

## **HAMPSHIRE UNDER 20s 21 KENT UNDER 20s 24**

### **Match report by Richard V Isaacs**

Hampshire Under 20s bowed out of the 2025 Jason Leonard Championship but not without a fight as it took a late Kent penalty to see the visitors over the line 24-21 on a glorious sunny Sunday afternoon at Havant.

Already unable to qualify for the knock-out stages, Hampshire knew they had nothing to lose and they put on a free-flowing display of entertaining rugby which stunned the visitors, whose own game faltered all too regularly.

After missing an eminently kickable penalty within the first minute, Kent's handling was continually letting them down, a trait that also befell Hampshire on a handful of occasions but a drinks break on 20 minutes saw a change in fortunes for the hosts.

The opening score came just two minutes later. A Hampshire attack was turned over on the Kent line but, as they attempted to release the pressure, a scuffed attempted kick to touch was gobbled up by fly-half Alec McCormack. As he charged forward, Kent was penalised and, from the quickly taken tap, Havant's Tyrese Keita sauntered over the line, McCormack adding the extras.

This rattled the visitors but their passing continued to be lax, providing Hampshire with plenty of ball from which to play and, following a yellow card for Kent's centre Owain Collins, Hampshire added another score before the interval.

More Hampshire possession resulted in Kent regularly infringing and some quick ball allowed Winchester's Nick Moore to power his way over the line for his sides' second of the afternoon and again the Newbury fly-half McCormack posted the extra two.

With a fully deserved 14-0 lead at half-time, hopes were high that they could close Arthur Rabjohn's eight-year tenure as Under 20s manager with a victory.

A reinvigorated Kent side came out for the second half, although their handling hadn't improved but they finally broke through with Hampshire down to 14 players when their prop was sent to the sinbin. From the ensuing tap penalty, Kent replacement Ben Reeve crashed over from close range and with Jordan-Smith's conversion cut the arrears to just seven.

Hampshire could have opened up the gap once again when Havant's Munashe Sakutukwa crossed the line but dropped the ball and would miss a penalty shortly afterwards too - which would ultimately cost them dearly.

Kent levelled the scores on the hour mark when replacement prop Andrew Thomas burst through a gap in the Hampshire defence and they would hit the front for the first time with 13 minutes remaining when Reeve posted his second when he powered through.

Shellshocked by conceding three tries in quick succession, Hampshire did not let their heads droop and pulled the scores level once more. New Milton hooker Harry Duell-Merritt took full advantage of the space afforded to him and he punched his way over the line, Bradley Caparo hitting the conversion for 21-21.

It set up a grandstand finish - Kent knowing that a bonus pointless draw would not be enough to see them through to the next phase of the competition and then Collins' penalty struck the upright just ahead of injury time, they could have thought their chance was gone.

Unfortunately for the hard-working home side, they were given a second bite at the cherry and Collins made no mistake from 20 yards out and, despite Hampshire giving it one last strong attack, they couldn't find a way through and had to settle for a losing bonus point.

It was a huge improvement on their showing against Hertfordshire three weeks previously, where they suffered a disappointingly heavy defeat but whilst this will be the end of the road for a number of players at county age group rugby, there were plenty of 18 and 19 year olds who will carry the mantle forward to next season.

**HAMPSHIRE TEAM:** Dominic Cooney, Edward Holmes, Nicholas Moore (all Winchester), Cameron Davey, Richard Towers (both Havant), Alec McCormack (Newbury), Charlie Cuervo-Moraga (Guildford); Sheldon McEwan (Winchester), Harry Duell-Merritt (New Milton), Luca McLaughlan, Patrick Dunne, Luigi Forconi, Harry Judge (all Winchester), Tyrese Keita (Havant), Thomas Jackaman (Winchester). Replacements: Jacob Nash (Winchester), Vincent Jefferies (Portsmouth), Ben Booth (Sandown & Shanklin), Luca Hackett, Munashe Sakutukwa (both Havant), Jack Hewlett (Millbrook), Henry Carter (Winchester), Bradley Caparo (Petersfield).