

The season's final curtain

13 March 2023



Sutton & Epsom RFC 34 v Bracknell 24. Saturday 11th March.

The modern league fixture list has a marvellous symmetry as it ends against the opponent one played on the opening day of the season. Way back in September that meant a journey to Lily Hill Park to play Bracknell for the first time since the 2009-10 season. A lot of players have crossed the whitewash since then, and too many of them have been S&E's opponents, and 22 games later the season has ended. Perhaps the omens were not so favourable on Day 1 as once again as with those former times the Black & Whites were facing the denouement of the campaign having already been relegated from Level 5. On 10th April 2010 the team bid a fond farewell by thrashing North Walsham 55-15 and on this occasion Sutton & Epsom put in a rousing performance to sign off with a 34-24 triumph over Bracknell.

The game certainly had the feeling of the end of an era as James Caddy led out the side for his allegedly last appearance. Joining the stalwart back row in the departure lounge were George Drye, Sam Hurley and Jamie See, all of whom have been superb servants of the club and were instrumental in the recent rise to National 2. In addition, it was certainly a red-letter day for Chris Pointing as he celebrated his 100th 1st XV league appearance.

Despite the aforesaid reasons for one last Herculean effort S&E started the match in the worst possible manner. The unfathomable slow start that has become the byword of this season reared its ugly head again. In front of a crowd in excess of 250 Bracknell ruthlessly exposed the early Sutton frailties. The opening ten minutes hinted at an unpalatable drubbing for the Black & Whites. The outstanding Bracknell Number 8 Ken Hodgson was rampaging round Rugby Lane and soon scythed through the defence to set up Simon Bayliss for a try in the corner. Moments later the backtracking Robbie Martey cut out an assist but was shown a yellow card. With the man advantage the Berkshire men went blind exploiting another defensive oversight and Simon Bayliss strolled in for his second. On this occasion Ollie Radford added the conversion for 12-0.

As the Fab Four might have considered that the fairy tale ending to their careers was being penned by the Brothers Grimm Sutton scored. Freddy Bunting intercepted a pass in his own half and ran it back. He added the conversion for S&E to trail 7-12. The Rugby Lane men had woken from their slumber and began to defend with urgency. The Bracknell backs who had enjoyed time and space in the first quarter were being pressed on the gain line and all over the pitch Sutton tackled with a ferocity and zeal that lifted the crowd. Robbie Martey returned and was soon on the action making a vital mark on a dangerous cross-field kick. A couple of infringements and the Bunting boot put the hosts in the corner for a 5-metre lineout. The ball was secured and the pack did the necessary and George London scored. Freddy Bunting made light of the challenging conversion and the Black & Whites led 14-12.

What had looked like a relaxing end of season jaunt for the visitors had been transformed and the hosts had not finished. On the half hour the S&E pack once more lined up for another 5-metre lineout. Lightning was to strike twice and with meritorious efficiency Will Lloyd forced his way over. Freddy Bunting thumped over the conversion as the jubilant crowd roared their appreciation for the 21-12 lead. Aged followers tried to recall if they had seen their team lead at the break. The Lily Hill Park team rather taken aback by the effrontery of three scores conceded without reply threatened to end the half as it had begun. Scrum half Franklin Lewis took a quick penalty 40 metres out. Desperate defence saw Sutton fling themselves on a loose ball but a knock on gave Bracknell a scrum 15 metres out under the posts. From this prime platform to attack Ben Tame and Jamie See made crucial tackles before Ken Hodgson was held up over the line. Five minutes later the referee drew the first half to a close when Ollie Radford's promising run ended when he was bundled into touch. Sutton turned around 21-12 to the good after a Jekyll and Hyde performance in the first period.

