



## Sutton & Epsom topple league leaders

Sutton & Epsom RFC 20 Beckenham 19. Saturday 14th December.

For the final league match at Rugby Lane in 2024 the crowd were treated to the visit of the league leaders Beckenham. Twice previously this campaign have proud pole position players descended upon Cheam. Firstly, Sidcup were dispatched and then Medway had their colours lowered by the Black & Whites. Could Rugby Lane prove again to be a graveyard for the aspirations of the high-flying? This is the first of the reverse fixtures this season and the visitors' hopes were bolstered by their September success at Balmoral Avenue by 29-14. However, it was Sutton who triumphed 20-19 to collect, arguably, their most valuable scalp of the season.

After one week away Jordan Huie and Jac Davies returned for Sutton. The Black & Whites may have the Kiwi trio of Bibby, Lennie and Rea but Beckenham included Jamaican internationals Lamar Sinclair & Rimani Richards, Barbadian Sevens caps with the Caddy brothers in the centres as well as Messrs Aoke-Tiamu, Badger, Boyce & Kakoulidis from Australia added to the mix. Freddy Bunting set the game in motion on a dismally gray afternoon, thankfully free from rain, with a crosswind in his face. It was high tempo rugby from the outset as probing attacks were battered back by formidable defences. Rob Hegarty, who is enjoying an impressive season for S&E, made the first significant break to the 22 but his side failed to capitalise. Sadly, Beckenham lost their influential 15 Bradley Bateup to an horrific dislocated knee in the opening ten minutes.

The next S&E opportunity was snuffed out as the ball was stripped in contact. It was to be a feature of the first period that Sutton ball carriers became isolated and were consumed by Beckenham's predatory pack who were excellent at the breakdown. In addition, the league leaders, from the first whistle, showed a propensity to run the ball from defence. The abrasive and robust carrying of Liam Caddy was perfectly complemented by deft offloads of his brother Jake as they tried to utilise the power and pace of Jordan Gabriel and Zane Kakaloudis on the wings. The Black & White defence had to be on their mettle and they were equal to every challenge.

After a quarter of an hour the deadlock was finally broken. A Beckenham player strayed offside and Freddy Bunting calmly from 40 metres put his side 3-0 up. Having gathered the restart the hosts did not escape the perustration of Mr Spencer Pearce who reciprocated with a kickable penalty for the visitors. The Balmoral Avenue side were not content with levelling the score but went in search of the lead as they kicked into the corner. The league leaders illustrated their promotion credentials by scoring in the corner despite resolute defence. After several phases Tom Ward, like all good 7s, was on hand to cross the whitewash. The touchline conversion failed but the Kent team led 5-3 at the end of the first quarter.

Poor passing by the Sutton & Epsom side on halfway led to a lightning counter by Beckenham. A stunning score was nipped in the bud by a trademark covering tackle by the ageless Steve Munford. Sutton rallied with a superb scrummage winning the ball against the head that initiated their best passage of play. The game was developing into a highly entertaining spectacle as dangerous attacks were neutered by extremely efficient defences. Unfortunately, just after the half hour the away side suffered a second significant departure as loose-head prop David Aoake-Tiamu hobbled off the park.

Half time was rapidly approaching but with two significant breaks for injuries there would be a healthy amount of afters to consume. Beckenham were holding Sutton in check until a stunning break by Tom Lennard saw him advance deep into the 22 and as he was enveloped by the defensive cover flanker Dan Jones was on hand to take the well timed pass under the posts. Captain Bunting chipped over the conversion for a 10-5 lead. The Black & Whites went in search of further glory and moment later Freddy Bunting was lining up a pop at the posts. The expectant crowd, so accustomed to the excellence of their kicker, were surprised to see the ball drift wide as Bunting missed kicks are as rare as Ben Duckett leaving a ball in a test match. The final opportunity fell to the visitors but their 5-metre lineout was bundled into touch to conclude the first half with the scoreboard reading Sutton & Epsom 10 Beckenham 5.

The hosts made a rapid start to the second period. Learning from the first half the forwards advanced was ably supported and Steve Munford enjoyed a stream of fast ball on the front foot. A stunning break by Gareth O'Brien propelled him into open space in the 22 but he selflessly passed to Rob Hegarty who ran in under the posts. Freddy Bunting completed the formalities for 17-5. This was a healthy lead though when returning prop Alex Mount vociferously declared: "They cannot live with us" it was met with ribald laughter from players on both sides. Everyone at Rugby Lane knew this game was far from over. It soon came to pass, five minutes later, that Beckenham were alive but not kicking as they declined the three-point option. Then another penalty meant the hosts were defending a 5-metre line out. Geordie Boyce secured the ball and hooker Lamar Sinclair muscled his way over despite the efforts of his opposite number Sam Lennie. Lewis Bunton added a sweetly struck conversion to reduce the deficit to 12-17.



The visitors pressed hard but Sutton held on. In the dying minutes, after a relentless forty-phase attack, a blocked drop-goal attempt from Lewis Bunton secured Sutton's 20-19 victory.

### **Sutton & Epsom**

O'Brien, Huie, Bibby, Bunting ©, Findlay, Lennard, Munford, Johnson, Lennie, Boaden, Tame, McTaggart, Rea, Jones & Hegarty.

Replacements: Boaden, Davies & Hilton.

### **Beckenham**

Bateup, Kakoulidis, Caddy J, Caddy L, Jordan, Bunton, Curtis, Aoake-Tiamu, Sinclair, Badger, Moran, Keefe ©, Boyce, Ward & Knowles.

Replacements: Richards, Latouche & Lovell.

Photo credit: Robin Kennedy