

**Saturday 5<sup>th</sup> January 2008**

**Midlands Division Five West South**

**Alcester 9 Upton on Severn 10**

A New Year, but an all too familiar story for the red and blacks as they slipped to yet another narrow defeat, their seventh of the campaign, all of which have been by two scores or less including four by less than five points. They did take heart from having run the league's second placed side so close for the second time in six weeks, both games of which could really have gone either way.

The stiff downhill breeze and the bright sunshine at the backs of the side playing down the King's Coughton slope, made for the proverbial "game of two halves" with the visitors benefiting from the conditions in the first half in which they took the lead midway through the half with their only kickable penalty opportunity of the game.

Alcester were pegged back for much of the half, and despite winning their fair share of possession, offered very little in attack. In fact they were thankful to some, at times, desperate defence as Upton broke away in space and looked likely to score, before no 8 Nick O'Connor on two occasions and centre Brett Allard on another, put in superb tackles to thwart the attack.

Alcester were rocked by injuries to two of their players. Tight head Steve Lunn was forced off with a knee injury, before influential skipper Scott Carmichael took several hefty hits to the ribs but played on for the remainder of the half, before finally being replaced at half time.

The visitors showed some of the rugby that has taken them near to the top of the league, but had to wait until the final few minutes of the half to add to their score. Their outside centre, who scored the only try of the game when the two sides met at Upton in late November, turned provider this time, making an incisive outside break and taking play to the left hand touchline, just inside the Alcester half. Spotting a gap behind the Alcester defence, he sent a well weighted kick in to the path of this supporting full back who won the chase to the ball and had the simplest of touchdowns. His fly half converted. Straight from the restart, Upton played the best rugby of the half to send the ball through several pairs of hands, only to be stopped deep inside the Alcester twenty two, by some determined defence.

Alcester knew that they had to start well in the second half and they did just that, enjoying even more of the domination that Upton had in the first half. Whilst the visitors were always dangerous on the break, virtually all of the play was in the Upton half in the second period, and a lot of it was inside the visitors twenty two.

Fly half Matt Gwynn enjoyed proceedings with the wind at his back, and with his pack now well on top he dictated the game with some intelligent and accurate kicking out of hand, to keep the visitors pinned in their own territory. Now it was Upton's turn to defend desperately and they were forced to concede a string of penalties, a number of which came from their blind side flanker, who was shown the yellow card by the afternoon's match official Nick Edwards. Edwards, the former Stratford forward

turned whistler, had a good game himself where he controlled proceedings with accuracy and authority. Alcester were unable to make the most of the man advantage, other than in Gwynn's conversion of the penalty that came from the same offence that sent the Upton player to the bin. This was the home fly half's second successful kick of the afternoon.

Alcester came close to getting the vital try on several occasions, most notably when flanker Mica Pieri was held up just inches short of the line and lost control of the ball as he stretched to try and ground it.

When Upton were restored to their full numbers, Gwynn was presented with a third penalty opportunity which he struck well from distance, and was only just wide with. Straight from the resulting Upton drop out, Alcester took play back down field and the visitors conceded another penalty, this time for a high tackle on home full back Robbie Parker, which Gwynn again converted well to bring his side within a point.

Upton worked hard in the final 15 minutes to keep their penalty count down, with Gwynn's boot such a threat. Alcester laid siege to the black and whites line in the closing stages and roared on by a sizeable home support, bolstered by the second team game finishing ten minutes earlier than this one, they came frustratingly close to getting the all important try in the final few minutes.

The home forwards took clean ball from their own throw to the front of the line out and drove deep into Upton territory. From the back of the rolling maul, the ball was spun into midfield where full back Parker joined the line on the angle and at pace, for what looked like a clear run to the line. A home defender seemed to appear from nowhere to haul Parker down just a short stretch from the line and when the Alcester speedster realised he wasn't going to get there, he turned and popped the ball up for the support, who in their haste to gather, got in each other's way and knocked the ball on.

In the end Alcester were left frustrated with another narrow defeat. They now face a huge task in the fortnight ahead, with back to back games against the unbeaten league leaders Rugby St Andrews. They are awaiting final confirmation that next Saturday they will host the Warwickshire Shield Quarter Final tie against their opponents from the east of the county, before they make the return journey the following week, for the second league meeting between the two sides. Alcester finally succumbed 16-3 in the first meeting in November, after conceding a last minute score to give the score line a flattering look.