

Saturday March 14th 2009

Midlands Division Six West (South East)

Alcester 15 Atherstone 5

Alcester maintained their unbeaten home record in competitive fixtures with a second hard fought win of the season against the men from Atherstone. In a game that was very similar to the first meeting between the sides in September, the home side fronted up well to a very well drilled, experienced and competitive visiting pack, despite being under pressure at the set phase for periods of the game, particularly in the first half.

Starting up the Kings Coughton slope and against a stiff breeze, Alcester were pegged back in their own territory in the opening exchanges, and their cause was not helped by the loss of inspirational skipper Scott Carmichael to a nasty head injury, caused by an accidental clash with an opponent's knee. Carmichael will miss the next couple of games at least following the hospital trip and the seven stitches he received to his wound. Rich Smith joined the action to replace him which prompted a reshuffle in the back line, that saw another Smith brother Andy replace his skipper in the no 10 position.

After the home side settled following the early visitors pressure, a very even remainder of the half was fought out with the only other points of note being the yellow carding of the Atherstone hooker after his side had previously been warned for persistent infringement at the ruck, by referee Dermot Collins. The ten minute sin bin spanned either side of half time, but in the last play of the first half, the visitors had the opportunity to break the deadlock from a penalty after Alcester were penalized for offside. The all blacks kicker put his kick just wide of the upright and the board remained scoreless at the break.

Alcester made their two remaining changes at the turn, with player coach Steve Lea replacing Nev Teasdale at loose head and Jim Watson coming on for Aaron Mason on the flank. The changes contributed to the home pack, now with the benefit of the slope, getting the upper hand at the scrum although it was always keenly fought, and the front row exchanges were a high quality technical battle particularly on Alcester's loose head side where Lea and his equally experienced opposite number called on all of their past experiences to attempt to out fox each other at the set phase.

With the benefit of the elements, the home side soon gained the ascendancy and went in front just after the visitors were restored to full numbers following the return of their hooker from the bin. Andy Smith broke the deadlock with a penalty after the visitors were once again penalized at a ruck.

Shortly afterwards, the home pack pinched an Atherstone throw at the front of the line out allowing scrum half Robbie Parker to set his backs free. The ball move swiftly through hands in an incisive back line move to the left wing, where the quickest player on the

field Stuart Whitehead rounded off the move by outpacing his man in a touchline hugging run which sent him over. He managed to cut in and put the ball down under the posts once over the try line, allowing an easy conversion for Smith.

The home kicker struck the left hand post with another penalty attempt, before Alcester crossed for their second try. The back row ran a move from the a scrum deep inside the visitors twenty two. Mika Pieri was hauled down just short of the line, but his fellow back rower Phil Birks picked up and dived over. In his pursuit of testing the sturdiness of the Kings Coughton infrastructure, Smith this time smacked the other post with his conversion attempt.

To their credit the visitors upped their game and enjoyed their best spell of the half in the closing stages. They crossed for their only score as their pack drove over from a maul following caught line out ball.

This was a good win by Alcester against strong opponents, where they were forced to dig deep to gain the victory. There were several notable performances, but none less than that of the home front row against strong opponents. Nev Teasdale worked hard in the first half against arguably the best tight head in this division, allowing player coach Lea to continue and edge the battle against the same man in the second half. Another veteran, club chairman Steve Lunn, was recalled for only his second 1st XV start of the season and was at his very solid best, particularly at the set phases. Hooker Brett Allard also stood up well to the pressure he was under and shrugged off the one or two “flights” he had in the scrum to be accurate at the line out and his usual prominent self around the park.

Alcester will be hoping for Atherstone to do them a favour against league leaders Rugby Welsh next week, whilst the red and blacks visit Wellesbourne for a rearranged league fixture to the earlier postponements. Kick off is 3pm.