

Bonus point boosts Esher survival bid

By Richard Spiller

Esher 27 Sale FC 54
National League 1
Saturday, February 18

A BONUS point was Esher's compensation for battling ferociously against a Sale team who still have their eyes on the league title.

Led by Dan Rowland's hat-trick in a vibrant encounter, it kept the Molesey side two points above the relegation zone in their fight for survival at the other end of the table, returning to action after a break of three weeks.

Esher's pursuit of safety, in their first season at National Division One level after promotion last spring, is no easy task and their next two matches are against sixth-placed Cinderford (on Saturday) and Cambridge (second) on March 4.

That makes the following four games against Chinnor (March 10), Hull (March 25), Bishop's Stortford (April 1) and Darlington Mowden Park (April 15) crucial to their escape plan, given the finale sees them entertaining current leaders Rams on April 22.

If home fans were lifted by the opening try, on eight minutes, their optimism was misplaced given it was Sale wearing the black strip which Esher generally sport, their hosts in an unfamiliar blue. That was down to a fund-raising day for the Princess Alice Hospice, the shirts being auctioned after the match.

It was an impressive move either way, No 8 Stone Priestley-Nangle's offload setting up lock Nick Gray to speed over wide on the right and Kieran Wilkinson neatly converting.



Esher earned a bonus point against title-chasing Sale to keep their survival hopes alive

The lead was doubled on the quarter-hour, Fergus Mulchrone's deft back-of-the-hand pass freeing wing Oskar Hirsjk-Douglas, who returned the compliment for his colleague to stride over and this time James Robins converted, the first of six kicks he landed.

What threatened to be a very one-sided match saw Sale adding a third try on 20 minutes, full-back Tom Brady setting up centre Mulchrone to sprint in, Robins making it 21-0.

Esher, beaten 35-21 when the sides first met in October, underlined their own handling skills for Rowland to storm down the right on 26 minutes, Sam Morley's conversion attempt flying just wide. But the visitors hit back within moments, stealing the ball deep

in home territory for scrum-half Matt Bradley, who set up speedy Tom Walsh's dive in for the bonus point try.

Es pulled themselves back into the match through two Rowland tries either side of the interval. The dying seconds of the first half saw the wing fly in for a second time, Morley adding the extras to make the deficit 16 points.

It took ten minutes of the second half before Morley added a penalty while Rowland's electric break from halfway earned his hat-trick, the conversion meaning there were just eight points between the sides.

Sale gathered themselves and sprinted away again, aided by Esher losing No 8 Jack Rouse to a yellow card. A lineout close to the Esher line enabled Josh

Brown to dot down – Robins making it four out of four conversions – and produced a scintillating moment of their own on 57. Just when it seemed Rowland might be on course for a fourth try, the visitors turned over possession close to the line and raced downhill for Brady to net his second. Robins extended the gap to 22 points.

Esher weren't done yet, hooker Andy Hamilton going over with nine minutes remaining for the fourth try to earn what could prove a priceless point.

Two tries at the other end underlined Sale's superiority, replacement Sean Street's dramatic dive over the line celebrating his maiden try for the club and Mulchrone completing the second hat-trick of the day with time running out.

Records tumble at Battersea

Battersea Park stood witness to some fast distance racing as club and course records were broken at the Podium Under the Lights 5k on Friday.

Healthy prize money attracted some of the UK's best athletes with 67 men breaking the 15-minute barrier and a new course record in the women's race for Révée Walcott-Nolan.

Walcott-Nolan, a Tokyo 2020 Olympian in the 1500m, pulled away from fellow international athlete Calli Thackeray over the final two kilometres, running 15.48 to break the previous women's course record by two seconds.

With the race organised by Hercules Wimbledon Athletic Club coaches Ben Noad and Keith Scofield, there was a suitably strong showing from the south-west London club.

In the men's elite race, won by Thomas Kean of Cambridge and Coleridge, in 14.07, Jonathan Cornish was the first home for Hercules in fourth. His time of 14.14 bettered his own club record by a single second.

Not far behind in 11th was Andrew Penney in 14.21, setting a personal best over the roads. This is all the more impressive given a heavy fall in the opening mile.

Charlie Eastaugh, racing for the third time in ten days, finished 34th in 14.46.

In the Club Elite race, Archie Walton ran a huge personal best to finish second in 14.37. His time represented a 51-second improvement on his previous best, set in April 2022.

