

Westcliff 21 Sutton & Epsom 8

After opening the new year with a fruitless trip to Leicester, Westcliff returned to The Gables for the first in a crucial three game run against the clubs around them at the foot of National 2 South. Sutton & Epsom were the visitors, champions of London & South East Premier and something of a bogey team for the hosts in recent times. Westcliff recalled to the matchday squad Billy Marrant Rob Smith Jack Jones Vandermolen and Bolton who all started plus to the bench Hogarth. The afternoon was grey but dry with a cross field wind the pitch was soft but in good condition.

Westcliff were keen to start on the front foot and by and large did so controlling possession and enjoying territorial advantage in the opening stages whilst defending stoutly when called upon to do so. Early pressure was rewarded after 13 minutes with Jim Smith smuggling the ball from teammate Dellas and peeling off as the line approached to touch down under the posts. A try that Bannister converted to establish a 7-0 lead. Sutton grew into the game and the rest of the half ebbed and flowed with both sides posing occasional threat but neither side managing to score before the break.

The second half continued in much the same way a tight keen and closely fought contest. Sutton opened their account in the 44th minute with a penalty bringing the scores even tighter at 7-3. Westcliff's failure to convert pressure and half chances into points encouraged the visitors who sensed a shift in the balance and enjoyed more possession and exerted for a sustained period, better control. Despite a tightness and anxiety in their attacking game Westcliff continued to defend manfully when called upon to do so, frustrating Sutton when they sought to knock the door down. As the game entered the final 10 minutes each side lost a player to the bin in quick succession and after 71 minutes the visitors front row replacement squeezed over the line giving the visitors a slender 7-8 lead. Westcliff were in danger of letting a game once more slip from their grasp in the dying minutes, which would have been a deeply disappointing outcome. Instead though they responded almost straight away, a defensive box kick gave them possession back after the restart and after a few phases Bannister changed the direction of attack at pace breaking the defensive line before a tap tackle brought him to the ground. An effective clear at the break down and quick ball shifted down the narrow side then a grub kick from Hogarth and a favourable bounce allowed Bean to collect and score his first try for the club. Jones converted and Westcliff had wrestled back the lead at 14-8, just 5 minutes remained. There remained a nervousness in both sides play Sutton kicked directly into touch from the restart, but Westcliff did the same from the resulting scrum. That gave the visitors an opportunity to attack from a lineout on halfway and they moved the ball wide to the opposite flank. At the breakdown Westcliff counter rucked furiously through Bannister and Campey and the ball was turned over. A single phase later Bolton chipped the ball to the corner looking to pin Sutton deep on their line. The ball tumbled and rolled to their line watched dutifully by the defender waiting for the moment to arrive when the ball could be touched down. That moment appeared to arrive, but he dithered while skipper Dartnell at the end of a lung bursting chase did not. Everybody watched with slack jawed amazement as Dartnell dropped on the ball over the line fractionally before the

cover to score a match winning try. Jones swung the conversion in and over taking the score to 21-8. With just one minute to go Westcliff negotiated it easily enough and the game ended with them on the attack.

It was a very significant result for us, winning it was important not winning it would have been a real blow. I think that showed at times because in truth we weren't great, we have played better and lost, and we have played better against Sutton and lost. We put ourselves in good positions but failed to execute too many times and a tightness crept into our game. Never mind that for now though, it was all about the result, and from being a point behind inside the final 10 minutes we found a way to both win and get the Sutton bogey off our back. It's now all about next week and the trip to Bristol to face Old Redcliffians the side immediately below us in the table.

Bannister, Spivey, Campey, R Smith, Bean, Jones, Bolton, Dellas, Marrant, Binneman, Vandermolen, Dartnell, Lynch, Webber, J Smith REP Weston, S Reynolds, Hogarth, Scogings, Hughes