

## Westcliff 25 Sutton & Epsom 27

Westcliff welcomed back some of those that missed the game at Brentwood, but remained without the services of Binneman and Stol as well as the unavailable Mckeith Mackintyre and Weston, for this eagerly anticipated top of the table clash. Midweek rain had drained away, and although soft underfoot the pitch was in better condition than had at one time seemed likely. There was a firm breeze blowing straight down the pitch towards the airport end.

Westcliff started fast and dominated proceedings with the wind at their backs from the outset despite losing the influential Vandermolten to a head injury at the very first breakdown. It took 10 minutes for the first try to arrive through Jim Smith but a further 3 tries followed in the next 20 minutes through Dartnell Reynolds and Spivey. Westcliff's play had been adventurous the scores created by swift incisive attacks combined with strong support and slick offloads. After half an hour they enjoyed a 22-0 lead although importantly only three of the four tries had been successfully converted. Sutton had arrived sat at the top of the table on the back of a long unbeaten run and although under the cosh responded on 35 minutes with a strong break out that got them in behind the Westcliff defence. Dragged down short of the line quick recycling and support saw them score under the posts and reduce the arrears 22-7. Westcliff went back on the front foot and put consistent pressure on the visitors line for the remaining minutes of the half but failed due to flawed final execution and committed defence to add to their lead.

Sutton had the wind at their backs for the second period and immediately began to enjoy better territory and possession. They were able to capitalize after 47 minutes with a converted try, and carried constant threat for much of the time, Westcliff's opportunities to attack more limited playing into the stiffening breeze. A successful Sutton penalty brought the score to 22-17, within a single score after 55 minutes but Westcliff drove upfield and converted a penalty of their own some 10 minutes later to establish an 8-point gap once more. The game was intense and regularly fractious with Westcliff finding themselves frequently falling foul of the referees whistle. They were down to 14 for half of the half as the referee brandished 2 yellow cards for Rob Smith and Marsh. Although defending stoutly and threatening to break out and score a decisive try they became increasingly frustrated by a stream of bewildering decisions and puzzling interpretations by the referee and Sutton converted a further penalty to bring them once more within a score with less than 10 minutes to go. Left with a nervous few minutes to see out Westcliff appeared to have done so but deep into injury time a hugely disappointing turn over at a set scrum with which the referee could find no fault the visitors had good field position and numerical superiority with Marsh in the bin. They forced a last play try under the posts to level the scores and a straight forward last kick conversion to win the game 25-27. Sutton jubilant victors Westcliff desperately disappointed and crest fallen by the late turn of events.

Having led from the 10<sup>th</sup> minute to the 85<sup>th</sup> and having not been behind until the final kick of the game it was a hugely frustrating and bitter result. We have to take it on the chin and take the loss with good grace, congratulate Sutton who played well and took their opportunity and do our best to shrug it off. That though isn't easy the result and the outcome of our season were massively impacted not only by the decisions and rulings made by the referee but as well by those things that were overlooked and missed that resulted in us conceding crucial scores. The importance of the game was crying out for a team of three to be appointed which would have been able to help a good referee who had a bad day get more things right. Never mind move on we must.

Bannister, O Jones, Reynolds, R Smith, Merrick, J Jones, Spivey, Brown, Marrant, Lane, Scogings, Dartnell, Vandermolten, Hatton, J Smith REP H Marrant, Maloney, Marsh