

West Continue on Their Way

West of Scotland Ladies 66 Howe Harlequins 10

West of Scotland Ladies continued their positive start to their defence of the National Shield with another emphatic victory, this time over Howe Harlequins at Burnbrae on Sunday. Having scored nine tries at Orkney last week, they improved on that total by two on this occasion in another excellent display of positive rugby. Alexa Smith converted four or was it six of the tries and added a penalty goal.

There was a more youthful look to the starting XV this week with the return of loose-head prop Tash Burge and TwinTwo. They replaced the two veterans of the side who were recovering from bumps and bruises sustained in Kirkwall. Bumps and bruises sustained from colliding with walls on their way to the hotel from the rugby club. TwinTwo started in the second row, Holly MacDonald staying at No 8 after her fine display last week. Burge was in her usual place, joining Pamela Duffy and Vanessa Reid-Phelps in the front row. TwinOne deservedly retained the no 9 shirt.

The visitors had the clear physical advantage in the forwards and in the early stages they did pose some problems for the West defence without ever really threatening the home line. West suffered the early loss through injury of hooker Duffy. Ashley Blair came on at loosehead with Burge moving inside. Despite the setback, West soon settled. Amber Johnston's try put her side ahead after twelve minutes, good work by the forwards tying up the visitors' defence to create space for the full-back. By the mid-point of the half, Smith's penalty goal quickly followed by MacDonald's try extended the lead to fifteen points. The No 8 finished off a forward drive by breaking some weak tackling to score.

Somewhat surprisingly, Howe did narrow the gap when Rachael Croniken used her pace to go through a gap in the West defence. The inside centre was impressive throughout, in attack and defence. In the closing minutes of the half, though, West made victory and the try bonus point secure with further tries by Louise Wilson and TwinOne. The lock finished off a forward drive before the scrum-half was alert to a lack of concentration in the Howe defence to go over.

On the restart, Martine McCann soon extended the home lead, the centre's pace simply too much for the already tiring visitors. Try machine Burge's score, her third of the season (and career) quickly followed, with the usual look of surprise on her face as she realised what she had done. With the game as a contest clearly over, it gave coach for the day Steven Meenagh the opportunity to give game time to those on the bench. Johnston got her second try of the afternoon with a fine solo effort. With her wing free and expecting the pass, she threw a dummy which was bought by the opposition, the first three rows of the stand who ducked and the touch judge who had run twenty yards up the park and put his flag up. Premature adjudication. Johnston, meantime, continued to the line to touch down. TwinTwo, who had been outstanding in an unaccustomed second row berth, forced her way over, soon followed by a superb effort from Bex Francis. The replacement flanker ran in from thirty metres, as Emlyn Francis watched his mother score a try for the first time. It was actually the first time anyone present could remember seeing Bex score. Rowan Todd added

two late tries, the second after the ball was moved across the backline after a powerful forward drive. Probably the try of the game. Almost on the whistle for no side, Howe hooker Lisa Croniken made it a family double with a try she deserved for a fine performance. Ten points garnered and twenty tries scored. It has been a good start to the group stages for West. They now have a break before Inverness Craig Dunain Ladies visit Burnbrae on 10 March.

There was an unfortunate ending to the game when Louise Skilling went down with what was clearly an ankle injury. Her reaction, somewhat worryingly, suggested serious injury. West Ladies are fortunate to have the professional as well as the playing skills of Bex Francis. Bex had Louise placed on a stretcher and carried back to the dressing room. Thanks to all of the stretcher bearers. It must have been most discomfoting for them as they heard the screams of anguish from the injured party as every bump in the path, every turn of the stretcher brought even more acute pain. (A vet may just have pulled the screens round and.....) Harrowing. It was a trip to hospital to follow for the distressed party. (Fortunately, her shirt was recovered before she departed.) Broken bones, torn ligaments, damaged tendons? Possibly even a combination of all three? Louise was to spend some time at the Queen Elizabeth and thanks to all of the staff there. She was eventually diagnosed with a sore ankle (I think "sprain" was the term used) and should be back in time for the Inverness match.