

Snowdown Colliery XV 16 vs. Maidstone 3rd XV 21

League: Invicta 3, Match 11

The Welfare Ground, Saturday 5th January. Kick-off 14:15

The first game of the New Year found Maidstone heading down to Snowdown as third hosted fourth in Invicta 3. Both teams started the day on 32 points, also joint with Edenbridge, whilst Medway led the table on 36 points.

Maidstone travelled down with a strong squad, and notably, welcomed former Mustangs captain Nick East back into the team along with Nathan Fitzpatrick who was back from University.

Playing up the slope, Maidstone knew that if they had true aspirations for the League title, nothing less than a victory here would suffice. The opening exchanges were to set the tone for the match with strong tackles and big hits going in from both sides. Even though the slope was against them, Maidstone were looking to move the ball around and give the backs the opportunity to run at the Snowdown defence.

Powerful forward running from Martin Maytum and Toby Young provided an excellent base to build phases, with Captain Tuggy and Dom Baxter linking the play with superb tactical awareness. Maidstone's first opportunity to score came from quick re-cycled ball at a ruck, which allowed Dom Baxter to make a break up the middle, and ship the ball to Tom McCulkin who nearly made it through to the line before being tackled just short. Rather frustratingly though, and against the run of play, Maidstone went behind to a penalty, the kick well taken by the Snowdown 13.

Shortly after, Maidstone made a further break up the middle and produced some free-flowing rugby between both forwards and backs with both Lewis Fagg and Ian Howson coming agonisingly close to the line. From this break and the resulting ruck, Simon Wright was on hand to pick up the ball and coast over the line for his first try of the season. The conversion missed, but Maidstone were ahead 3-5.

The game had also started to get rather fiery with Snowdown becoming more and more aggressive. In a rather atypical display, Maidstone were sucked into this behaviour and started to concede numerous penalties as tempers flared. The second quarter found the game being played largely in the middle of the pitch as both teams struggled to put together concerted pressure due to the indiscipline. However both Maidstone and Snowdown did kick a penalty a piece to leave the half time score: Snowdown 6, Maidstone 8.

The second half started with Maidstone being pushed back due to the continued indiscipline. With the penalty count rising, an incident in the middle of the pitch close to the Maidstone line led to a player from each side being yellow carded. Snowdown finally realised that they were only two points down and duly took the points, and the lead.

Captain Tuggy's leadership then came to the fore. Finally realising what was at stake; Maidstone cut out the indiscipline and started to control the game. Moving steadily up the field, possession was kept cleverly and comfortably. On the odd occasion where possession was conceded, some superb counter rucking by the Maidstone forwards retrieved the ball and allowed the phases to be built

again. Ian Howson, running from full-back was cutting some superb lines, and it was from one of his breaks that the next score would come.

Following a break and chip into the Snowdown 22, the ball was collected by the Snowdown full-back and kicked back. Missing touch, the ball was gathered by Will Rush, playing in the back row. Taking the ball off his thigh, Will made a dash for the line with the Snowdown defence flailing. With the touchdown and the conversion, Maidstone now had a commanding 21-9 lead.

With around ten minutes left in the match, Snowdown were clearly deflated, but to their credit they would not give up. A further penalty allowed Snowdown to kick for touch and win a line-out just outside the Maidstone 22.

Rather bizarrely, Maidstone conceded a further penalty from the line out when David Ruaux, playing on the open side wing was adjudged offside. Snowdown pilled everything forward and bashed Maidstone deep into their 22. Then a missed tackle in midfield allowed a simple run in by the posts with a simple conversion. Less than five minutes left, the score was now 16-21.

In true Maidstone fashion, the final few minutes were played out in the midfield in a controlled manner and Maidstone emerged from a tough encounter victorious.

This was a great start to the second half of the League campaign, with Snowdown a tough opponent and difficult place to visit. Taking the four points keeps the pressure on Medway, who this week defeated TJ's 19-10. With Edenbridge also winning 38-0 vs Gravesend, surely these are now the top three contenders for the title??

Maidstone's next match is away to Medway, with Edenbridge playing at home to D&B. With Edenbridge likely to secure the win next week, could Maidstone's title ambitions be decided in less than seven days??

Captains note – There were a number of standout performances this week – Maytum was working hard the tight and loose, knocking their big runners back in the tackle, Dominic co-ordinated well from the 'armchair' at no 10, the youngsters of Young, Fitzpatrick and Rush all worked tirelessly, Wrighty scored (!!!!) but this week's MOTM performance goes to Ian Howson who made numerous runs at full back turning defence into attack and leaving Snowdown grabbing at thin air as he threw dummies and sided stepped his way past them.

The 3rd Team Curry is booked for 7pm at the Tandoor Mahal – Dave Ruaux has arranged a deal for £15 for the food (to be collected in advance) past, present & future players invited!

Squad:

Toby Young: Dave Jackson: Nathan Fitzpatrick: Simon Wright: Martin Maytum: Edd Adams: Will Rush: Nick East: Dave Tugwell: Dom Baxter: David Ruaux: Tom McCulkin: George Coomber: David Baker: Ian Howson: Lewis Fagg

