



Brachers

law



Match Report



London Division 2 (South East)

Tunbridge Wells RFC 37 v Maidstone FC 33

Played at Southfield Park, Skinners School, Tunbridge Wells,

Saturday 1st March, 2014

With a dramatically close score line, this 33-37 loss to local rivals, Tunbridge Wells, would appear, at first sight, to represent a pulsating, fluctuating game of many shifts and shades. The reality was the proverbial game of two halves, with Tunbridge Wells dominating Maidstone in the first half and fortunes reversed for the second. Indeed, it took all of the hosts resolve to resist Maidstone's late surge, as they knocked on the door of a last gasp victory.



With the hosts' ground unfit after recent rain, the game was switched to Skinners School ground, where a number of their games have been played this year. The small pitch with a noticeable slope down to one corner, undoubtedly gave an advantage to each side playing downhill, perhaps with an extra factor to the home side because of familiarity. But this cannot fully explain the disparity in the scores in each half or Maidstone's woeful first half performance.



With Jack Davidson and Matt Iles nursing knocks from last week's encounter, Paul Hyland stepped into the back row, with Josh Pankhurst reverting to his usual open side berth, Sam Bailey back at hooker and Ben

Brill taking up the No 8 slot. Joel Byford retained his starting position at prop with Ben Williams on the bench, returning after injury.

The opening period saw Maidstone, playing up the slope, electing to run the ball from their own 22, rather than retain the kicking game they had used to good effect the previous week. And this would have been justified if they had accepted an early chance to score, after ten minutes, following a catch and drive that had taken them to within ten metres of the Wells try line. But a failure to use a two man overlap saw the home defence smother the chance.

From here, the Maidstone threat went downhill, as the hosts found holes in the Maidstone defence and an unusual lethargy crept over the whole team. Wells' stand-off, Giles made good ground with relieving diagonal kicks and the follow up put Maidstone's wings under enormous pres-





sure as they dealt with the high ball. Wells' first score came just before the end of the first quarter from just such a kick, regaining the ball and punching holes through their forward play, with No 8, Cook, coasting in from the 22. With Giles adding the conversion, for a seven point lead, the need for a rethink was apparent.

Maidstone reshuffled their resources, with Morosan moving to scrum half and Ford coming on to the wing. But a penalty to Wells just inside the Maidstone half was converted by Giles, to stretch their lead, just before Hyland was yellow carded for pulling an opponent out of the ruck.

With Wells already dominating the forward exchanges in the loose, they took full advantage of their numerical superiority, adding two converted tries to their total on thirty and thirty five minutes, through prop Redman and wing forward Thompson, respectively, to stretch the lead to 24-0. Maidstone's woes were compounded by a neck injury to Byford and a further penalty converted by Giles to extend the Wells lead further.

The message delivered to Maidstone at half time was loud and clear: ensure you do your own job well and start playing as a team. With Ben Williams restored to the front row and James Iles on in the second row, the message quite clearly hit home and Maidstone began to challenge the home side's authority. But with Wells looking to defend their lead, Maidstone made scant progress for the first fifteen minutes and after conceding a penalty, allowing Giles to set up a line out for a catch and



drive in Maidstone's 22, conceded another converted try. This was finished off by winger Crees under the posts to see the lead extend to 34-0.



This was the high point of the game for the hosts, as throwing caution to the wind, Maidstone began to find their feet. From the restart, Maidstone won a scrum deep in the Wells 22, and after an initial surge for the line, released their back line with Willie Brown getting the touch down. With Van de Westerlo adding the conversion, some measure of pride was restored to the proceedings.

A penalty awarded to Maidstone at the restart for a high tackle on the try scorer was punted to the hosts 22 and although the resultant line out missed its target, the kick out by Wells was gathered by blind-side, Hyland, to run back from 30 metres, brushing aside tacklers, to make the line.

While the conversion was narrowly adjudged not to have passed through the posts, the momentum was palpably swinging toward Maidstone and, when Wells' centre, Burke, was yellow carded for a high tackle, it was clear that Maidstone had a chance to fully reverse the situation.

With Maidstone now running like a southern hemisphere side on a firm pitch, it was only a matter of time before the home side's defence was breached, with Sam Brill providing the coup de grace on this occasion and Van de Westerlo adding another conversion to reduce the deficit to 34-19. A fourth converted try, just past the half hour, by Neil Graves, reduced the deficit to eight points as well as providing a try-bonus point, with time on the clock to make further inroads into the Wells lead.

On a rare foray into Maidstone territory, a penalty was conceded for





hands in a ruck, which allowed Giles to extend the Wells' lead, just as forty minutes was recorded. But with a significant amount of injury time to play, the tension continued to rise as Maidstone attacked at every opportunity and from the restart, regained the ball to spin it down the line for Brill to get his second score and Van de Westerlo his fourth conversion.

With nine minutes of added time and legs on both sides tiring, Maidstone threw everything at Tunbridge Wells but to no avail, leaving the hosts with a four point margin at the end.

This game posed a number of questions, not least why Maidstone were so poor in the first half and so inspired in the second. The restoration of skipper, Ben Williams, just before half time, leading from the front, as usual, and tying up the opposition, may be one answer: and lack of ruthlessness in failing to score the early try is another. But the second half display has shown what is possible by playing as a team, which is a lesson that will surely be carried forward for the rest of the season.

Maidstone

Joel Byford; Sam Bailey; Ollie Smith; Lee Evans; Gareth Ellis; Paul Hyland; Josh Pankhurst; Ben Brill: Sam McPherson; Caleb Van de Westerlo; Sam Brill; Willie Brown; Neil Graves; Lucian Morosan; Josh Jensen

Replacements (All used): Ben Williams; James Iles; Brad Ford

