

Murrayfield Triumph for West Ladies

West of Scotland Ladies 19 Cartha Claymores 12.

After an injury-ravaged season that at one point saw no fewer than nineteen players unavailable, West of Scotland Ladies ended it in the perfect way by defeating Cartha Claymores to win the National Shield at Murrayfield. The sides had met in the first group game at Burnbrae with West recording a narrow 34-32 victory. A close match was clearly in prospect and in terms of the scoreline, that is exactly what we got. It was, though, an eighty minutes of remarkable imbalance with both sides dominating for long periods. Player of the Match Alex Love's try and Alexa Smith's conversion with ten minutes to play gave the Burnbrae side the victory they just deserved over a battling Claymores.



West were led out by co-captains Emily Irving and Amanda Paterson, accompanied by mascot Louisa Cullen, a member of the P1 squad at West. It was a new experience for all the West players against a side who had featured in last year's "Silver Saturday", playing in the Bowl final. West had the chance to go ahead after only two minutes. Cartha were penalised at the breakdown inside their own 22. The quick-thinking Natasha Burge tapped and fed the supporting Paterson who had Love on her elbow. The No 8 looked certain to score as she crossed the line but referee Alana McClean ruled the ball was knocked-on after a superb covering tackle by left wing Melissa Wilson. A promising start, nonetheless, by the Burnbrae side.

West dominated the opening quarter with play rarely out of the Cartha 22. Locks Ciera

Campbell and Louise Wilson gained yards every time, hooker Rachel Morrison was lively in the loose. A combination of handling errors and excellent Cartha defence saw the scoreline remain blank. Cartha's attack was limited to a touch line break by Rachel Shankland. Full back Amber Johnston's tackle ended that threat. West's forwards were always on the front foot, driving at the Cartha line, providing a plentiful supply of good ball for the backs. The side in green and black defended brilliantly. It took West twenty-five minutes to finally break Cartha's resolve. They did so with a fine try. A feature of West's play this season has been their willingness and ability to move the ball quickly from a penalty. Paterson tapped thirty-five metres out and drove to the 22. Irving supported, Smith set up the ruck just inside the right touch line. Paterson carried again, Watson and Amy McHenry were both held up just short of the line. More ruck ball, scrum-half Katie Wilson fed it left, the ball going through the hands before Johnston came into the line to create the overlap for Rowan Todd. The winger still had work to do as the Cartha cover came across but she made it to the line with three defenders failing to hold her. A score of many parts, all perfectly executed.

Cartha had their first foray into their opponents' 22, successive penalties rewarding them with a line-out six metres out. Fiona Gassner did superbly to take possession and as the West forwards drove, Cartha were penalised and West cleared their lines. This led to another excellent West try, not dissimilar to their first but arguably even better. From the line-out between the West 22 and 10 metres lines, they carried and they drove and they supported. The link play seemed to involve all fifteen players. They went right, they went left, they went right again. Love was held up just short, Campbell, too. Paterson set up the ruck, Wilson fed Smith and Irving timed her run perfectly to take the stand-off's "Toonie flip" to crash over. Smith converted to give her side a twelve points lead. Most present would have assumed at this point West would go on to record a comfortable victory. The forwards were gaining yards every time they carried, the backs were moving the ball with confidence. Cartha had been on the back foot for almost all of the half. The match, though, took a change of direction just before the interval. West were penalised at the breakdown, thirty metres from their line. Cartha drove and West were penalised again. From the resulting tapped penalty, loose-head Lynsey Torrance barrelled over. Although the conversion was missed, there was only one score in it at half-time, West leading 12-5.

Immediately on the restart, Cartha turned over possession in the West half. They drove to the West line and for the next few minutes it was Cartha forwards versus strong West defence in which Jade Scott's tackle count reached a ridiculous level. The Burnbrae side, though, were being penalised for a variety of



offences. Eventually, the referee spoke to co-captain Paterson and made it clear the next offence would mean a yellow card. Full back Johnston was the unfortunate recipient, being adjudged to have been guilty of a high tackle. Cartha, with the player advantage, attacked without let-up. West's defence performed heroics with Eilidh Power's experience of having played at full back of great benefit. They did, though, continue to fall foul of the referee. Paterson was spoken to again about her side's discipline. Play had not been outside the West 22 for fifteen minutes. The defensive effort was huge but eventually the damn was breached. After another tap penalty and with the West defence overloaded on their right, space was created for replacement Amy Donaghy to go over. Donaghy had been outstanding since her introduction at half-time. Lou Smith's successful kick drew the sides level.

West seemed to switch back on again. Play was more evenly-balanced but the arrival of rain did not help West's more expansive game with the accuracy of the first half gone. Irving's break, supported by Love and then by Hannah Foster-Rain took West to within ten metres of the Cartha line but the ball was dropped. Another Irving break again took West close before Cartha knocked on. The resulting scrum saw the score that would win the game. It was another fine try, crafted on the training ground. Love picked up, Irving collected before returning to Love who was not going to be stopped.

West had ten minutes left in which to hold on to their lead. Continued wonderful work in defence ensured they did. The bench was emptied to provide fresh legs and see every member of the squad play on the international pitch. Cartha's last real chance was ended by a superb tackle and turnover by Rachael Millar, another of the long-term injury victims. In the dying seconds, Burge, after an outstanding performance, was as unfortunate as teammate Johnston in receiving a "team yellow". She had just reached the touch line when the whistle blew for no side and the celebrations began. West of Scotland Ladies was the first name on the National Shield.

West of Scotland Ladies: Amber Johnston; Eilidh Power, Jade Scott, Emily Irving (CC), Rowan Todd; Alexa Smith, Katie Wilson; Amy McHenry, Rachel Morrison, Natasha Burge; Louise Wilson, Ciera Campbell; Amanda Paterson (CC), Fiona Gassner, Alex Love.
Replacements: Pamela Duffy, Ashley Blair, Rosie Broadhurst, Laura Grant, Hannah Foster-Rain, Caitlin Reilly, Rachael Millar.