



## Match Report



London & SE Division 1 (South)

Maidstone FC 28 v Gravesend 20

Played at The Mote, Saturday 21 October 2017

With seven personnel and two positional changes from the team that played at Cobham, there were concerns from the outset that the rhythm of the side that had been established in the narrow away defeat two weeks ago, would be upset. An ankle injury to Ben Brill within a few minutes of the start of this game, that required hospitalisation, compounded the problem, resulting in a 12-20 defeat to local rivals, Gravesend.

A further woe was the non-availability of skipper, Ben Williams, after his 80<sup>th</sup> minute red card at Cobham. While Adam Knight tried his best, as stand-in skipper, to direct the side to play as a coherent whole, the outcome was, for much of the game, a shapeless affair. It was only the last ten minutes of the second half that Maidstone raised themselves to really threaten the visitors line, managing to score two tries and begin to put doubts in the visitor's minds.

But for the previous seventy minutes, Maidstone lacked cohesion, failed to control the ball when they had it and failed to breach the opposition defensive line, with any frequency.

In the skipper's absence, Kiwi recruit, Keiron Gibbons stepped into the front row. From the same North Island club, Burnside, as former favourite, Willie Brown, much was expected and he delivered with a solid performance in a pack that came under pressure, in the tight, on a number of occasions.

Ben Massey, Ben Brill and Matt Iles were restored to the pack after injury, with Rob Field returning to the replacements bench after a good performance at Cobham and Ben Knight taking up his familiar, blind-side role. The big disappointment was the failure of Stuart Doust to overcome a training ground injury, which meant a significant re-shuffle of the back line.

While the three-quarters, on paper, looked solid enough, the passing skills brought to the party by the missing Doust, evident in the performances at Havant and Cobham, proved the significant difference, on the day. The extra half-yard provided by his quick distribution has yet to be seen on home soil, but for those that made the recent away trips, will understand the benefits he brings.

With storm Brian blowing merrily above the pitch and delivering rain clouds aplenty, conditions at pitch level were surprisingly genial. While there was a wind behind Gravesend, playing down the slope in the first half, it wasn't so strong as to be a problem for either side. But Maidstone sensed the demons were against them when after an early penalty attempt by the visitors had drifted wide, Ben Brill, in jumping to catch the restart, fell heavily on his left ankle and had to be carried from the field.

Maidstone regrouped, with Rob Field taking up a back-row position, but their first opportunity to get on the scoreboard came to nought when a line out in the Gravesend 22, following a penalty, was adjudged not straight, letting the visitors off the hook.

With the end of the first quarter approaching, Maidstone inflicted further pain on themselves when Rob Field was yellow carded for a high tackle. This prompted a spell of

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Gravesend pressure through a series of catch and drive moves. To their credit, the home side fought their way through and, on the half hour, with full complement restored, had their first chance to get on the scoreboard. But Caborn's 40 metre attempt, into the wind, fell just short.

With the clock moving into injury time, the deadlock was broken when Gravesend full back, Betts, slotted a penalty, twenty-five metres out. A three-point deficit at the mid-way point would have been acceptable, but a mistake by Maidstone after the restart, gave Gravesend a scrum and an attacking position, from which they took full advantage.

A flowing move to the left was on the point of touchdown, when Josh Pankhurst committed a high tackle which resulted in a seven-point penalty try for Gravesend and another yellow card against Maidstone. The deficit, thereby, grew to ten points with Maidstone facing a further ten-minute player deficit, most at the start of the second half.

While Gravesend pressed to further their advantage, it was a long kick to the visitors' 22, that presented the crowd with the best rugby of the afternoon and another visitors' try. Recovering the ball from the kick and evading the Maidstone follow up, the ball was moved swiftly across the field to right wing, Okenla, who moved outside the cover, swapped passes and then slalomed back across the field to score to the right of the posts. With Betts adding the conversion, the Gravesend lead jumped to seventeen points.

Another break by Okenla gave the visitors a further opportunity to increase their lead, but the resultant kick through was knocked on by the opposite wing in the act of scoring and Maidstone escaped, on this occasion.

On the quarter hour, Gravesend extended their lead to twenty points with a second Betts penalty and all seemed lost for Maidstone. But with the game losing shape, with both sides making too many mistakes, a stalemate evolved.

As if from nowhere, Maidstone suddenly roused themselves and scored twice within five minutes. The first was secured by Adam Knight in the right corner, after a catch and drive move, which saw a fine conversion by Caborn, to put seven points on the board. The second, was by Ben Knight in the left corner, after a typical break from Josh Pankhurst that took play from half way to the visitors' line.

The near miss of the conversion, by Caborn, meant a losing bonus point evaded Maidstone and Gravesend played out the last few minutes with a succession of pick and drives. While frustrating for the home side, it encapsulated the difference between the sides on the day, playing to and delivering on a plan to secure a win.

**Maidstone** Kieron Gibbons; Josh Pankhurst; Garry Beck: Adam Knight; Ben Massey: Ben Knight; Ben Brill; Matt Iles: Lucian Morosan; Rory Beech: Vaki Antoniou; George Perry; Ryan Copp; Eliot Green: Euan Caborn

Replacements: Max Guero; Rob Field; Jack Leech (All used)

