

Saturday December 13th 2008

Warwickshire Shield Round One

Alcester 11 Copsewood 11

The two sides fought out a very evenly contested draw in extremely damp and muddy conditions at Kings Coughton after the heavy rain of the previous 24 hours had flooded much of the local area. The match was due to start at 2pm, but the kick off was delayed for 15 minutes after the late arrival of the visitors due to road closures caused by the appalling weather conditions. This delay proved crucial at the end of the game, as the match finished in near darkness, due to the game finishing level in normal time, and 20 minutes of extra time ensuing. The result maintains Alcester's unbeaten home record in competitive games this season, but Copsewood progress to the next round of the shield on the "away team rule."

Starting up the slope in the first half, Alcester enjoyed the better of the opening exchanges, with the additional preparation time they had before the game, becoming evident against their "cold" opponents. The home side forced two early penalties and centre Max Biltcliffe converted the second attempt, after his first had hit the base of the post.

Slowly the visitors got into their stride, and their pack played the conditions superbly by retaining possession for long periods with their short drives, ruck and maul game. These tactics meant that Alcester had to remain disciplined in defence, which they did for the most part, with their line being breached just the once, when the visiting no 8 just managed to force his way over, after a long period of possession deep inside the Alcester half. Skipper Scott Carmichael and pack leader Phil Birks led the way in defence with a couple of thunderous hits, the Birks tackle ending the game for his unfortunate opponent, with a shoulder injury. The home pack were also in no mood to be shoved about by their opponents, and when he was awarded a penalty, the visitors skipper must have regretted electing to take a scrum near the home line, when his pack were comprehensively driven back and shoved off the ball by the Alcester eight.

The remainder of the half was fought out in the middle of the field, in the increasingly difficult conditions, where the ball rarely made it past either fly half, particularly for the visitors who were intent only in a ten man game. They increased their lead right on the stroke of half time, with a well struck penalty goal after the home side had killed the ball at a ruck.

The second half started in a similar vein with the visitors intent on retaining possession with their short pick and drive strategy, gaining the metres and keeping the ball away from their opponents. Their patience paid off when Alcester were again penalized at the ruck, allowing the visiting kicker to increase his side's lead with another successful kick.

The ever deteriorating conditions meant that any sort of ball retention was becoming more and more difficult, resulting in more scrums from knock ons. This played in to Alcester's hands as their pack were now totally dominant in the scrums, as their forwards were able to get the purchase under foot down the slope, that they had not been able to do in the first half, to drive their opponents back. This brought Alcester back into the game, and when tight head

Nev Teasdale picked and drove from a ruck which followed a scrum, Copsewood were penalized for failing to release after the tackle and Biltcliffe converted.

With their tails up, Alcester played some of the best rugby of the game, showing great hands in moving the ball along their back line to the left wing where Stuart Whitehead formed the ruck. When his pack drove over, scrum half Robbie Parker quickly moved the ball right and each one of the backs drew their men superbly to set right wing Jack Sears in to the corner to level the scores. This was a great finish by the Alcester youngster, who still had plenty to do when he received the ball.

The remaining period of the game remained scoreless which meant the match went in to extra time. With the colours on both team's shirts long since gone, muddy brown being the common colour on both kits and King's Coughton in near darkness, the extra time was really a lottery, although Alcester did come closest to scoring when replacement wing Mike Badoud joined the line at pace in midfield and went on a pacy run which saw him finally hauled down yards from the try line.

Referee Nick Edwards, the former Stratford player, who had his usual good and authoritative game, called a halt to proceedings after extra time, and it was not until both sides were back in the changing rooms and the rule books had been consulted, did it become clear the visitors would be progressing to the next round.

Alcester took heart from a decent showing against a side operating a division above them, and one who have improved their results of late. They are now able to focus only on league rugby, starting next week with their final game of the first half of the season at home to Old Wheatleyans, kick off at Kings Coughton is 2.15pm.

Alcester 2nd XV

Alcester's 2nd XV had to cry off their scheduled friendly at Harbury, as illness robbed them and the 1st XV squad of several players on Friday and Saturday morning. Alcester would like to pass on their apologies to Harbury for the late cancellation of the game.