

Willem The Conqueror brings victory to local rugby side

12 November 2023

London Cornish 24 Sutton & Epsom RFC 53, Saturday 11th November. It had been a decade since these two clubs had met in a league fixture and only a point separated them this season in the nether regions of the table. Having defeated bottom club Sidcup the previous Saturday Sutton travelled with optimism and were buoyed by the arrival of centre Willem Ratu from New Zealand who was making his debut. The hosts after weeks of hampered availability were also content that they were fielding their best combination so far this campaign.

At the final whistle it was Sutton & Epsom who took the spoils with a 53-24 bonus point victory. This ended a winless streak of 16 away league fixtures for the Black & Whites stretching back to the thrilling Tring 21-20 triumph of March 2022.

On a chill but still afternoon Freddy Bunting initiated proceedings in sunshine under a bright blue sky following a minute's silence for Remembrance Day. London Cornish have endured a hideous run of injuries and their misfortune continued after the first ruck that forced them to bring on Mathew Hand for Tony Pellow and reshuffle their front row. London Cornish's attempt to clear from their 22 was spoiled by Ewan McTaggart using all of his Brobdingnagian stature to charge down the kick then he adroitly transferred the ball to Robbie Martey who offloaded to Josh Pulvirenti to score his first 1st XV try. Freddy Bunting added the extras for a 7-0 lead. S&E barely had time to reflect on their perfect opening before the hosts drew level. Having forced their way into the 22 they were awarded a penalty that was quickly taken and scrum half Findlay Tweedie scored by the uprights. Michael Edworthy added the simple conversion for 7-7.

Sutton pressed hard to regain the advantage and seemed to have wasted an opportunity but the referee brought play back for a penalty in front of the sticks and Freddy Bunting made it 10-7. Moments later they extended their lead with their second goal of the afternoon. Another kick clipped Black & White hands foreshortening the clearance enabling Gareth O'Brien to gather the ball in centre field. The ball was transferred to Willem Ratu who ran it in from 40 metres with clinical efficiency and devastating pace. Captain Bunting bisected the uprights for a 17-7 lead.

Moments later he was caressing another penalty over the bar for 20-7 to end the first quarter. In the next ten minutes the men in Black & Gold had a chance to get back within a score. Fly half Michael Edworthy was successful with his first penalty but his second attempt drifted wide so London Cornish trailed 10-20 with ten minutes remaining of the first period as they enjoyed their best spell in the game. Sutton broke the shackles courtesy of another erroneous kick. A penalty failed to find touch and Robbie Martey returned it with interest. Soon Willem Ratu was offloading to Chris Farrell and the hooker set off for the line only to be denied by a wonderful covering tackle and the observant visiting touch judge who spotted he put a foot in touch when diving for the corner. It was then the Surrey men who suffered a charge down in their 22 but they escaped unpunished. In the dying embers of the first half Sutton secured their third try. Willem Ratu released Jordan Huie who showed great strength in the 22 before Ewan McTaggart advanced it to the line. The recycled ball came to Gareth O'Brien five metres out who stepped inside and was tackled but managed to reach for the line and score. Freddy Bunting concluded the half with the conversion and Sutton & Epsom led 27-10.

This was familiar territory for London Cornish, in the previous round they trailed at the break by 22-0 at Cobham before a storming 4-try second half brought them to the verge of a classic win. However, it was not long before the Rugby Lane team were extending their lead as they secured a bonus point with their fourth try two minutes into the second period. Willem Ratu in a flurry of surging limbs swatted away touchline tacklers and ran the ball in from his own 22 and the Bunting boot made it 34-10. As with the first half the hosts swiftly replied. This time it was a forward effort rounded off by captain Alex Davey from short-range. Ciaran Johnston took over the kicking duties from the injured Mike Edworthy and reduced the lead to 34-17.

