

Six out of Six for West

West of Scotland made it six wins out of six in National League Division 3 this season with victory over Howe of Fife by 17-12 at a very wet Burnbrae on Saturday. The heavy underfoot conditions reinforced by intermittent bursts of driving rain suggested it would be a game for the purists. The full commitment and no little skill of both sets of players gave those present much more than that. It was, though, a game for the spectators to enjoy in the bar afterwards rather than during eighty closely contested minutes. West always led but the match was not won until the referee blew for No Side.

With Dru Nicholson still missing through injury, Rory Cuthbertson continued at stand-off with Fraser Brand back on the right wing. There was a more familiar look to the pack with Pete Rhodes, Connor Moran-Smith, Dylan Matthews and Marc Zoma all returning. The forwards showed their power in the first set scrum, driving the Howe eight backwards on their own feed. The second scrum of the match and the first score came in the third minute after the visitors were forced to carry over their own line. The West pack drove again, Howe went backwards and No 8 John Vasconcelos touched down.

Stand-off Ian Aitken quickly brought Howe within two points, converting a simple penalty from thirty metres. Aitken's accuracy of kicking, from tee or from hand, would be a feature of the game. Another Howe penalty saw Aitken take his forwards to ten metres from the West Line. They drove from the resulting line-out but the power of the home forwards came to the fore again, holding up the Howe men and winning the feed at the scrum. West were looking much more secure in defence than in recent weeks.



After the two early scores, the game settled into a pattern with both sides having a fair share of possession but with conditions dictating it would be the two sets of forwards who would see most of the play. There were frequent turnovers, from lost possession and from a referee quick to spot any infringement of the laws. It was West who would move further ahead, just short of the half-hour mark. Howe ball was again lost on their scrum feed, the ball went out through the

West backs before outside Darren Allan found the gap to score. West, though, again allowed their opponents to close the gap after breaking the offside line. Aitken kicked a simple goal from fifteen metres. West led by 10-6 at the interval. All to play for.

The first minute of the second half summed up what had gone before. The West forwards took another ball against the head from a scrum on halfway. They drove to the ten metres line before the referee blew his whistle and awarded a penalty to Howe. Allan came close to his second try after good work by Jamie Carruth. The scrum-half recovered the ball on the ground before kicking ahead. The ever-alert Callum McCormack hacked on over the Howe line before Allan was just beaten to the touchdown. Carruth and McCormack are two of the youngest members of the squad but both have been in outstanding form this season.

Ten minutes into the second half, West coach Andy Douglas made a tactical switch. Brand was withdrawn, Allan moved to the wing, Cuthbertson to 12 and Nicky Sutcliffe from 12 to 13. Cammy Finlayson was introduced at stand-off. The gap was soon down to one point, Aitken slotting another penalty, from twenty-five metres. Play settled into a pattern similar to that of the first half as the two packs continued their battle. Good work by the West backs did see McCormack cross the Howe line but the try was ruled out for offside. Howe broke from a line-out on half-way, McCormack's perfectly timed interception probably saving a score.

The sides entered the final few minutes with West holding that single point lead. It was still a match that could go either way. It was home skipper Scott Cochrane who would secure the win for his side. With three minutes left, Howe were in possession but in their own 22. A do or die effort was required. They perished. A long pass was thrown but Cochrane was perfectly placed to intercept and go under the posts to the delight of the home support. Finlayson's conversion took West eight points and importantly, two scores ahead. Instead of seeing the game out, there was a minute left to play, they conceded yet another penalty. Aitken's fourth successful kick of the afternoon reduced the gap to five points, enough to ensure a losing bonus point for the Fife side. Remarkably, in the few seconds that remained, West fell foul of the referee again. A knock-on ended Howe's chance of scoring again and pulling off what would have been a ridiculous win.



Full credit to every player on the park and to the referee. Conditions were truly awful. Gordonians had a try bonus victory at Royal High and sit top of the table, a point ahead of West. This, though, was a result the Burnbrae men would happily have accepted at kick-off. Next Saturday, West travel to face Greenock Wanderers at Fort Matilda, kick-off three o'clock.

West of Scotland: Alex Fiskien; Fraser Brand, Darren Allan, Nicky Sutcliffe, Callum McCormack; Rory Cuthbertson, Jamie Carruth; Pete Rhodes, Connor Moran-Smith, Andrew Love; Scott Cochrane, Dylan Matthews; Marc Zoma, Donald Morrison, John Vasconcelos. Replacements: Stuart Murray, Stuart Macdonald, Cammy Finlayson, Brodie Buchanan.