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FOOTBALL: Honours even as rivals net late goals

Super start for Saracens says McCall



Wealdstone in action against Southend United on Tuesday

Image: Jon Taffel

Stones boss Taylor draws some positives

WEALDSTONE boss Matt Taylor felt his side's 1-1 draw with Southend United on Tuesday showed an improvement in their attacking threat.

After weeks of concern at the lack of potency in front of goal, Callum McFarlane snatched what looked to be a late winner only for Southend substitute Josh Walker to level right at the death. "We changed the way we set up because we wanted more of a focal point at the top of the pitch," a disappointed Taylor told the club website.

"We had some good chances in the first half. Elliot Thorpe put some excellent balls in, but we weren't or didn't quite get on the end of it.

"But what I was pleased with today is that we found a different way to score. I'd say Jadyn (Mundle-Smith) was excel-

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lent coming off the back of a long-term injury. He should probably score before we get our goal.

"It's similar in terms of a ball up to Jack Cook and it bounces down, we get a bit fortunate that it goes through to Jadyn, but we don't take the opportunity.

"For the first 15 minutes of the second half, Southend got a little bit of control. But we dealt with that really well. We got to our football today, and we controlled the temperature of the game in the way we played.

"The rotations, with moving the ball quickly. We've had to deal with a lot. Adrian Mariappa had to go off at half-

time, so we've had to change the shape and put Enzo [Boudewijn] in a position where we know he can play, but it's not his preferred position, and then try and find a different way to win a game."

The Stones boss also critiqued his side's lapse in concentration after their goal went in, suggesting they needed to manage the final moments a lot better.

"You don't get what you deserve in this game, and I know I've said it before, so I don't want to sound like a broken record," he said.

"But we've probably got to be a little bit cuter when we score into injury time. The opposition is obviously going to put the ball in your box. I just felt we've not gotten what we deserved in terms of the three points.

"Southend are a very good team,

but we smothered them and changed the way we pressed. I thought we were excellent. The players' energy was fantastic.

"Having said all of that, we've only come away with a point, and when there's two or three minutes to go, we probably should win. The thing I have to sit down and work out with the coaches is that what we don't want is for this to become a pattern, because it's the second time this has happened this season.

"I should be stood here with four more points at least. We've conceded a similar goal at Hartlepool this season, and we've conceded the same goal here today."

Stones, after losing 3-0 at home to Barnet last weekend, visit Halifax on Saturday.

PREMIERSHIP CAMPAIGN BEGINS WITH VICTORY AT GLOUCESTER

SARACENS' director of rugby Mark McCall was delighted with the opening-day performance of his side at Gloucester

After seeing club stalwarts Owen Farrell, Mako and Billy Vunipola and Sean Maitland all depart during the summer, Saracens ran out 35-26 winners at Kingsholm.

The impressive Andy Onyeama-Christie scored two tries for Saracens, with Ivan van Zyl and Tobias Elliott also going over as Fergus Burke kicked two conversions and two penalties.

And Saracens were good value for their win, with the final scoreline flattering their hosts as Gloucester scored 14 points in the closing stages to earn a bonus point.

"We approached pre-season differently as we've got a younger squad with a pack which is more athletic and faster so we were able to work them harder. Remarkably Maro Itoje at 29 is the oldest by some distance," said McCall. "Fergus (Burke) had an impressive debut. He is a different personality to Owen (Farrell) but he has the same skill-set to him by being able to pass and kick excellently.

"Obviously the victory is pleasing but today was about how we approached the game in terms of effort and competition.

"Parts of our rugby can improve but I'm more than happy with the energy and the buzz factor we showed towards the game, with our new skipper Maro (Itoje) looking as if he means business."

Meanwhile, Gloucester head coach George Skivington admitted "losing the opening game is tough to take" after Freddie Thomas, Freddie Clarke, Jack Clement and Seb Blake scored tries for his side, with George Barton adding three conversions.

Skivington said: "I'm disappointed as we knew what Sarries would bring as they are a clinical side. Every ball we dropped they capitalised on and our inability to get on the front foot cost us.

"The positive is we played with endeavour for 80 minutes and to get a bonus point was pleasing, but we know the Premiership is a relentless league.

"We dropped a lot of balls in the first half as their line-speed shot us down and their work at the breakdown was outstanding.

"We secured a lot of good positions but gave away some soft penalties to let them off the hook, so losing the opening game is tough to take." Saracens welcome Sale to StoneX Stadium for their first home fixture of the new Gallagher Premiership campaign on Saturday (3.05pm).