

Saturday 17th November 2007

EDF Energy Junior Vase Round Four

Bloxwich 15 Alcester 7

After hitting the heights of their season so far the previous week, with their narrow defeat to league leaders Rugby St Andrews, Alcester came back to earth with a shuddering bump, with a desperately disappointing performance in the heart of the Black Country, exiting the national vase in the process. To make matters worse they lost three key players to injury inside the opening half hour and lost two more to the sin bin in the second half, but despite all this, and somewhat frustratingly, this was a game they could still have won.

The pumped up home side started brightest and had Alcester on the rack for the opening ten minutes, but the visitors weathered the storm and started to assert their authority on the game. Just as it looked as though it would be the red and blacks who would be the first to put points on the board, a stray pass from a visiting forward from the back of a maul in an attacking position, gifted possession to the home side and they quickly used the turnover to good effect in feeding their left winger in plenty of space to race clear and score.

The visitors lost hooker Dickie Moore to an ankle injury, shortly after the first try, he was replaced by prop Steve Lunn. Within minutes fly half Matt Gwynn went down with a groin injury, but he didn't leave the field initially, and once again Alcester were guilty of a bad mistake to let the home side in. From the back of another attacking maul, a stray pass was flung in the direction of Gwynn, who by this time was walking wounded. Gwynn was unable to reach the loose ball and the same Bloxwich player who scored the first try, reacted quickest to race in under the posts. Following the conversion, Alcester trailed 12-0.

The red and blacks disastrous first half hour of the game was confirmed when principle line out jumper Phil Birks had to leave the field with the reoccurrence of an existing knee injury. Without their regular thrower and main line out receiver, the visitors had to scarp for possession at the line out for the rest of the afternoon, resulting in young scrum half Tom Burgess having a torrid time in trying to salvage what ball he could behind his pack. The half could have got worse for Alcester, but the home kicker missed a penalty resulting from the visitors failing to master the referee's interpretation of the ruck law.

Turning around with the wind in the second half, the visitors started to get more into the game, but they lacked real cohesion in their play, despite looking dangerous when the ball did get to midfield and beyond. The opening quarter of the half remained scoreless, but it was becoming more and more fiercely fought up front, particularly owing to the visitor's frustration at being penalised for seemingly the same sort of tactics at the ruck, that their hosts were being allowed to perform. Such frustration boiled over twice in the final quarter. First flanker Andy Spires was yellow carded, despite being the victim of mistaken identity, following an altercation at a ruck.

The reduction in numbers seemed to galvanise the visiting pack, and by now they were well on top at the scrum, even with numbers reduced. The visitors were given a route back into the game, whilst still down to fourteen men, from another mistake, which typified the game as whole. This time the error occurred in the Bloxwich midfield, which allowed Alcester wing Robbie Parker to react quickest to the loose ball and race clear. Full back Andy Smith converted.

Alcester pressed for the further score to rescue their disappointing afternoon. They spent much of the next ten minutes deep inside their hosts half, but despite having possession near the line, they were still being penalised by the referee and were struggling for any continuity. As time was running out, Bloxwich took possession into Alcester territory through their forwards, but they seemed to kill the ball once more at a ruck and the referee blew for a penalty. To the visitors surprise the official awarded the penalty to the home side within range, and in front of the posts. The red and blacks pack leader Andy Flynn's attempts to discuss the decision with the referee, resulted in him spending the remainder of the game in the sin bin. Shortly after the kick went over, the referee blew the whistle to end this disappointing afternoon for Alcester.