

Westcliff 24 Dings Crusaders 25



The summer months since promotion to National 2, through the play off in April, had been eventful. The departure of a head coach and several key squad players presented a challenge but one that was met head on. By the time Saturday and a first appearance at Level 4 arrived a busy and productive pre-season spear headed by new Head Coach Jacob Ford had concluded and the real business was at hand as the club welcomed for the first time to The Gables Dings Crusaders. Westcliff named a 20 man match day squad including 17 players who had progressed to senior rugby through its youth section. It handed 1st XV competitive debuts to Chris Bolton, Elliot Croft, Francois Rossouw and on the bench 17 year old Jack Hogarth.

The game kicked off on a firm pitch with a crossfield breeze of indeterminate advantage. The visitors kicked off and an early midfield knock on by the hosts gave them the opportunity to attack the Westcliff line. This was repelled and soon good ground was gained and fine continuity from Bannister Marsh and Billy Marrant took them close to the Dings line. Moments later Jim Smith picked and reached from a metre out to score the games first try. The conversion slipped by the upright but Westcliff led 5-0. Unfortunately Smith had sustained a hand injury in the act of scoring and barely 5 minutes later was forced from the field and did not return. The contest continued, Dings taking the opportunity to probe and pound at the home defence which stood firm. After 20 minutes a kick and chase from the visitors created pressure under the posts and a penalty was conceded that was routinely converted to reduce the arrears to 5-3. The game continued

for the next 10 minutes to ebb and flow with both sides carrying threat but without scoreboard success. The final 10 minutes of the half though belonged to the hosts as they crossed the visitors line twice. From a scrum just inside their own half Bolton broke at pace making ground in behind the defence and releasing the supporting Bannister who scored close to the posts and then converted his own effort. Five minutes later Croft wriggled out of a tackle to break the line on the 22 and outstripped the defence to touch down. Bannister again converted and Westcliff held a 19-3 half time lead.

Westcliff restarted the game by kicking straight into touch and conceded a set piece penalty at the scrum. Dings went quickly made good ground and soon cut through the defence to touch down on the right flank. The try went unconverted but the score moved to 19-8. From the home sides point of view, it had been an untidy start to the half but they responded quickly when Bolton collected a loose ball off the back of a lineout to sprint home from just inside his own half. Westcliff led 24-8 and had secured their first point of the season. From the restart Westcliff nearly scored again, Bannister running the ball back breaking tackles and releasing Kwaasi. The winger though was pulled down just short of the line and in holding on a fraction too long conceded a penalty which released the pressure. It felt like an opportunity missed and so it was, but it also felt like others would come. They did but unfortunately, they were not taken either while Dings kept playing and dragged themselves back into the game. A converted try for them closed the score to 24-15 and a penalty at the start of the final quarter brought them to within a score. The last 20 was a tense affair as Westcliff attempted to close the game out and it's likely they will reflect on one or two moments when they might have managed the game differently but even, so it seemed they had done enough. Instead in the 8th minute of time added on, in the games final phase, Dings barged over from short range under the posts. Their goal kicker retained his composure to secure the victory by the slenderest of margins with the game's final act.

So, a promising start and two points obtained but also a sense of frustration and bitter disappointment in the way the game got away from us. Fair play to Dings who kept playing and took their opportunity but they got on the bus knowing they had picked our pocket and that if we had taken our opportunities or managed key moments better maximum points would have been ours.

Nevertheless, its clear that there is much to build on and whilst disappointing it was also a performance of great promise. There is plenty for the coaching team to work on and significant room for improvement for a group with so many new faces in the coaching and playing set up. A special mention for Elliot Croft and Chris Bolton for solid try scoring debuts and 17 year old Jack Hogarth who debuted impressively from the bench. Next week the team travel to Bury St Edmunds.

Bannister, B Reynolds , Rossouw, Whiting, Kwassi, Croft, Bolton, Weston, B Marrant, Binneman, Scogings, Dartnell, Vandermolten, Marsh, Smith REP Dellas, Maloney, S Reynolds, H Marrant, Hogarth