For the Rugby Lane followers of a pessimistic disposition their fears were immediately allayed. Sutton claimed the restart and carried the ball to the Cornish 22 where Alex Mount made the telling break before passing to Rob Hegarty to do the honours. The simple conversion was completed and the scoreboard indicated S&E were 41-17 up within ten minutes of the second half.

The Black & Whites replaced Steve Munford at 9 with Chris Ballard and Tom Boaden swapped with Alex Mount at prop. London Cornish were far from subdued and threw everything at their opponents with winger Rob Mackay a constant threat coming off his wing numerous times zigzagging his way through would be tacklers. The Sutton & Epsom defence held firm with Matt Whitaker's magnificent tackle holding up his opponent over the line.

The next score went to Sutton and Willem Ratu completed his hat trick. He ran into the 22 and appeared to be halted as he stumbled but he rolled over regained his feet and ran in to score.

There followed a collector's item... a missed kick by Bunting as the visitors held a 46-17 advantage. The visitors were now at full throttle. They were held up over the line, a kick ahead was cleared by the scrambling defence and Matt Whitaker was halted from a five-metre scrum. But with ten minutes remaining it looked as if Rob Mackay was going to get his reward for his afternoon's endeavours. He strode towards the corner but was brought down with glory within his grasp by Jordan Huie. In years gone by it would have been acclaimed as a great cover tackle but in this season of the experimental new law it was a high tackle, yellow card and a penalty try.

S&E's penchant for the penalty try has seen five in eight outings and has now reached epidemic proportions as the Cornish trailed 24-46. With the numerical advantage they eyed the opportunity for a bonus point for a fourth try before

the match concluded.

Once more the Rugby Lane XV regained the restart and advance to the 22. A tremendous scrummage provided the perfect platform to exploit a generous blindside. Matt Whitaker picked up at 8 drew the defender and Chris Ballard waltzed in for his first Sutton try. Normal service resumed as Freddy Bunting converted to bring his personal tally to 18 points and the score to 53-24. For the remainder of the game the hosts went in search of the valuable bonus point but the visitors showed the same determination in defence as they had in attack. Despite the extra man London Cornish were not able to create a clear cut opportunity and the game ended with no further addition to the score. Sutton & Epsom had finally ended their away day woes and won handsomely 53-24.

Willem Ratu was outstanding on debut not only scoring a hat trick but also his passing and tackling were of the highest quality. As is often the case when an exceptional player is added into the mix it elevates the players around him. Ewan McTaggart had his finest game, Chris Farrell revelled in his role out wide and Robbie Martey racked up impressive stats for players passed and metres made. The travelling supporters were delighted to see the Black & Whites playing once more with pace, power and confidence and are now relishing the remainder of the season. London Cornish never took a backward step but were hindered by losing two of their front five within the first 10 minutes. Notable in a losing cause were Number 8 Adam Wheeler who carried relentlessly and Rob Mackay who was dangerous whenever he got the ball.

Next Saturday Sutton are on the road again when they visit the Memorial Ground to play high-flying Cobham who are fourth in the league only trailing Reeds Weybridge on points difference.

Sutton & Epsom:

Gareth O'Brien, Robbie Martey, Willem Ratu, Lawrence Elliott, Jordan Huie, Freddy Bunting , Steve Munford, Callum Gibson, Chris Farrell, Alex Mount, Ewan McTaggart, Josh Glanville,****George London, Josh Pulvirenti & Matt Whitaker.

Replacements: Tom Boaden, Rob Hegarty & Chris Ballard.

London Cornish

Ben Boorman, Robert Mackay, Kyle Hughes, Peter Brogden, George Bromage, Michael Edworthy, Findlay Tweedie, Tony Pellow, Oscar Cruz, Rory Ling, David Chalkey, Tom Carr, Alex Davey ©,****Jack Waving & Adam Wheeler.

Replacements: Mathew Hand, Mark Osei-Tutu & Ciaran Johnston.