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Haywards Heath 17, Maidstone 16

By Richard Ewence

Following their defeat of hitherto unbeaten Dover last week, a close to full strength Maidstone travelled to Haywards Heath knowing that they had the ability to turn over higher placed opposition: instead they left Sussex ruing the late penalty that enabled Heath to snatch what would have been a well deserved victory, from their grasp.

It would have been well deserved because Maidstone had outplayed their large and powerful opposition in almost every department. In the scrum, the return of Will Fox to the front row and Charlie Bentley to the 2nd row gave Maidstone dominance in that department; the line-out functioned well all afternoon, to the credit of hooker Tom Varker who had a fine all round game in set plays and loose; the handling of the Maidstone backs in a stiff wind was impeccable and at times breath-taking (in contrast with the Heath three-quarters who were full of running but were often undone by poor handling) and the back-row trio of Jordan Amos, Jamie Marzetti and Dan Fisher carried the ball well and harried the Heath attackers all afternoon, often catching their fly-half or centres in possession. However, the one department in which Heath had the edge perhaps was in supporting the ball-carrier, where Maidstone were penalised repeatedly for not releasing on the ground, the last one of which cost them the game.

Following a minutes silence in respect of a Heath stalwart who had died tragically the previous week, Maidstone kicked off in bright sunshine with a strong blustery wind at their backs. From the off, Heath showed their intent by launching powerful runners at Maidstone from inside their own half, but the Maidstone three-quarters and full-back Alex Clark, all of whom tackled magnificently all afternoon, soon showed that they were not going to be intimidated by pace or size and in fact quickly showed that they were a potent attacking force in their own right.

After weathering sustained pressure from Heath in the early exchanges, centre Joe Burden robbed the ball just inside the Heath half, which was quickly spread wide via George Perry till it reached Scott De Zoeten on the wing who, finding himself with no space on the outside executed a high-speed back-handed flip pass to enable the attack to continue until the ball reached No 7 Dan Fisher who danced through a crowded defence from 20 metres out to finish under the posts, converted by Perry.

However from shortly after the restart play broke down 15 metres from the Maidstone try-line and in the melee that followed, the Heath winger was able to find gaps to wriggle through under the posts to level the scores at 7-7.

A penalty to Maidstone for a high tackle gave Maidstone a good chance to kick to the corner but in the blustery wind the kick went dead (an error that was to be repeated by Heath themselves in the 2nd half) but shortly afterwards Scrum-half Newton chipped ahead and then scragged the Heath full-back on his own try-line, a passage of play from which Heath were lucky to emerge without conceding. A high tackle on Joe Burden gave Perry a 30 metre kick in front of goal, which he duly slotted. Maidstone then endured sustained Heath pressure resulting from a penalty that they kicked to the corner but the Maidstone defence proved strong and despite a battering from the Heath forwards, the only damage conceded was a yellow card for Skipper, Ben Massey, followed shortly thereafter by yellow cards for Tom Varker and the Heath number 5 for "hand-bagging" one another. Despite only having 13 players on the pitch, Maidstone were able to close out the half with a further penalty from Perry after Alex Clark was taken out in mid-air (for which not even a yellow card) to bring the score to 7-13 - but would it be enough with the wind against them in the 2nd half?

Shortly after the restart, Amos caught the Heath 10 in possession and Maidstone were awarded a penalty from 35 metres out against the wind, but the distance proved too great for Perry although Heath knocked on whilst trying to field the kick, giving Maidstone a 5 metre scrum. It was now Maidstone's turn to batter the try line with repeated efforts to score and being held up inches from the line but eventually a penalty to Heath relieved the pressure and play moved down wind where despite a gutsy tackle from Alex Clark that brought down the 15 stone+ Heath winger just metres from the try

line, sustained pressure led to a try under the posts on 52 minutes that enabled Heath to go ahead for the first time in the match at 14-13.

After the restart, a big catch from Dan Fisher at the back of the line and strong running from Josh Smith moved play to within a metre of the Heath try-line where Jack Leech was bundled into touch but Heath were able to clear their lines with a relieving kick. Maidstone came back quickly and another high tackle from Heath gave Perry his last 3 points of the day and Maidstone a precious but slender 17-16 lead with 5 or 6 minutes to play. With echoes of the Aylesford defeat coming to mind two weeks ago, Maidstone were caught not releasing in the tackle whilst trying to run the ball out of their own half and a 30 metre penalty opportunity with the wind behind him, was not going to be spurned by the Heath kicker as they gratefully took the points and the narrowest of wins.

Could the Maidstone team have done much more? Probably not: they played with exceptional heart and skill and made the best use of the talents at their disposal, doing enough to win the match but falling just short - not helped by what appeared to be some rather harsh refereeing decisions at times, although it perhaps highlights a weakness in supporting the ball-carrier and clearing out at the break-down. Man of the match was Dan Fisher, who has now scored a try in all 3 of his 1st Team starts, whilst the Dick of the Day accolade was incurred by Team Manager Richard Weston for leaving the Kit Bag in Maidstone, meaning that the team had no shirts until Bob Beney rode to the rescue 3 minutes before kick-off.

Will Fox, Tom Varker, Ashley Gilligan (replaced by Ryan Murphy), Ben Massey, Charlie Bentley (replaced by Charlie Williams), Jamie Marzetti (replaced by Jack Lamb), Dan Fisher, Jordan Amos, Ollie Newton, Jack Leech, Josh Smith, Joe Burden, George Perry, Scott De Zoeten, Alex Clark.