

Saturday October 18th 2008

EDF Junior Vase Round Three

Harborne 12 Alcester 15

Alcester extended their unbeaten run in competitive fixtures this season to five games, to progress to Round Four of the national vase, after a closely fought game that was played at King's Coughton after the second city side elected to forego their home advantage due to problems with the availability of their pitch this week.

Harborne will be wondering how exactly they managed to lose their own unbeaten run which has seen them progress to joint top of Midlands Five West North, the level above Alcester, after they spurned no fewer than four clear try scoring chances throughout the game, three of which came in a frantic final quarter.

Alcester started well and took the lead through an Ash Newdick penalty early on before the Birmingham side became more accustomed to the windy conditions against them in the opening half, and elected to keep ball in hand and run at their opponents. They started to get on top but were rocked back when the home side scored against the run of play. Alcester right wing Stuart Whitehead anticipated a pass brilliantly and raced in from his own half for an interception try that is fast becoming his trademark. Newdick converted.

Harborne fought back and looked to have reduced the deficit, but their unfortunate centre knocked on in the act of scoring, due mainly to the attention of home flanker Mica Pieri who just managed to hang on to his opponent for long enough to force the mistake. Alcester thought they had broken free for their second score just before the break, when the back line moved the ball quickly through the hands to Whitehead on the right wing and although he had rounded his man to set off for what was likely to be a further score, the referee pulled play back for a forward pass earlier in the move.

Against the elements in the second period, Alcester knew they would have to up their game, particularly because they had lost influential scrum half Robbie Parker to injury just before the break. Rich Smith joined the action from the second team field as replacement, a move which was forced a reshuffle in the back line with skipper Scott Carmichael moving to play at 9.

The King's Coughton men saw off an early period of pressure before they extended their lead. Full back Andy Smith continued his recent rich vein of try scoring form with a smart finish after getting free in the left hand corner of the field.

Harborne upped their game and reverted to their effective fast offloading style of rugby which left Alcester scrambling in defence at times. The Birmingham side scored just before the start of the final quarter of the game, to peg the score back to 15-7, before Alcester lost pack leader Phil Birks with an arm injury. Jason Reed made his competitive first team debut as replacement, with Andy Speirs moving from lock to back row to replace Birks.

There was little respite in the wave of Harborne attacks for Alcester, and after spurning two try scoring chances the Birmingham side crossed for their second try with a little over five minutes left. By now Alcester were desperately hanging on and although they defended well, most of the play was inside their twenty two as they struggled to clear their lines with any real distance into the strong wind against them.

With time running out, Harborne launched another attack and the ball found it's way to their inside centre with a free run to the line, but he spilled the ball and knocked it on, much to Alcester's relief.

Although this result was somewhat fortuitous, it was also a good one by the red and blacks and there were again lots of positives in their display against previously unbeaten opponents from the level above in the league structure.

Alcester return to league action next week and visit fellow joint leaders Rugby Welsh for what promises to be an important game in their campaign. Kick off for this top of the table clash in Rugby is 3pm.