

Annan Warriors 10 West of Scotland Ladies 66.

West of Scotland Ladies continued their quest for promotion to the Premiership with an emphatic ten tries performance at Annan on Sunday. Remarkably, nine of the tries were scored by two members of the back row. Open side Hannah Foster-Rain led the way with five tries. No 8 Alex Watson touched down on four occasions.

The sun shone on a perfect late November Sabbath but with a temperature suggesting two semmits would be the order of the day. The bus driver clearly had concerns about the players being out in the cold for no longer than necessary so devised his own route to Annan, a route that would have left the nice lady of Google Maps reaching for the Strepils. It is possible it had slipped his mind the purpose of the journey was to play a rugby match at an hour determined by the Championship Committee of the Scottish Rugby Union. Would we reach our destination before the coach exploded? (And we are not talking buses here.) Matters were somewhat complicated by some members of the party being unable to download the English COVID app to their phones as we passed along the narrow, winding country lanes with little in the way of wi-fi signals until we picked up the Manchester masts. The splendid views afforded of the peaks of the Lake District were more than compensation and for the romantics aboard, and there were some, there was no less than two visits to Gretna Green. We eventually arrived at Violetbank, Annan. Those who needed to be strapped up had been strapped up as we journeyed while the rest of us wondered if there would be enough fuel to get us home.

Coach Lindsey Smith was forced by injuries into making changes. A wayward prop landing on her foot in training ruled out Fi Gassner. The versatile Foster-Rain moved from hooker to open side. Full back and captain Eilidh Power took over as touch judge after Neil Stobie got a sore knee running for a bus on Saturday. This move saw Aimee Watson wear the no 15 shirt.

West were quickly into their stride with Watson putting the Milngavie side ahead after only two minutes. Rachel Morrison, restored to hooker, threw a huge dummy to take her into the Annan 22. The No 8 was, as ever, up in support to score. Emily Irving successfully converted. Four minutes later, a tremendous drive by the West forwards allowed their backs to get into home territory. This time it was Foster-Rain who was on hand and was rewarded with the score.

With spectators expecting West to continue on the front foot and build a substantial lead, the visitors seemed to lose their playing discipline for the next quarter of an hour. Possession was turned over in good positions, passes didn't go to hand, knocks-on were too numerous. Annan came into the game and put pressure on the West defence. The visitors, though, repelled them and began to regain control. After twenty-five minutes, Foster-Rain increased her side's advantage, her break from forty metres leaving defenders trailing in her wake. Irving added the extra points.

Just before the half hour, Annan got on the scoreboard. Not for the first time this season, West were penalised for backchat to the referee. From the penalty close to the West line, left wing Jane Stewart scored in the corner. West quickly replied. Loose head Tash Burge powered forward before Watson took possession twenty-five metres out and sprinted to the line. Irving again made it full value. Right on the interval, more fine work by Morrison saw her again set up Watson to complete her hat-trick. Irving's successful kick gave a half-time score of Annan Warriors 5 West of Scotland Ladies 33. The spell immediately after the

scoring of the second try apart, the coaching staff must have been happy with the first half performance but frustrated by the way in which they conceded Annan's score.

West were quickly into their stride on the restart. After a series of drives by the pack, Foster-Rain picked up to go over for her hat-trick. Annan, to their credit, quickly responded with Stewart breaking some weak West defence to score her second of the afternoon. Two tries from Foster-Rain, her fourth and fifth scores of the game, both converted by Irving, took the Burnbrae side past the half-century. A burst through a large gap in the home defence was followed a few minutes later by a try that would have pleased the forwards as they took a heel against the head close to the home line, allowing the open side to pick up and score.

West rounded off the afternoon with two more scores. Left wing Lucy Gardner was pulled down just short of the home line after a superb fifty metres run. Outside centre Jade Scott was on hand, though, to take the ball over the line. Irving converted. The final try came from Watson, right on time. It was a solo effort, the home defence, having had a torrid afternoon, were unable to do anything about the powerful runner's break from thirty-five metres. She went in under the posts to leave Irving with a simple conversion and close matters at Annan Warriors 10 West of Scotland Ladies 66.

It is hard to be critical about a performance that sees ten tries scored. Foster-Rain, a relative newcomer to the sport, and Watson will take most of the plaudits for their try scoring feats but it was no surprise when loose head Burge was named Player of the Match. She put in a power of work throughout. So, too, did the third member of the back row, Amanda Paterson. Four tries last week but it was her colleagues who got the glory today. It was a fine team performance, from 1 to 20.

Next time it will be an entirely different exam paper that will be placed in front of them. League leaders Garioch visit Burnbrae on Sunday at two o'clock. The Aberdeenshire side lead the table by six points and are unbeaten. A West victory is vital. If you can come along and support, please do.