm in the middle of the park. The situation was transformed by the scintillating skills of Adam Bibby, who broke free and passed to flanker Josh Rea deep in the 22. Impressive cover was closing on the Sutton & Epsom man, who passed back inside for Adam Bibby to score. Gareth O’Brien’s conversion erred but S&E led 10-5 and a sense of relief permeated the stand.

They say a team is never more vulnerable than just after scoring. The Black & Whites reinforced that view. They made a complete mess of clearing a kick to their 22, then conceded three penalties near their line in a couple of minutes. The hosts appeared to have escaped when awarded a five-metre scrum. A dominant set-piece ensued but Mr MacDonald was not so impressed and awarded Cobham possession. Deservedly, the visitors forced their way over with lock Ben Keller grabbing the glory. Connor Dellapina converted as Cobham led 12-10.

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ISSN 2753-2771

Sutton & Epsom's lofty aspirations were being severely tested. Their response was superb. Making light of the conditions, they rallied to dominate the remaining dozen minutes of the game. The visitors were penalised for crossing near halfway. Gareth O'Brien drilled the ball to ten metres from the line. Finally, the Sutton & Epsom lineout worked like a well-oiled machine. Inexorably the pack advanced towards the line for hooker Sam Lennie to collect his first try of the season at Rugby Lane, as he has saved his impressive scoring feats for his travels this campaign. Gareth O'Brien added the conversion as Sutton & Epsom led 17-12. A couple of minutes later the Rugby Lane supporters were applauding the bonus-point try. Tipene Maxwell, who had enjoyed an excellent afternoon, ran powerfully from depth, shrugged off multiple tacklers and strode home. Mastering the wind, Gareth O'Brien added the extras for 24-12.

The Black & Whites, who appeared to be in the deepest oubliette earlier, were in control and making light of the challenging conditions as they played out the remaining moments. It was a most welcome, if unlikely, bonus-point win. Cobham, for all their selection woes, had seemed to be on course for defeating the top dogs in their backyard for the second time this season. It was most harsh that the visitors' endeavours were not rewarded by at least a bonus point on an afternoon that had seen Sutton & Epsom struggle to find their form. It was a day for the coaches to philosophically reflect on the wise words of Jeremy Bentham: "The rarest of all human qualities is consistency." Perhaps it was just an afternoon where the weather was the winner and the conditions were the dominant factor.

Once more Cobham showed they are a match for any team in this league. One suspects that, given a fair run with injuries and availability, in the second half of the season, if they can field a regular squad, they will be even more competitive in Regional 2 South East. For the hosts, Sam Lennie revelled in the conditions, carrying the battle to the opposition at every opportunity. Captain Rob Hegarty led by example and, once more, accumulated considerable yardage carrying the ball. Ultimately, it was a couple of moments of high quality from the centres Adam Bibby and Tipene Maxwell that provided the difference on a keenly contested afternoon.

After a brace of home games, next Saturday, 5th December, Sutton & Epsom return to the Garden of England for a trip to Dartfordians. For the many pessimists of Rugby Lane, this fixture will be perceived with utter dread as the Bourne Road club are not only bottom and winless, but also defeated the Black & Whites 34-33 courtesy of a Tom Gubby penalty that was the last kick of the corresponding fixture last season.

Sutton & Epsom

Munford, McCormack, Bibby, Maxwell, Findlay A, O'Brien, Findlay E, Boaden, Lennie, Northcott, McTaggart, Tame, Glanville, Rea & Hegarty (captain).

Replacements: Howes, Curwen & Lovatt.

Cobham

Saywell, Cox, Springett, Jones-Davies, Moule, Dellapina, Harty, Lippiatt (captain), Joyce L, Joyce B, Keller, Farmer, Cronk, Turpen & Davison.

Replacements: Clark, Lappin & Berry.

John Croysdill

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