

## Westcliff 20 Bournemouth 20

After two consecutive wins against relegation rivals Sutton and Old Redcliffians, Westcliff hosted for the first time, Bournemouth, the third of the sides immediately below them in the table. The visitors arrived on the back of a string of results against higher placed sides that had yielded valuable match points but not an outright win. Westcliff made three changes to the matchday squad, one enforced with Scogings replacing unavailable skipper Dartnell, and two optional, Spivey returning from injury and on debut recent squad addition Joe Ford. Conditions were grey and chilly but relatively benign the pitch soft underfoot but in good nick for the time of the year.

The opening exchanges were robust and combative both sides desperate to gain the upper hand and establish a platform from which they could go on and win a game vital to them both. Intensely physical the contest saw the sides cancel each other out in the opening quarter but Westcliff began to craft openings and threaten the visitors line as the game entered the second twenty. Frustratingly they failed to convert several opportunities into points until in the 29<sup>th</sup> minute the deadlock was finally broken. Bannister received the scoring pass after slick passing from first phase ball, the conversion was missed but they doubled the advantage just a few minutes later. Solid and disciplined Westcliff defence forced turnover ball that was collected by Ford who galloped unopposed down the exposed flank to score. Again, the conversion slipped by but as half time approached Westcliff led 10-0. Both sides were required to defend again but there were no further scores before the break.

Dellas who had been making his presence felt was withdrawn through injury at half time, replaced by Weston as the contest was renewed. Westcliff began the half on the front foot and soon camped in Bournemouth territory. The extended visit produced a succession of penalties which Westcliff declined to go for goal from, preferring instead to tighten the screw at the set piece, in search of greater reward. Desperate and commendable defence repeatedly kept them at bay but inevitably penalties were conceded, and the visitors were unable to escape the danger zone. Finally, the ball was shifted wider and Bean applied the finishing touch to score on the flank and extend the lead. The conversion attempt again failed but the hosts were now more than two scores ahead at 15-0. A solid platform it seemed, but Westcliff went off script, Bournemouth took an opportunity, and a momentum shift was palpable. An attempt to run the ball out of deep defence without support in the face of a disciplined chase resulted in an inevitable penalty and Bournemouth conjured up a well taken try after several phases. The try was converted and four minutes later they returned and scored a second converted try. The momentum was now with Bournemouth who at just 15-14 down had renewed belief and energy while Westcliff sought to shake off the stupor that had descended. They were not able to do so before Bournemouth slotted two penalties to inch ahead by first a point and then four, again poor decision making, the root cause. Suddenly with ten minutes left Westcliff had to chase a game they should have already put to bed. At last alive and responsive to their predicament Westcliff proceeded to set up camp in the Bournemouth twenty-two and pound at the line. Increasingly desperate defence once more forced a

rash of penalties and this time Westcliff didn't have the luxury of going for goal. They did though have a dominant scrum and they sought to drive the visitors back over their own line. In this they were frustrated by persistent infringements which were repeatedly penalised by the referee. Westcliff chose to reset again and the whole process repeated. After four perhaps five penalties and two Bournemouth yellow cards the ultimate penalty try sanction seemed inevitable, but instead playing yet another advantage, the ball was moved right, and Spivey touched down. The scores were now level and the final outcome of the match would depend on the conversion which would be the final act of the game. It proved not to be the home sides day with the boot as the attempt drifted left and the game finished, 20-20 three match points for Westcliff two for Bournemouth.

We have to take a balanced view about today's result. If we had been offered 12 points from these last three key games a month ago, we would have taken them happily. We have created a little space between ourselves and those three teams, but the gap is not unbridgeable, and we let two points slip out of our grasp today. We can look to the referee and his reluctance to award a penalty try at the end, but we failed to win the game because we were wasteful with opportunities in the first half, missed all our shots at goal, and sleep walked our way through poor decision making into conceding 20 unanswered points in a ten minute spell . It should be said as well that Bournemouth were competitive throughout and really seized their opportunity, but we should have closed this game out and not doing so is frustrating. However, despite not making the most of our opportunities we did create a number of them which in itself is encouraging. In the meantime, the games continue to come thick and fast and next up is the road trip to Taunton next Saturday.

Spivey, Bannister, Campey, Jones, Bean, Ford, Bolton, Dellas, Marrant, Binneman, Scogings, Vandermolen, S Reynolds, Marsh, Smith REP Weston, Hogarth, B Reynolds, Johnson, Lynch