**Raiders begin National League season with win at Bristol**

Everyone Active Raiders began the National League season with a hard-fought 4-3 win at new boys Bristol.

Pitbulls had lost all four of their pre-season games, albeit after some close battles with Basingstoke and Swindon, while Raiders had shared their series with Peterborough and beaten Bees twice.

The visitors arrived without Ashley Jackson, but had the first chance of note on the night when Brandon Ayliffe forced a turnover and teed up Blaho Novak, who fired wide.

Elliott Dewey was called for cross-checking moments later, but the Raiders penalty killers worked well to restrict the hosts to just one shot, which went wide of the right post.

The visitors looked to have been caught with too many men on the ice moments later, as Jake Sylvester stepped off the bench and received a pass, but the officials chose not to make the call after a brief conference in mid-ice.

Bristol opened the scoring in the eighth minute, though, when Harry Gulliver lost the puck in the neutral zone and Owen Sobchak skated in to beat Ethan James.

Ayliffe went close to a quick response from Novak's pass, with captain Aaron Connolly just off-target from Erik Piatak's pass, but Alex Roberts was not far away for the home side.

Sylvester then shot just wide after great work by Gulliver and saw Will Kerlin keep out his close-range effort after Ethan Reid's impressive dash up the right boards to create the chance.

Raiders were back on level terms in the 14th minute when Adam Laishram cut between the circles and appeared to force the puck under Kerlin's pads, with Gulliver following up to make sure.

But the visitors could not then capitalise on a power play chance of their own, with Dan Scott seeing a hard shot saved by Kerlin and Sylvester misfiring at the far post after some nice set-up play.

Piatak also had a shot saved towards the end of a generally encouraging opening frame for Raiders, but the middle session was barely a minute old when Reiss Kelly fired Bristol back in front from the blue line.

Raiders responded quickly, as Novak found Laishram to net an equailser from a tight angle, and Connolly had a shot held after a rush up ice soon after.

Sobchak thought he had given Pitbulls their third lead of the night as the red light went on and the music began to play, but the puck was in the glove hand of James.

Kerlin denied Mikey Power with an excellent blocker save at close range, but Raiders took the lead when Huggett won a face-off to the right of goal and Novak whipped the puck home.

Novak went close to another after Callum Wells saw his shot from the point blocked, but Raiders were then punished for failing to clear their zone as Alex Roberts set up Sobchak at the side of the net to make it 3-3.

Raiders could not make a power play count after Sam Smith was called for tripping Huggett but they went 4-3 up with just four seconds left on the clock when Piatak cut in from the left and sent a wristshot into the top corner.

Sylvester was binned for tripping just 19 seconds into the final stanza, but Raiders survived and saw Roberts send a low shot just past the far post once back at full strength.

And after navigating their way through something of a scrappy spell, Raiders saw Sylvester cut in from the right boards and force a good pad save from Kerlin around the 45-minute mark.

James thwarted Ed Bradley and Roberts in quick succession as Bristol pressed for an equaliser midway through the period, enjoying more time in the offensive zone as Raiders dug deep.

Bradley sent another shot narrowly wide, before Raiders got some respite thanks to an icing call against the hosts and Connolly fired over from the resulting face-off.

But Sylvester was called for holding a home player behind the Raiders net with just over four minutes to play, with man of the match James holding onto a slapshot from Roberts midway through the Bristol man advantage.

Ayliffe did well to escape from Roberts at the blue line but lifted the puck over the crossbar, before Bristol removed Kerlin for an extra skater in the final minute.

And Raiders did just enough to hold onto their lead in a tense climax to open their campaign with two points, ahead of a home date with Leeds Knights at Romford's Sapphire Ice & Leisure Centre on Sunday (5.15pm).