



Match Report

League - London 3 South East

Maidstone 19 v Gillingham Anchorians 10

Played at The Mote, Saturday 23 March, 2013

With six changes to the starting line-up, the question on everyone's lips focused on how this would impact the team ethic. In fact, the answer turned out to be, little, but this was not the efficient machine we have seen in recent weeks, especially in the first half, as the forwards stuttered and the backs found ball handling difficult in the wet and cold conditions.



Was there a thought creeping into the collective mind about the big game next week? Certainly not from the visitors: they had a very clear game plan, which was to go at Maidstone with as much intent as possible, with the hope of building a lead and hanging on. And, as a strategy, it almost came off. Led by Maidstone old-boy, Craig Whitehead, Gillingham defied their league position and almost caused an upset, only conceding 19-10.

With Josh McKenzie and Michal Majcher starting in the front row and Andy Bacon and Sam Weston replacing Lee Evans and Richard Parker, the pack had a lighter, more mobile look to it. And with a new half back partnership of Adrian Hogben and Sam Mann, it was to be expected that it would take time to establish the fluency normally expected from the back line. But with a muddy pitch and a cold east wind confounding the best intentions to play a running game, it took longer than anticipated for Maidstone to find their feet. In fact, it took the first half, by which time, Maidstone found themselves ten points in deficit and their unbeaten record in peril.



The opening phases of the game saw both teams attempting to move the ball wide. What was missing from the Maidstone effort was the ability to get the wrong side of the Anchorians' defence, so, while many patterns were weaved; they all took place in front of the visitors' defence.



A seemingly innocuous tackle by left wing James Davies just past the ten minutes mark, saw him leave the field clutching his ankle, giving Gareth Bramwell the chance to show his paces, following his own injury problems this season. A penalty to Gillingham immediately following this incident, for not releasing after the tackle, gave the visitors the opportunity to get on the scoreboard, which fullback Mark George, gratefully accepted.

A second opportunity just past the quarter, from an easier position was spurned by George, a costly miss as it turned out. But Anchorians continued to defend stoutly and looked to kick for position in the Maidstone half, from which to launch attacks on the Maidstone line.

With their big scrum holding the Maidstone eight in the tight and a rampant pair of wing forwards causing their own problems, Anchorians posed a number of problems for the struggling Maidstone pack. And it was blind side flanker, Whiting, that rounded off the best move of the match, to put Anchorians' even further ahead on the half hour. Starting in their own half, the visitors moved the ball down their left flank before bringing it back infield to cut through the Maidstone defence. With George adding the conversion, Gillingham went in to the break with a ten point lead and their tails up.



With a manifest threat to Maidstone's unbeaten record presenting itself, club skipper, Ben Williams, delivered some unpalatable truths at half time, and, along with regular front row, Danny Baker, elected to start the second half. And the fight back began from there.

Following a penalty to Maidstone, a line out on the Anchorians' five metre line allowed Danny Baker to trundle over in the corner to get the Maidstone reply underway. And it was the added pressure of the pack that began to pressurise the Gillingham defence, generating a succession of penalties to Maidstone as the visitors tried everything they knew to repel the reinvigorated home side.

Further disruption to Maidstone came when standoff, Mann, left the field with a shoulder injury. But with Majcher back on and man-of-the-match, Matt Iles, moving from No 8 to centre, this hardly caused a ripple.



A Bailey touch down on fifteen minutes was disallowed, following his contact with the referee just before scoring, but a scrum, deep in the Anchorians 22, a few minutes later, saw the ball moved to Willie Brown to score half way out. Sam Brill added the conversion to put Maidstone in the lead for the first time.

A further score, just before the half hour, with Brown again applying the finishing touch, after a five metre scrum, and Brill adding the extras, provided the points cushion required to close out the game. And despite every effort by Maidstone, the Anchorians' defence held a series of attacks, denying the home side only their second bonus point of the season.



So, with minds now turning to the cup semi-final next week, it is clear that improvements in Maidstone's application will be required. This was a wake-up call for the big one. Let's hope the alarm was loud enough.

Maidstone

Sam Bailey; Josh McKenzie; Michal Majcher: James Iles; Andy Bacon: Sam Weston; Jack Lamb; Matt Iles: Adrian Hogben; Sam Mann: James Davies; Willie Brown; Mark Dorman; Jason Smith: Sam Brill

Replacements (All used): Ben Williams; Danny Baker; Gareth Bramwell

Photos: Oscar Newman