George Mallett finished in 15th in 14.51, seven seconds outside his own best, with Finn Johnson finishing 15th in Race 1 with 15.12. For Johnson, it was a welcome return to the low-15 minutes and was just five seconds outside his 2019 best.

This is the second edition of the collaboration between the Podium and Friday Nights Under the Lights race organisers, with the event drawing a number of sponsors. Elite Race winners took home £1,000, with prizes all the way down to 10th and a course record for Walcott-Nolan scooping her an additional £500 bonus.

Late goals not enough

Folkestone Invicta 3
Corinthian-Casuals 2
Isthmian League Premier Division
Saturday, February 18

A LATE fightback from Corinthian Casuals wasn't enough to take anything away from the south coast as they fell to a 3-2 defeat at Folkestone Invicta.

After a closely fought opening stages, Folkestone created a flurry of chances and took the lead on 37 minutes, when Casuals were undone by a short corner that resulted in Ian Gayle converting a Scott Heard cross.

The second half became an end-to-end contest, with Casuals hunting for an equaliser and Folkestone looking to absorb the pressure and hit the visitors on the break.

The plan worked for the hosts as they doubled their lead in the 70th minute through Ibrahim Olatude, who latched on to a direct ball from keeper Patrick Ohman before looping his effort over the onrushing Coulter. Folkestone.

They got their third in the last minute of normal time as Ira Jackson set up Olatude to seal the win for his side.

Casuals kept probing and pulled two goals back in added time. First, Finlay Lovatt drove into the box and slotted his effort past Ohman, then Nathaniel Pinney curled an effort into the top corner with the outside of his boot after determined work from Will McDonald.

Chelsea hit rock bottom against Saints

CHELSEA have hit rock bottom with the humiliating 1-0 loss to Southampton at the Bridge.

To be beaten at home by a managerless team at the foot of the table is hard to take. If Roman Abramovich was still running things, Graham Potter would be toast.

Ahead of kick-off, talk in the stadium had been about turning the corner and finally scoring some goals with this expensively reshuffled pack.

Instead, goals seem as scarce as litter-free streets. So the Blues travel to Spurs on Sunday lunchtime with a sense of dread, not a spring in their step.

Former Chelsea manager Antonio Conte will relish the occasion, while the Blues will be without captain Cesar Azpilicueta, stretchered off unconscious after getting a boot in the face against the Saints.

The problem with Potter's

team selection is the starting line-up. Last weekend, he refreshed the side in the second half with Raheem Sterling, Kai Havertz, Conor Gallagher and Micky Mudryk, and a new energy and purpose was evident.

But the entire first half had been wasted as the defence tried to contend with Southampton's 6ft 7in Nigerian forward Paul Onuachu, towering above 5ft 11in Ben Chilwell, while the

attack misfired.

Experimental line-ups are good when they work and Potter has more options than most Premier League managers. But the current haul of seven points from eight matches is relegation, not European, form.

You sense that a brilliant starting line-up lurks at Chelsea, but the fact that Potter has yet to stumble upon it is not a great reason for optimism.

Cyclones storm to Hurricanes victory



Greens beat whites

SUNDAY'S encounter between Beddington Cyclones, wearing all green, and Hackbridge Hurricanes, in all white, seemed on paper to be a very closely contested match.

Beddington Cyclones were in pursuit of their first win of the second half of the season whilst Hackbridge Hurricanes were without some key players away on international duty. The match ended with a 3-0 victory for the Cyclones, which sparked

jubilant scenes at full time.

After a very even start, with chances coming at either end, the Cyclones started to play some very attractive football, with Arlo Salah speeding continuously down the left wing and crossing in for Lewis Grantham and Alfie Hannon to attack the ball.

The deadlock was broken with a goal from Arlo Salah wonderfully struck into the net, which Aarush Bhomia, the Hur-

ricanes goalkeeper, could do nothing about. The Hurricanes had a chance when Henry Ruby broke free only to be stopped by Finley Styles, the Cyclones keeper. The Cyclones continued to attack but were foiled often by Jude Hibbert with some hard but fair tackling and long clearances. The Cyclones also defended commendably, with Gabriel Menewe (aka the Rock) chasing everything and preventing the Hurricanes from

creating any clear-cut chances.

They never gave up, though, with the Hurricanes coming close when Finn Wyner hit a dipping ball just over the crossbar. Harley Phimister, back after a few weeks out, played fantastically well at left back for the Hurricanes, but nothing could stop the Cyclones. With their attacking style of play, chances kept coming with lovely goals from Alexandru Bogles and a second from Arlo Salah.