



Ilkley Rugby Club

Match report

Saturday 7th April 2012

Ilkley R.F.C. vs. Stoke on Trent RUFC

Venue: Stacks field

RFU Intermediate Cup Semi Final

Result: Ilkley 24 points, Stoke on Trent RUFC 20 points.



Late, late drama saw Ilkley into a Twickenham final on Saturday as an Iain Mackenzie try in the seventh minute of injury time nudged them ahead of a committed Stoke side.

In front of over one thousand spectators, Ilkley started with a fierce intensity unmatched by their opponents, and soon broke the deadlock.

A quickly taken penalty by Kirk Arundale set up the in-form JH Johnson with a dart for the line, which was halted ten metres out. From this, a poor Stoke clearance handed Ilkley a line-out just ten metres out, and a charging maul proved unstoppable. Iain MacKenzie was the man to send the crowd into raptures, and after Phil Howell's fifth-minute conversion, the home side were 7-0 up.

The frenetic start continued. A Stoke attack came to nothing in the face of committed Dalesman defence, and when the ball was turned over, a counter attack was set up. Stuart Vincent took the opportunity to lead from the front with a purposeful run through the Stoke defence, a move which ended with a tackle on Morgan Collins deep inside the away half.

A shaken Stoke defence conceded a penalty, which Howell hit home. Ilkley's gauntlet had been thrown down in the form of a 10-0 lead.

Stoke grew into the occasion, and the first half soon become a fluid and open spectacle.

The away side looked well drilled with ball in hand, and in Chris Rowley and Sam Christmas, they have a half-back partnership of real class. Both players looked to move the ball through the backs time and again, and the away side stretched the Ilkley defence on more than one occasion. Quick winger Robert Spruce threatened the line only to be halted by terrific defence once again.

Stoke were rewarded for their advances at the 20-minute mark with a Christmas penalty from in front of the posts.

With the arrears reduced, Ilkley set out to quell their opponents progress with a flowing attack. Johnson was always a threat with ball in hand, and broke Stoke tackles time and again. His attack was continued through the centres, and only fine tackles prevented Mark Kirby, and then Ollie Renton from crossing the line.

Big Ben Fear went down with a back injury, and this long stoppage allowed Stoke to regroup. With the first half winding into its final stages, they launched into an attack. With his side now camped in Ilkley territory, slick feet from full-back Steve Talbot opened up a hole in Ilkley's defence, which he took full advantage of. Try. Christmas converted with ease, and Ilkley's lead was diminished. The sides entered half-time at 10-10.

Stoke are a side in form, of that there is no doubt. They have already been crowned as champions of their division, and have amassed 92 league points in an unbeaten league season. It was them that began the first half with gusto.

With a first flurry into Ilkley territory, quick hands and fierce rucking set up Sam Christmas in the pocket, who kicked a well taken snap shot drop goal. Ilkley found themselves behind, and battling hard in the face of Stoke momentum.

Again, the away side took the game to Ilkley. Phase after phase of pressure inside their twenty-two was well dealt with by a determined Ilkley defence, but a classy cross field kick stretched Ilkley beyond their tether. Spruce was the man to touch down. Stoke 20-10 up.

Ryan Cooper replaced the injured Kirk Arundale. Cooper is still an inexperienced player at first team level, but he began with flair and excitement when he dropped his shoulder to break the Stoke line after the hour mark.

The Dalesmen, like their opponents before them, grew into the half in the face of a ten point deficit. The forwards began to dominate proceedings, and with the backs now playing fine and direct rugby, the home side grew in confidence. Pressure told, and after a inch-perfect pass by Cooper, skipper Stuart Vincent crossed over in the corner. Stacks Field was bouncing.

Every point would count in this epic battle, but few would have blamed Howell for missing this conversion. Cometh the hour. His strike from the left-hand touchline sailed over to put the Dalesmen to within a penalty of level terms at 17-20. With fifteen minutes remaining, Ilkley were taking the ascendancy.

The drama continued. Another Ilkley attack came to nothing in the face of desperate Stoke defence, and on the counter, it was the Midlands side that opened up an opportunity when Ilkley were penalised in front of the sticks. Inexplicably, Sam Christmas missed the kickable opportunity, and the Stacks Field crowd breathed a collective sigh of relief. Surely, now was the time.

The home side would have to move quickly if they were to win this epic battle. The dying embers of the half began to flicker, and Ilkley moved forward in the form of Phil Howell's boot.

Stoke were never going to give up a place in a Twickenham final in a hurry, and their defence stayed true. Possession was over turned time and again by both sides, as both sides realised that any individual mistake could cost their team dearly.

Eighty minutes were called during a fierce spell of Ilkley pressure. Camped deep inside the Stoke half, they turned to their forwards for a score. Ruck followed ruck followed ruck as the Stoke defence remained strong.

Stacks Field had been turned into a quivering wreck. Any stoppage in play would end the game, and send Stoke through to Twickenham.

Each forward took his turn to dive for the line. Fred Mathews, John Oakes and John Hutchinson all came close, with no reward. Stoke's desperate defence was threatening to hold out.

And then.

After six and a half minutes of gut-wrenching stoppage time, the defence relented. Iain MacKenzie was the man adulated by his team mates, and the thousand-strong crowd went ballistic. Phil Howell capped off a fine day with the boot with a well taken conversion. and Ilkley were victors by 24-20.

A 5th May Twickenham final awaits the Ilkley faithful, who will play East Grinstead.

Images of this season and previous season's games may be viewed and purchased from www.Ruggerpix.com

