

Aylesford 3<sup>rd</sup> XV 12 vs. Maidstone 3<sup>rd</sup> XV 27

League: Invicta 3, Match 4

Jack Williams Memorial Ground, Aylesford, Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> October. Kick-off 15:00

Following a break from the League last week, Maidstone's first away fixture of the campaign took them on the short trip to local rivals Aylesford in this season's first match for local bragging rights. Maidstone's 100% record this season was contrasted against an Aylesford team that have shown inconsistent form, racking up a forfeit, a heavy defeat and an impressive victory in their opening three games.

With nine changes from Tuesday's selection, there could have been an air of uncertainty about the cohesion Maidstone could put together, but with a lot of experience in the squad, a solid display would mean victory was certainly possible. Two notable selections this week saw a debut for forward, Shane Davis, and a return to the on-field action for the ever impressive, and former first team captain, Jim Walker.

Maidstone started the match working up the slight slope. Aylesford's game plan was to keep the ball tight in their forwards, and focus on playing short, sharp balls around the fringes to try and break through the Maidstone defence.

Maidstone were on the back foot for much of the first fifteen minutes, but strong, resolute defending meant that Aylesford were never truly threatening the Maidstone line. With the match being kept largely in the forwards, strong tackling and aggression at the breakdown stopped Aylesford gaining momentum, and then combined with accurate tactical kicking from John Hogarth at 10, Mike Laurenson at 12 and Ian Howson at 15, meant Maidstone could play for field position whenever pinned back to their own 22-metre line.

Going into the second quarter of the game, Maidstone found more time with the ball in hand. Aylesford were playing a very narrow defensive line and this allowed the Maidstone backs the opportunity to stretch the play. Strong running from all areas kept Aylesford constantly on the defensive. This period of pressure was going to pay off as a scrum on the far right of the pitch was taken up short by Jim Walker at number 8. The recycled ball was then shipped through the backs across the full width of the pitch for David Ruaux on the wing to hold off two defenders and touch down in the corner. Aylesford could probably feel aggrieved but the score was 0-5.

Too often this season Maidstone have allowed the opposition to come straight back in once they have established a lead. However, from the restart Maidstone continued to dominate the game. Martin Maytum, Jim Walker and Edd Adams were consistently forcing Aylesford back with powerful runs, and the whole pack would control the breakdown to provide a solid platform for the backs play off.

With the ball in hand, the backs worked as a unit to exploit gaps in the Aylesford defence with Mike Laurenson and Tom McCulkin adding further flair in the midfield. This would be the basis for Maidstone's next score. In a near carbon copy of the first try, Maidstone's forwards set up a platform on the right hand side. The ball was then moved through the entire backline for David Ruaux to outpace the cover. Maidstone now leading 10-0.

With a reshuffle at half time, Dominic Baxter came into the centre and the 'retired' Matt Plowman in at number 8. Maidstone needed to start the second half with the same control that they finished the first. Aylesford in contrast, needed to adapt their own play to try and find a way back into the game. Unfortunately for Maidstone, Aylesford came out the traps quickest.

In a similar fashion to the start of the game, Aylesford pushed Maidstone back with penetrating runs round the fringes. This kept Aylesford moving forward until a size mis-match out wide found Aylesford shipping the ball to their big number 3 to power over the line, despite three Maidstone players attempting to hold him back. The try went unconverted so the score was now 5-10.

Maidstone continued to struggle to get a foothold in the second half, and Aylesford were unrelenting in using the sheer size of their number 3 to test Maidstone's tackling ability. Playing deep in their own half, Maidstone should have cleared their lines but attempted to slow the play and set up a base first. This proved costly as an uncharacteristic loose pass in the forwards allowed the Aylesford number 10 to intercept the ball and run in by the posts. The simple conversion meant that fifteen minutes into the second half an Aylesford were up 12-10.

As always with Maidstone, being behind seems to galvanise the team. After re-grouping Maidstone started to re-assert themselves through their experience and tactical awareness. John Hogarth playing for field position finally had Maidstone on the offensive.

Maidstone's forwards then began to completely dictate the play. Periods of intense pressure saw Maidstone's pack push Aylesford off the scrum on numerous occasions, and using the 'catch and drive' at the lineout frequently found Maidstone gaining ten to fifteen metres. Maidstone stayed camped in the Aylesford 22 but seemed unable to find the gap that would allow them to cross. In the end a gap wasn't required.

Maidstone were awarded a scrum, and the sheer presence and power of the forwards pushed Aylesford over their own goal line for Jim Walker to touch the ball down and re-establish Maidstone's lead at 12-15.

Maidstone were now in total control and Aylesford had no idea of how to deal with Maidstone's creativity. From the re-start Maidstone retained possession and kept the ball moving. Playing about midway in their own half John Hogarth spotted some empty space deep on the left side of the pitch and launched a pin-point cross field kick for winger David Ruaux to chase. With the Aylesford defence caught scrabbling, David collected the ball and crossed for his third and Maidstone's fourth try of the afternoon. The game now practically beyond Aylesford with the score: 12-20.

Soon after, Aylesford's big number 3 received a yellow card for repeated infringements and with about ten minutes left to play Maidstone had the chance to further emphasise their superiority. Setting up multiple phases, the forwards relentlessly forced the ball up the pitch. Winning a scrum about thirty metres out, captain Tuggy cleverly saw the opportunity to take the ball himself. Weaving past first the winger and then the on-rushing fullback to score under the posts. With Mike Laurensen adding the extra two points, the game's final score was Aylesford 12, Maidstone 27.

This was probably Maidstone's strongest performance this season and coming against Aylesford makes the victory that much sweeter. Crushing Aylesford on their own pitch is something every Maidstone player wants to be a part of, and this was a real team effort where everyone showed

their capabilities.

With four wins from four, Maidstone are joint top of the League with Ashford with the two teams meeting at Ashford next week. To add further fuel to that fixture, Ashford were surprisingly beaten 2-0 by TJ IV's, meaning that although Maidstone and Ashford are equal on points, Maidstone has a game in hand.

**Captains Note :** As usual an excellent match report from Dave Ruaux who this week fully deserves the MOTM performance for his desire for the ball and ability to convert the chances when he had it. He is consistently showing the work rate, effort and desire that the 3<sup>rd</sup> team is all about.

Squad:

Martin Maytum: Chris Morton: Ross Laing: Matt Cooper: Simon Wright: Edd Adams: Shane Davis: Jim Walker: Dave Tugwell: John Hogarth: David Ruaux: Tom McCulkin: Mike Laurenson: David Baker: Ian Howson: Dominic Baxter: Matt Plowman.