

Birmingham and Solihull 10 Newport (Salop) 33

Newport saved their best efforts for the final league game of the season and even the most one-eyed attendee at Portway, and there were more than a few, can deny that the first half display, in particular, was precise, dynamic and thoroughly entertaining.

Despite the post-match protestations of the Bee's management and coaching staff, Newport did not arrive 'fully loaded'. In fact, seven first team regulars were unavailable, two only dropping out on the morning of the game, leaving the absolute bare bones of a team. Not wishing to deplete the second fifteen, who had a Cup Final to contest at Sutton Coldfield, Newport elected to travel with just two players on the bench and had to play the greater part of the second half with a loose head prop on the flank.

This game may have been termed a dead rubber, but it is not in the collective make-up of this Newport squad to treat any game with anything less than one hundred per cent commitment and effort, whoever the opposition and whatever the selected line-up. Those players who had been present when the game was postponed some weeks back, had taken verbal abuse from opposition players and supporters and that unfairly meted out invective was still ringing in their ears as they took the field this Saturday.

Knowing that they had come up just short in the home fixture, losing 23-22, Newport knew that Bees would struggle to live with the pace, physicality and tempo of their A game.

After an early period of Bees territorial domination, Newport came to life in the seventh minute, when a superb take of high kick by Connor Adams allowed him to counter attack and with support from the ever-reliable Oli Buckley released wing, Liam Holder. He was bundled into touch metres short, but only one minute later Henry Vaka, such a difficult player to contain in even congested areas of the field, found the rampaging 21 stone blindside flanker, Rhys Morgan, who showed a remarkable turn of pace to sprint home from 25 metres out. What a way to mark your first start for nearly two months. Liam Holder added the extras and a 7-0 lead had been established.

Just seven minutes later the try of the day was scored by Newport. A full three minutes and well over twenty phases of play, led to Jack Price touching down

and allowing Liam Holder to extend the advantage to fourteen points. The move had been initiated by the quick-thinking Connor Adams, whose burst of pace got in behind the scrambling Bees' defence. From that juncture, patience, which has not always been evident in some mid-season games, allowed Sam Brown to direct play left and right and stretch to opposition to breaking point.

Every man in the burgundy and white was contributing, but mention must be made of the determined carries of Kirk Robinson, Tom Cowell, Nathan Parker and Oli Buckley. There is no doubt that the entire Bees' team were gallant and fearless, but they were finding containing Newport's big men, along with the heavy pitch, an energy sapping experience.

On 25 minutes, after another sustained period of pressure on the Bees' line, Kirk Robinson forced his way over for a deserved try and Newport were in complete control. Holder was again accurate and the score was now 21-0.

There was then a bit of an aerial battle, which Newport shaded, before a loose kick from Connor Adams rebounded off Bee's Number 8, Umraan Jadwat. A quick pass to their speedy left wing, Matthew Dight, allowed him to sprint home. There was certainly a suspicion of some off the ball interference with the defending winger, Billy Wara, but this was not spotted by the otherwise impeccable referee Andy Smith and as in all games these incidents tend to even out over a season, if not a game. With the conversion kick unsuccessful Newport's lead had been cut to 16 points at 21-5.

Newport's front row of Jordan Grass, Tom Cowell and Jack Wells were giving their opposite numbers a torrid time. These were no part-timers, both props had played in the reverse fixture and I heard one of the Bees' faithful proudly state that the hooker Charlie Robinson had once played age group rugby for England. Ironically, he was a Newport player back then and coached by our own Bob Adams! A second take against the head gave Robinson the opportunity to pick and go. Great support work by Grass allowed Monty Maule to dance through a gap and score under the posts. Holder's fourth conversion gave a half time scoreline of 28-5.

Eager not to allow Bees to make a contest of the game, Newport absolutely flew out of the blocks. From the restart, the pace of openside, Price, meant that he took the kick on the full. This led to another superb team try. Holder's name goes down on the record, but faultless handling by Newport's forwards, Wells, Parker and Price in open play, led to his score.

Unfortunately, the crossbar denied Holder in his attempt to add a further two points.

Seven minutes into the second period Sam Brown was replaced by 18-year-old Jake Leonard, soon to be plying his trade at the prestigious Hartpury College, making only his second appearance this season. His pedigree is well known to the Newport support, having debuted last season, days after his seventeenth birthday. An immediate impact was made with an inch perfect towering box kick causing a misfield by the otherwise very reliable Bees' fullback Harry O'Brien. Billy Wara was quick to seize the opportunity and only scrambling defence scuppered his efforts after a 60 metre gallop.

Although not in any danger of relinquishing control of the game, Newport's dominance was not so complete in the second period. That said they were still causing the tiring Bees players to have to dig deep and really commit to the cause. Nineteen-year-old Charlie Hill, who had come on to replace Rhys Morgan, had several charges through the midfield and his ability to break the first line of defence along with growing confidence in the tight at this level, will no doubt see him become the cornerstone of the Newport pack in the coming years. Morgan's departure saw Jordan Grass move from the front row to flanker. There are not many looseheads who could make that transition comfortably. Jordan, who tackles as well as any back row, is certainly one.

Also showing his versatility, veteran front row player, Jack Wells seamlessly switched from tighthead to loosehead. Also an effective hooker, his return to the squad, after a mid-season sabbatical has been a boon.

With three minutes remaining Harry O'Brien gave the home crowd something to cheer, with a well taken try, to cap a fine individual performance. Final score 33-10.

Our final points tally for the season is 102, level with Peterborough Lions, who pipped us for the play-off spot, by virtue of having registered one more win than Newport. Finishing the season with a nine-game unbeaten run, 3rd place is our best ever finish at this level. We also recorded the highest points scored, 1032, of any of the 56 teams playing at Level 5 this season, an average just shy of 40 points per game.

We look forward to next season, having learned lessons from the 'ones that got away' and ready to push for the automatic promotion spot that Birmingham and Solihull achieved this season.

We thank you all for your support and hope to see you all at the North Midlands Cup Final on May 12th when we take on Bromsgrove.

Team: Grass, Cowell ©, Wells, Buckley, Parker, Morgan, Price, Robinson, Brown, Maule, Wara, Vaka, Perry, Holder, Adams, Hill, Leonard.

Phil Gittus