

Westcliff 15 Henley 26

Having achieved a fine win away at Worthing, a first of the season, and a first ever at the level, the previous Saturday, Westcliff welcomed high flying and much fancied Henley to The Gables, another first. Smith and Webber were not selected due to injury and unavailability but welcomed back to the squad were Binneman, Lynch, Vandermolen, Bolton James and Triana. Seventeen-year-old Hogarth retained his place in the starting XV and under 18 teammates Richmond and Hussey were again selected on the bench. The weather was not great but midweek and late morning rain had failed to seriously degrade the pitch which was as firm and true as could be reasonably expected. Yes, it was windy, but it would be no mud bath. The disappointment of Englands comprehensive defeat at the hands of South Africa in the World Cup Final lay heavy in the air but much lubrication was easing the pain by the time attention turned to the National 2 clash.

Westcliff played into the wind for the opening period but in the early minutes took the game deep into Henley territory. They pressed hard but met firm resistance and after 7 minutes turn over ball allowed Henley to counterattack at pace and the opportunity was clinically exploited by the visitors with number 8 Sam Lunnon crossing under the posts, fly half Ben Bolster added the extras. The next 20 minutes followed a similar pattern, Westcliff failing to impose themselves on the scoreboard despite possession and territory to work with, and the visitors with the wind at their backs converting two opportunities with precision and ruthlessness. The first of these by scrum half Fenley which Bolster converted and the other by Bolster himself which he did not convert. With half an hour gone Henley led 0-19. The hosts were on the back foot but did not buckle and soon persistence and patience paid off with Billy Marrant crashing over from short range. The conversion slipped by but a foothold in the game was established. There was promise of further success most notably through a decisive line break from teenager Hogarth. However, he was dragged down just short and the Henley defence although hard pressed held firm, as did the Westcliff defence which was itself regularly tested. A penalty in front was finally despatched by the home side with the halves final act and the teams headed in at 8-19.

The second half was the same committed contest the first had been with both teams pressing and defending with vigour. After 50 minutes Westcliff had an opportunity to close the gap further, but Bannisters penalty attempt slipped the wrong side of the upright. It was a further 10 minutes before the breakthrough arrived, a forced turnover on the midfield gain line was gathered by Marsh who outstripped the covering defence on the long run in by a fraction to slide over the try line. Bannister added the conversion and with a little under 20 minutes to go the teams were within 4 points of each other. The visitors with their noses in front led 15-19. The final

quarter played out on a knife edge, but it was Henley that slipped the shackles after 71 minutes escaping the defence down its left flank and allowing Lunnon to score a second and ultimately decisive try which was duly converted. The score had simultaneously restored the 11 point lead and earned a try scoring bonus point range whilst putting a losing bonus point beyond the home teams grasp. Westcliff had several minutes to respond but their efforts were thwarted and came to nought.

The performance was good, but it was one without reward which was hugely frustrating. As ever the lads were totally committed and left nothing out on the pitch and its clear progress is being made. The game turned on a few pivotal moments when naivety and flawed game management yielded opportunities that Henley exploited with ruthless efficiency. Setting that disappointment and frustration aside though its clear that we can compete at the level and hard work on the training pitch will bridge the gaps and bring positive results.

Bannister, James, B Reynolds, Whiting, Hogarth, Croft, Bolton, Dellas, Marrant, Bineman, Scogings, Dartnell, Lynch, Vandermolten, S Reynolds REP Richmond, Triana, Meakin, Hussey, Marsh