

Kent 20 Hampshire 15

A fine second-half performance from Kent who overturned a 15-3 deficit on 50 minutes with 17 unanswered points, including three tries, to emerge victors in this opening match of the 2023 Bill Beaumont County Championship.

On a grey, damp afternoon at Priestfields, home of Medway RFC, it was Hampshire, however, who looked the sharper in the early stages, and although limited to just three assaults in Kent territory in the opening period, scored from two of them to build a significant advantage.

Twice Kent were thwarted in the first ten minutes as, perhaps trying to over-complicate from a close-range scrum, ball was intercepted and danger cleared, before a penalty to touch fell dead.

Despite having the slope in their favour, and dominating territory, the pattern was set for the first half, while Hampshire's first excursion uphill saw Havant hooker Sean Shepherd emerge from the maul, following a kick to touch, for a converted try on eleven minutes.

Andy Denham made ground on the right-wing for Kent, and there was a mighty drive from a lineout on half-way, but no reward until a 33rd minute Frank Reynolds penalty narrowed the gap.

However, as the interval approached, Hampshire threw short to the lineout, and as ball was moved across field, Max Fletcher of Sandown & Shanklin RFC came up from full-back to pierce the defence for a second try and a 12-3 lead to the visitors at the break.

As the rain intensified, the restart saw the same pattern emerge, with Hampshire turning possession, creating attack out of defence, and Winchester fly-half, Tom Fieldsend adding a penalty to his earlier conversion, but it was to be the last time the visitors came close to scoring.

The introduction of Tom Williams and Sam Evans at half-back injected more energy and pace into Kent's game, and the amalgamation of some intelligent out-of-hand kicking, and a growing dominance at the lineout, changed the game.

On 56 minutes, Evans made ground, before sending Nick Cooke across out wide on the right, and moments later, Rafael Dutta broke clear on the same flank.

Some fine defence held up the ball, denying the second-row the try, but the goal-line drop-out saw Kent straight back on the offensive, with Cooke charging through the centre for the number-eight's second score, Evans' conversion making it 15-apiece on the hour-mark.

Kent's scrum came to the fore with a huge shove, and as Denham shrugged away tacklers on 73 minutes, the right-wing found Dutta on his inside for the winning try.

'We changed the dynamics at half-time, found a better kicking game, and narrowed the point of attack,' said Kent Director of Rugby Taff Gwilliam.

'With just one training session prior to the game we looked a bit disjointed early on, but we grew throughout, with the combinations meshing together as the match progressed, and finished a much-improved unit.'

Kent's campaign continues next Saturday, with a home match against Somerset at the same venue, but with an earlier kick off time of 2.00 pm.

Kent Tries: Cooke 56, 60, Dutta 73 Conv: Evans 60 Pens: Reynolds 33

Hampshire Tries: Shepherd 11, Fletcher 37 Conv: Fieldsend 37 Pens: Fieldsend 49

Graham Cox