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The Agony and the Ecstasy

24 October 2022

ROYAL WOOTTON BASSETT RFC 31 – SUTTON & EPSOM RFC 29 – 22nd October. This was **Sutton & Epsom**'s first ever match against **Royal Wootton Bassett** RFC. Both clubs were desperately in need of a victory with S&E's solitary victory only just better than their host's winless start to the campaign. In front of a large crowd swelled by Ladies' Day at Ballards Ash, a euphoric home crowd roared on their team to a 31-29 victory in a match of fluctuating fortunes.

Under cloudy skies but spared of any rain Freddy Bunting kicked off the contest for Sutton and Epsom. It has become an unfortunate this season that S&E are slow out of the blocks when on the road. The opening fifteen minutes of this match was sadly no exception. After five minutes not only had RWB lock Josh McCaffertey scored a try from close-range converted by Troy Cusack but also they had been reduced to 14 with a yellow card issued to Number 8 Tom Brooker. In addition prop Alex Mount had departed injured to be replaced by Will Lloyd.

Inspired by the early score the Wiltshire All Blacks pressed hard to make the most of their numerical advantage. The Black & Whites defence was rather too porous as first Number 8 Kyle Lovell and then winger Jone Waqadanidrola made significant breaks. The first Sutton & Epsom attack ended with Kyren Ghumra departing with a torn hamstring and Stefan Cooksammy entering the fray. Approaching the quarter hour mark the hosts won a 5-metre line out and this time the ball was spun wide and full back Sam Williams ran a superb line to scythe through the defence and score under the posts. Troy Cusack made it 14-0 in as many minutes.

S&E finally awoke from their slumber and began to claw back the deficit. The reliable boot of Freddy Bunting immediately got them on the scoreboard with a perfectly struck penalty for 14-3. It was RWB's turn to concede a penalty and be punished with the familiar 5-metre line out resulting. The scrappy S&E line out fortunately ended with a knock on providing Sutton with a scrum. A slick set move resulted in Ollie Baptiste-Wilson taking the aerial route to score in the corner. Freddy Bunting converted from the touchline to make it 10-14. Five minutes later the ugby Lane kicker bisected the uprights for another penalty success to reduce the gap to a solitary point, 13-14.

The Malmesbury Road men were starting an unfortunate trend of conceding penalties at the breakdown, a first half trickle that was to turn into a torrent in the second period. Cheered on by the sizeable crowd the home team rallied and were indebted to a sublime 50/20 kick by Troy Cusack as he rolled the ball into the far right corner. The RWB line out, which was possibly their greatest strength in this contest, provided clean ball and centre Daniel Hale supplied the finish. Troy Cusack added the extras to extend the lead to 21-13. There was time for one more Freddy Bunting penalty attempt but it was blown wide and the half concluded with the hosts enjoying an interval advantage of 21-33. Both camps had plenty to reflect upon in a contest that was for from over.

The weather held and Royal Wootton Bassett restarted the game defending their 8-point advantage. From the outset they were on the back foot. It was their turn to be defending a 5-metre line out after a penalty and moments later to be reduced to 14 men. The referee was exceedingly consistent in his punishments. The difference was that unlike the Wiltshire line out which was very secure the Sutton version was totally unreliable. Ten minutes of pressure and numerous opportunities in the left hand corner were squandered.

Finally, tactics turned to Bunting's boot and another three points were added for 16-21. The S&E cause was being aided by an outbreak of penalties that had reached epidemic proportions that was infecting the Ballards Ash XV. After a quarter of an hour in the second period after carries from Boaden and Harwood the backs took over. Archie FitzGerald muscled over the gainline, the ball was recycled and Ollie Baptiste-Wilson finished with aplomb. Though the conversion from the flank failed it was all square 21-21 as the game entered the final quarter.

The one-way traffic was halted when RWB on their next visit to S&E territory won a penalty just outside the 22 adjacent to the posts. Effortlessly Troy Cusack regained the lead with the hosts 24-21 to the good. A minute later the visitors scored their best try as Ollie Baptiste-Wilson completed his hat trick. Tom Brooker burst down the blindside from halfway, sold one dummy and then passed to the speeding winger who did the rest.

Despite the errant conversion Sutton and Epsom led by 26-24. From the restart Tom Brooker took the catch but fell heavily and was forced to leave the pitch. The Black & Whites continued to press hard to extend their lead and with the frequency of penalties conceded by the hosts it was unsurprising when an opportunity within Freddy Bunting's range arrived. Once more the Rugby Lane kicker's aim was true and the visitors led 29-24 with five minutes left on the clock.

Indiscipline now hit the Surrey team's ranks. Ominously the ball was kicked into the corner from a penalty. Valiant defence was matched by infringements resulting from sustained pressure. Finally, the ball went wide and the space was exploited as the Wiltshire All Blacks' hooker Scott Parry touched down for their fourth try and a bonus point. Troy Cusack was the man of the moment and put the Malmesbury Road team ahead 31-29 with the conversion. Sutton moved ever onward into the host's half. Archie FitzGerald burst into the 22, was tackled and the whistle blew but it was a penalty to the home team against the centre for rolling on the deck. With great relief the ball was kicked to touch, the whistle blew and the celebrations began for Royal Wootton Bassett.

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It was a demoralising day for the Black & Whites as, once again, they failed to overcome the significant handicap of a dreadful start. With defeats by 4, 3 and 2 points and a draw in their first seven matches it is a serious case of ‘what might have been’ as they now join their hosts in the relegation zone. The lethal Ollie Baptiste-Wilson had the unusual feat of scoring a league hat trick for S&E but still ending up on the losing side. For RWB their line out was excellent, the kicking of Troy Cusack superb and the running of Man of the Match Daniel Hale was enough to engineer their first win of the campaign.

Once again Sutton will be breaking new ground in terms of league opposition when they host Oxford Harlequins next Saturday 29 th October. It will be last of the 3pm kick offs at Rugby Lane before switching to the seasonal variations. After reaching the giddy heights of topping the table consecutive defeats to title rivals Wimbledon and Havant has seen the Quins drop to fourth in the league but they will still provide stiff opposition for the Black & Whites.

Sutton & Epsom
Austin Bell, Kyren Ghumra, Archie FitzGerald, Freddie Bunting, Ollie Baptiste-Wilson, Jamie See, Owen Clemett, Alex Mount, Chris Farrell ©, Tom Boaden, Matt Harwood, Josh Glanville, Ben Tame, Rob Hegarty & Tom Brooker.
Replacements: Will Lloyd, George London & Stefan Cooksammy.

Royal Wootton Bassett
Sam Williams, Mark Trowbridge, Daniel Hale, Connor Tomley, Jone Waqadanidrola, Troy Cusack, Rhys Higginson, Harry Daynes, Scott Parry, Jake O’Neill, Epi Druavesi, Joshua McCafferty, Jack Daynes, Gavin Ougan & Kyle Lovell.
Replacements:
Phillip Bardwell, Oliver Craig Baycroft & Iwan Floyd.

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