

Hertford 16 Westcliff 23

A visit to Hertford is always a testing fixture and the first game after the Christmas and new year break tends to create its own challenges. Westcliff travelled in good form after a strong performance against Sidcup before the seasonal break and determined to get back to winning ways on the road. They would have to do so though without the commanding second row presence of Edwards recently relocated to the west country as well as the unavailable Smith brothers, Vandermolen and Sam Brown. Into the match day squad came Reynolds, Dellas, Dartnell, Maloney and for the first time Ed Johnson.

The game kicked off on a fresh but dry afternoon though the ground underfoot remained soft. The hosts were immediately on the front foot and urged on by a large and vocal home crowd dominated the opening minutes. Playing with conviction and tempo down the slope they pressed hard seeking the opening that defiant defence from Westcliff denied them. A penalty in front was converted and they took a 3-0 lead but Westcliff immediately responded by driving upfield creating space on the left wing and getting Reynolds up to and over the line in the tackle. Reynolds swiveled and rolled to complete the grounding when it appeared he would be held up. The difficult conversion was well struck before fading left but the visitors led 3-5. They were required to absorb and repel further pressure from Hertford but remained equal to the task and as the first quarter closed, they struck again. Forceful uncompromising defence generated a turnover in the centre of the field but Jones had space in front of him and the legs to outrun the wrongfooted cover and race home in the right-hand corner. The conversion was again missed but the lead was now 3-10. More uncompromising defence produced a similar outcome on the half hour mark with Bannister this time running in from deep. Westcliff continued to protect their lead and their line until the half time break leading at that point 3-15.

The second half started with the visitors on the front foot seeking a further score and a potentially match winning position. This time though it was Hertford who refused to buckle and instead drove upfield and got over the line the conversion hooked wide but at 8-15 the game very much in the balance. More Westcliff pressure followed and eventually paid dividends when a driving maul rumbled over the line with Maloney securing the score. Jones continued to draw a blank with the boot but the visitors led by 12 points. Hertford responded by scoring a try on the hour mark pouncing on a loose ball at a lineout that caught the defence out. With 20 minutes to go everything was still very much in the balance. As the game ebbed and flowed Westcliff returned to Hertford territory and forced a penalty in front of the posts but at long range. Jones accepted the responsibility and coolly struck the ball sweetly with the required accuracy and length to clear the crossbar and extend the lead to 10 point as 23-13 with 15 minutes to go. A further ferocious 10 minutes slipped by without any further scores until Hertford secured and converted a penalty of their own. The remaining minutes were tense as the sides locked horns Hertford pressed Westcliff defended Dartnell saw yellow but finally the referee blew time and Westcliff has secured a hard fought and well-earned victory for the first time at Hoe Lane.

We were really pleased with the lads application and their finishing today this is a tough place to come and get a result something we have learned to our cost in the past. We came having had to make enforced changes, then our tight head was injured in the warm up and couldn't take the field and we lost our outside centre to an injury in the first half, and yet we didn't allow ourselves to be knocked out of our stride. We remained focused and disciplined defended when we had to and took the opportunities we crafted scoring 4 good tries to collect the bonus point. A huge effort from the whole squad in an intense game and a tough environment and one that sets a very positive tone for the week ahead despite a few worrying injuries picked up along the way.

Bannister, Reynolds, Stol, J Jones, Merrick, Mckeith, Spivey, Weston, B Marrant, Dellas, Dartnell, Scogings, Marsh, Hatton, Maloney REP Lane, Johnson, H Marrant