

## Westcliff 24 Dings Crusaders 29

National League rugby resumed Saturday afternoon after an 18-month pandemic induced hiatus. Its return was long anticipated, and eagerly awaited. As in wider society much had changed, but much also, had stayed the same. A new look coaching set up and for the most part an old look playing squad, a few players peripheral to the group had moved on, but more notably 2019/20 player of the season Chris Bolton moved to league rivals Bury St Edmunds and long-time club servant and 1<sup>st</sup> XV captain Ian Dartnell retired. In truth preseason had been a little underwhelming, availability and game time limited by a combination of factors. Led out by captain Greg Bannister, competitive debuts were handed to Dylan Coetzee at 9 and from the bench winger Seyi Ajeigbe. The weather was fine with a modest breeze, the ground firm and the spectator's expectant, doubly so as the visitors were delayed on route and the kick-off was necessarily put back to 1545.

Westcliff started well and forced an early penalty converted by Jones to establish a 3-0 lead in as many minutes. Shortly thereafter though Billy Marrant was in the bin for 10, after an inadvertent and unfortunate coming together with an opposition player that was higher than permitted. Dings took immediate advantage of the extra numbers to score a converted try. Westcliff would have been happy to play out the rest of the bin period with no change in the 3-7 score line but were delighted instead to retake the lead with an interception try from Campey that Jones converted. The contest continued with each side having periods in ascendancy, but the next blood was drawn by the visitors 30 minutes in. Sustained and patient phase play in the Westcliff 22 stretched the defence until their centre was able to exploit a gap from short range. The try was converted, and Dings retook the lead at 10-14. The remaining minutes of the half were played out with the same intensity, the teams traded a successful penalty each and the game was finely balanced 13-17 at the break.

The second half started well for the hosts and after 50 minutes a break from Cummins was held up but he was able to offload to Bannister on an inside line that saw him touch down alongside the uprights, Jones converted and the lead changed hands once more 20-17. Not long after Binneman was penalised and yellow carded for failing to role away. Whilst technically correct it was clearly very difficult to have done so. Shortly before he returned Dings scored a further converted try to forge ahead 20-24. As the game entered the final dramatic 10 minutes it was no clearer who would emerge the final victors. It looked to be the hosts when Bannister cutting back against the grain was intelligently fed by Coetzee and was able to exploit a mismatch to scurry over. A single point lead with minutes to go, would it be enough? In the end, no it wasn't, a bonus point short range try after a concerted drive into Westcliff territory put the visitors back ahead 25-29. As Westcliff applied pressure in search of a response Vandermolen became the third Westcliff player to receive a yellow card with insufficient time remaining for him to return. Even so, and despite being deeply fatigued, Westcliff pressured the visitors for the games dying moments and had opportunities they were ultimately unable to take due to dogged defence and imperfect execution.

After such a long break and a difficult preseason, it was both an encouraging and frustrating performance. One of good moments and bad, something to build on whilst pushing to the back of the mind, without ever forgetting, that it was a game we had the opportunity to win but let slip away. For their part Dings will consider that after a difficult journey they dug deep lasted the distance and deserved their win. Thoughts though of winners and losers are put to one side with the news that later emerged of the death of Henley Hawks player David Hyde who collapsed after their game with Old Albanian. Everyone's thoughts will be with those close to him.

Bannister, Hogarth, Campey, Cummins, Ford, Jones, Coetzee, Lane, Marrant, Binneman, Weston, Scogings, Vandermolen, Reynolds, Smith REP Richmond, Ajeigbe, Johnson, Binstead, Miller

