



Match Report



London Division 2 (South East)

Tunbridge Wells RFC 10 v Maidstone FC 31

Played at St Marks, Tunbridge Wells, Saturday 7th Mar, 2015



The corresponding weekend in late November saw the division's top four clubs in action against each other and this weekend of the reciprocal fixtures was no different. Whilst Maidstone continued to head the division, their hosts had since then seen their promotion aspirations fade, with the 18-12 November defeat the catalyst for a series of mid-season losses that had somewhat dented their ambitions; whilst at the start of the day they still sat on the fringe of the promotion battle, this 10-31 loss combined with the outcome of the Sevenoaks v Medway fixture at Knole Paddock effectively ended those hopes for this season as well as maintaining the county town club's title aspirations.



St Marks is notoriously poor draining and despite the mild weather during the week, with the match also played on a bright but breezy spring day, the going, to use a racing parlance remained 'soft'

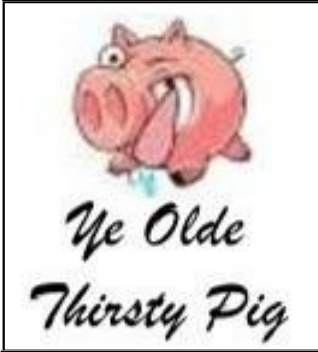
Whilst Head Coach Paul Hathaway was able to name a largely unchanged squad from the previous week, the side still featured a number of absentees from the regular line up. In the forwards the only change saw Matt Iles join brother James in the 2nd row, whilst the back division saw the return of Olly Newton occupying one of the centre berths, with Ben Pitkin starting at scrum half and Lucien Morosan reverting to the left wing.



The bench saw Luke Debnam alongside Jack O'Connell making his 1st XV debut and a first appearance in this campaign for Jason Smith after an injury troubled season.

The start of the match started with Maidstone playing at a pace that Wells found it difficult to live with as the struggled at the breakdown and were penned back in

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their own 22m. Maidstone could have been on the scoreboard inside the first two minutes as Pitkin and Morosan combined to burrow over the line wide on the left following the forwards initial driving maul, but the referee was unsighted the visitors had to settle for the scrum. From the resultant 5m scrum the pressure told and from a ruck close to the Wells' posts, Josh McKenzie got the touchdown as he grounded the ball against the base of the post; the extras were a formality for Pitkin and the visitors had an early 0-7 lead.



Within a couple of phases from the restart Maidstone were back on the attack as Ben Brill made the initial drive into the Wells' half, quick ball saw Jonno Skelton make inroads into the home side's half with Jamie Perigo on hand for the final pass, but still with work to do from outside the 22m to dummy the defence and touchdown under the posts. Pitkin added the extras and the signs were from the opening encounters, that Tunbridge Wells could be overwhelmed.



Maidstone were winning the early encounters and further breaks, this time by Pitkin and James Iles looked promising, but to Wells' credit, as the first quarter progressed they had regrouped and started to retain possession and put some phases together, which combined with a good kicking game gave them some territory; although in all fairness the visitors weren't helping themselves as some poor decisions gifted possession to the home side as well as a long range penalty attempt by Rigby which drifted wide of the posts. Midway through the half Wells were on the scoreboard as a poor 22m drop out gifted possession allowing the home side to move the ball wide with winger Ben Speer able to outstrip the defence to cross wide on the right with the extras added by Rigby from a difficult touchline conversion.



This was perhaps the wake up that Maidstone needed, but the remainder of the half was largely played out in midfield, although with Wells now having a penalty count in double figures, seven of which were consecutive, and four in quick succession at the breakdown; how referee Mark Sleet had not reached for his pocket bemused both players and spectators alike. Indeed it wasn't until the closing stages of the game that a card was eventually brandished.



The half was brought to a close with another Tunbridge Wells infringement, with Pitkin taking the points on offer to close out the half with a 7-17 lead.

Although they had played with the slope in the first half, it was the wind that created greater benefit and was too Maidstone's advantage in the second period. The early ex-

changes were played out in the Tunbridge Wells half as Maidstone, with Debnam now on for Will Fox and O'Connell replacing Matt Davies continuing to press, without really threatening the Wells line. The end of the third quarter saw Maidstone penalised at a scrum under the Wells posts, from this the home side were able to gain territory, and whilst they never really threatened the visitors line, a penalty awarded just outside the visitors 22m saw Rigby reduce the deficit to 10-17.



It was early in the final quarter that Maidstone collected their third try; a period of pressure on the Wells' line saw prop Debnam held up mid-way out on the left, from the resultant scrum the ball was moved from the base with Perigo hitting the line at pace against a flatfooted defence to cross under the posts. Pitkin predictably added the extra points in what was his last act of the game for a 10-24 lead, with Morosan moving to scrum half and Smith entering the game on the left wing.

It was in the 75th minute that referee sleet finally went for his pocket, with centre Wells' Lenin Malifa the recipient for a shoulder charge tackle. The resultant penalty saw Maidstone kick for the left corner, secure lineout ball saw the visitors instigate the catch and drive, and whilst the home side initially checked the progress, the second drive saw James Iles at the base to get the touchdown for the bonus point score with James Douglas taking up the kicking duties to add the extras for a 10-31 advantage.



The closing minutes saw Maidstone still on the attack, and a difficult Douglas penalty attempt narrowly missed the posts, with the final whistle sounding as Wells were playing some 'harum scarum' rugby behind their own posts in an attempt to run the ball.

In summary, this was a performance that started brightly for the league leaders, but the combination of their own basic errors and staccato nature of the game due to the high opposition penalty count somewhat checked their momentum. The key difference between the sides was that the bulk of the home side's efforts were in threatening the Maidstone 22m without really getting into the 'Red zone'. Maidstone on the other hand applied pressure on the opposition try line and seldom came away without scoring points.

Maidstone: Fox, Pankhurst, Byford, Iles J, Iles M, Davies, Cranston, Brill (C), Pitkin Skelton, Morosan, Perigo, Newton, Eastwood, Douglas. **Replacements:** (All Used) Debnam, O'Connell, Smith

