

COUNTY CHAMPIONSHIP SHIELD

Southern Group

EASTERN COUNTIES RUGBY UNION 10pts (Tries: Adrian Ball, Conv: Tom Hughes (Saffron Walden) Pens: Hughes).

HAMPSHIRE RU 18pts (G Lewis (Basingstoke) 2, R Forster (Rosslyn Park). Pen: M Hart (Richmond).

Once again the ups and downs of County Championship rugby were there for all to see at Cambridge on Saturday when Eastern Counties failed to repeat their magnificent performance of the previous week, frustrating for players, management and supporters alike. It wasn't for the want of effort but uncharacteristic errors and an unacceptable level of turnovers in the set pieces and loose gave Hampshire ample platforms to launch countless forays at the Counties line that resulted in three tries.

Preparations for the fixture had been fraught with problems with several players carrying injuries and unable to train. Influential forward Mike Howard was named on the bench but would have been unlikely to play due to a niggling back problem and with his selection into the England Counties squad and the tour to South Korea and Japan starting next week this was considered to be in the best interests of the player. Consequently Wymondham's Tom Coller was to make his first start at this level performing admirably for fifty minutes before being replaced by Martin Webdale of Bury St Edmunds.

The game itself was very evenly poised for thirty-five minutes with penalties from Tom Hughes and Matt Hart the only scores but it was Counties who were having to defend more than their opponents. Hampshire clearly wanted to use the pace of their Basingstoke wing Lewis continually shifting play quickly in an attempt to accommodate this. Counties were also having problems containing the Hants loose forwards and Captain Tom Booth was leading by example breaking tackles almost at will to put Counties on the back foot.

On thirty-five minutes Hants mounted a series of attacks the first was repulsed when Alex Kelsall had made a magnificent try saving tackle, forcing Lewis into "touch in goal" but the Hampshire wing was successful on his next attempt scoring in the corner. Worse was to befall Counties before the break with Matt Richards being shown a yellow card and in the dying seconds on first half injury time Hants increased their lead with Forster forcing over in the corner.

Counties once again had to chase the game in the second half but unlike last weekend when Middlesex's defence had been found wanting Hampshire's held firm at the beginning of the half. A promising break by Chris Kent was halted and a loose ball allowed Hampshire to relieve pressure. Fifteen minutes into the half Counties finally breached the visitor's defence, once again it was Aidy Ball, running an exquisite line, who pierced the defence scoring close to the posts and giving Hughes a simple conversion and bringing down the margin to just three points.

Several opportunities for Counties went begging during the next fifteen minutes as they tried in vain to grab the lead but the unforced errors continued and the home side couldn't cross the whitewash. On the half hour Hampshire delivered the Coup de Gras another promising attack was halted, a turnover occurred and Hants broke out of defence with quick hands releasing Lewis who scored his second to give Hampshire an eight point lead that they held until the end. Counties, for the second season in a row, finish third in the group behind Hertfordshire and Hampshire with Middlesex fourth.

Yellow Cards: Matt Richards (Diss) (42 mins)

Referee: Ed Turnill RFU, Touch Judges: Darryl Chapman & Nigel Carrick RFU
4th Official : Tony Kennedy ECRURF

Eastern Counties: 15 Iain Young (Nth Walsham), 14 Tom Holt (Nth Walsham), 13 Adrian Ball (Nth Walsham), 12 Toby Berridge (Cambridge), 11 Alex Kelsall (Diss), 10 Tom Hughes (Saffron Walden), 9

Alex Graf-Groote), 1 Matt Richards (Diss), 2 Gideon Rossouw *Capt.* (Diss), 3 Des Brett (Blackheath), 4 Ed Mills (Shelford), 5 Chris Kent (Nth Walsham), 6 Tom Coller (Wymondham), 7 Chris Godwin (Nth Walsham), 8 Andy Horne (Diss). Replacements: 16 Matt Scott (Nth Walsham), 17 Martin Webdale (Bury St Edmunds), 18 Felix Harris (Saffron Walden), 19 Sam Rhodes (Nth Walsham), 20 Mike Howard (Bedford), 21 Chris Glynn (Shelford), 22 Stewart Forton (Wymondham).

Hampshire: 15 Matt Hart (Richmond), 14 Glen Lewis (Basingstoke), 13 Andy Fitchell (Basingstoke), 12 David Byett (Richmond), 11 Dan Gates (Portsmouth), 10 Simon Humberstone (UWIC), 9 Chris Jackson (Havant), 1 Steve Collins (Basingstoke), 2 Steve Cruddas (Havant), 3 Tom Wells (Havant), 4 Luke Richardson (Portsmouth), 5 Russell Forster (Rosslyn Park), 6 Dylan Rubenheimer (Havant), 7 Gavin Hart (Richmond), 8 Tom Booth *Capt.* (Balymena). Replacements: 17 Jason Ford (Portsmouth), 18 Karl Osbourne (Basingstoke), 19 Kevin Molyneux (Havant), Jon Joe Ford (Portsmouth).