

Maidstone Barbarians 14 Canterbury V 19

This game saw the visit of the league leaders, who had soundly beaten the Barbarians in Canterbury earlier in the season, and resulted in what was probably the Barbarians' finest performance of the season. They were unlucky not to come away with a draw or a win from what was a fiercely competitive, sometimes brutal game: in fact, the referee paid both teams the highest of compliments, saying that he had not seen such a committed battle at this level of social rugby in a long, long time.

It was looking ominous almost from kick off, when a series of driving runs and rucks overwhelmed a slightly lacklustre Maidstone defence to send Canterbury over for a converted try. However, the ease of this first score was misleading and Maidstone were certainly not going to allow themselves to be a push over. In fact they came roaring back with an irresistible drive of their own, a real team effort, combining brutal forward momentum with imaginative angled running from the backs, culminating in a burst for the line through a couple of frantic, panicked tacklers by Tom Clarke to score a try that was duly converted by Simon Seal.

Quick feet and trickery from the Canterbury backs saw their wing skipping in for a second converted try to put them back in front. However, Maidstone were again quick to reply, with a perfect combination between Seal and Ace Knight, sending the latter at pace through the Canterbury back line. When Knight was tackled just short of the line, his centre partner James Greengrow was on hand to scoop up the ball skilfully and place it over the line. Again, Seal followed up with the conversion.

The rest of the match continued to be a battle of strong runners and thumping tackles, with the entire Maidstone team showing massive commitment at the breakdowns and supporting each other effectively in open play. Ferocious running, rucking and driving from all the forwards, especially Barney Carpenter, Tom Clarke, Colin Frost and captain fantastic Ian Ausher (as usual leading by example) as well as excellent lineout throws from hooker Mark Ingram set up clean and useful ball for the backs who made ground with pace and intricate combinations. Man of the match was Ace Knight, but James Greengrow, back for the first time since becoming a new father, ran him close. Both centres combined strong, aggressive driving runs with heroic tackling back. In fact, Ace was responsible for the tackle of the game, when an unexpected turnover during a Maidstone attack let the Canterbury backline through on the Maidstone line with no fullback cover. Ace made up at least 10 metres chasing back from the halfway line and timed a tackle perfectly to bring the Canterbury player down short of the line, dislodging the ball in the process. On the wing, too, Luke Cox repeatedly smashed larger opposition to the floor, bringing several turnovers from dangerous positions.

With five minutes to go, determined and persistent Canterbury pressure broke the Maidstone resistance to put the visitors ahead again. This set up a finale in which Maidstone put huge pressure on the opposition line and came close to breaking through on several occasions, most notably when one of Ace Knight's numerous foraging runs ended with him being tackled around the neck; he got the ball away to scrum half Mike Gillies, who was close to clean through, when he was called back for the penalty, when, frustratingly the advantage would have suited Maidstone far more.

The final whistle saw a Maidstone team a little disappointed with the loss, but justifiably proud of the part they had played in such a fine demonstration of the art of social rugby. The only blot on what was a very fine game, indeed, was the highly unsporting decision of the Canterbury captain, who had initially agreed to rolling substitutions in order to give Maidstone a chance to give some of their newer players a game, to change his mind and insist on the three subs rule, when the game was tied at half time. This meant that players who had committed their Saturday afternoon to play had to stand on the sidelines throughout: to do this at this level of rugby is disrespectful and unnecessary and we can only apologise to those who had to go without a game, as a result. We hope and trust that they will continue to turn out and be justly rewarded for their commitment in the future.