

Gravesend 3rd XV 32 vs. Maidstone 3rd XV 12

League: Invicta 3, Match 9

Donald Biggs Drive, Gravesend, Saturday 8th December. Kick-off 14:15

After a two week break from the League, Maidstone travelled to Gravesend looking for their third win on the trot. In contrast, Gravesend were looking to return to winning ways after two consecutive losses, however Gravesend were still unbeaten at home during this campaign.

With a number of Maidstone regulars unavailable the squad took on a slightly unfamiliar look, but Maidstone took to the field confident of a strong performance and keen to put on a good display with only one more game to follow before the Christmas break.

Playing on a pitch that had striking similarities to a half-pipe, Maidstone kicked off. The dank conditions were always going to mean that free flowing rugby would be difficult and thus it proved. Gravesend were up for a physical confrontation and much of the opening period was dominated by powerful forward play.

Maidstone found themselves on the back foot as Gravesend used their knowledge of their unusual home pitch to their advantage. Several phases of quick recycled ball pushed Maidstone back deep into their own 22.

To Maidstone's credit the defence was organised and held strong. Unfortunately the first blow of the day soon followed as Andy Smith, putting in a fine defensive display took a hard hit on the shoulder that forced him off.

Soon after the restart Maidstone had the opportunity for a clearing kick, however the ball failed to make touch and Gravesend cleverly moved the ball across the pitch and touched down in the corner to give them a deserved 5-0 lead.

From the restart Gravesend continued to push Maidstone back and an infringement in the centre of the park allowed Gravesend a shot a goal which was duly converted. Up until this point, Maidstone were finding it difficult to put together any real concerted pressure, but as they began to get a foothold in the game, a Gravesend clearing kick went uncollected and the winger powered through to pick up the loose ball and touch down. This second try rocked Maidstone and with half time approaching several missed tackles allowed Gravesend to run in for their third and fourth tries. Things were compounded further as Maidstone also suffered their second injury of the afternoon as Mike Hill came off with a nasty head injury. A difficult first half and the score was 25-0.

Needing to pick themselves up, Maidstone came out of the traps quickly and started running hard at the Gravesend defence. Playing shot, sharp balls around the fringes proved fruitful as Maidstone slowly moved up the pitch. Then an excellent break in the midfield by John Hogarth found Justin Evans to carry the ball twenty metres before shipping the ball on to James Sullivan to touch down with Tom McCulkin adding the conversion.

The score galvanised Maidstone and some good patterns of play were starting to pay off. But after suffering a heavy blow near the end of the first half, Martin Maytum needed to be withdrawn and the game went to uncontested scrums.

Gravesend pushed back and as Maidstone tried to find the gaps, a handling error allowed Gravesend to win the ball and run through with a three on one overlap. A further injury to James Sullivan meant there had to be a fifth re-shuffle of the game with several players now playing out of position.

Again Maidstone came storming back building controlled phases. Retaining the ball for nearly ten minutes, Maidstone were camped deep inside the Gravesend 22. Eventually Maidstone found the space and Ollie Coomber powered over the line to reduce the deficit.

The final fifteen minutes was played out largely in the centre of the pitch. However another head injury to a Maidstone player, thus time Justine Evans, and a hand injury to Will Rush forced further re-shuffles. The final score: Gravesend 32, Maidstone 12.

This game showed many positive things for Maidstone, particularly as there had to be several rotations within the team during the game forcing players to fill gaps in unusual positions. A solid second half performance showed how Maidstone can step up in difficult circumstances, and although Gravesend played some good rugby, with the performances so far this season, Maidstone can feel that the return fixture will show a different outcome.

This week's MOTM performance goes to Mike Laurenson for his versatility, consistency and all round play. Always reliable in both attack and defence, Mike is a powerful presence in the centre of the Maidstone backline.

Squad:

Chris Beszant: Richard Seaton: Martin Maytum: Mark Wilding: Ollie Coomber: Mike Oakley: Mike Hill: Simon Gower: Will Rush: John Hogarth: Andy Smith: Mike Laurenson: Justine Evans: James Sullivan: Ton McCulkin: Chris Morton: Simon Wright: Jason Smith: David Baker