The second half got under way with the visitors having the advantage of the wind and keen to be the first to add to their tally on the scoreboard. An early Bracknell break was followed by a probing

kick that was gathered by a wonderful sliding take by Robbie Martey 5 metres from his line. Having cleared the ball Sutton continued their fine form of the first period. The hosts spread the ball wide after powerful carries by the forwards and forced the visitors onto the defensive. Both sides were showing great defensive resolve as thunderous tackling all over the pitch thwarted the best attacking efforts of all concerned. The match ebbed and flowed until a long clearance from Freddy Bunting was taken near the touchline on halfway. The initial chaser was too easily stepped and the defensive support was inadequate. A surging run down the touchline and a simple pass inside saw lock George Jupp score. Ollie Radford impressively bisected the uprights as Bracknell trailed 19-21.

There was hardly any time for the crowd to contemplate the two-point deficit before the next score. And what a score it was by Robbie Martey. Any self-doubt in the Black & White ranks was instantly extinguished as the winger jinked and weaved his way through would be tacklers and outpaced the cover to score Sutton's try of the season. The conversion drifted wide as the hosts led 26-19. Next it was Jamie See's turn to sidestep his way down the pitch and the Rugby Lane team were awarded a penalty. Wisely they opted for the kick at goal and Freddy Bunting extended the lead to 29-19. Sutton had a ten-point lead with ten minutes left on the clock.

Perhaps the largest roar of the day greeted Chris Pointing coming off the bench for his 100th 1st XV league appearance. There have been too many near misses and eleventh hour tragedies this season for the Black & Whites and the crowd urged on the team to dig deep. The XV responded in great style. Ross Parsons made a break and the pack powered in behind him to advance the ball to the Bracknell line. It was the Berkshire men's turn to show superb defence and frustrate the Surrey men by holding them up over the line. However, Sutton gathered the drop out and countered. The ball went wide to replacement Ciaran Mohr who finished with aplomb squeezing in at the corner he stretched for the line to score despite a superb covering tackle. S&E led 34-19 as the game entered time added on.

There was no let up in the action as Sutton again attacked. Even in the opposition 22 the hosts tackled as if they were on their own line as they denied them any space to counter. In the end it was a kick and chase by Noah Cannon that almost secured a fourth try and a bonus point for the Lily Hill Park team. Once again Robbie Martey was on hand to touch down. In was a temporary respite as moments later Noah Cannon decided on a more direct approach. He sped down the blindside delivered a jolting palm off and scored in the corner. The conversion drifted wide and Mr Foster blew the final whistle and Sutton had won 34-24.

It was a rousing end to a disappointing season and a fitting farewell to Messrs Caddy, Drye, Hurley & See. It was the best Sutton performance of the season in a match where Bracknell started in irresistible style and threatened to run away with the game. For the visitors Ken Hodgson was at the heart of everything and a constant threat. For S&E it was a wonderful team performance. The commitment to the cause was mightily impressive whether it was the tackling in defensive duties or the ball-carrying by the pack or the Bunting boot. When it was needed Robbie Martey added that sprinkling of magic on an afternoon when the Black & Whites were not to be denied. The league season may have ended but a new Cup competition follows in the weeks to come. The draw will occur next week and the date and opposition for this match will be posted in due course on the club website.

Sutton & Epsom

Alex Mawdsley, Robbie Martey, Lawrence Elliott, Freddy Bunting, Sam Hurley, Jamie See, Ross Parsons, Tom Boaden, Chris Farrell, Will Lloyd, George Drye, Josh Glanville, Ben Tame, George London, James Caddy ©.

Replacements: (all used) Alex Mount, Chris Pointing & Ciaran Mohr

Bracknell

Alex Frame, Simon Bayliss, Daniel Mays, Oliver Radford, Alexander Fieldhouse, Matthew Outson, Franklin Lewis, Ruairi Henderson, Bradley Walters, Nicholas Ovens, Thomas Scott, George Jupp, James Johnson, Liam Wood, Ken Hodgson.

Replacements: (all used) Jasper Miranda, Joseph Maybey & Noah Cannon.