

Midlands Premier Division

Derby 19pts v Newport 23pts

Newport came through a difficult, combative and highly entertaining fixture at Derby last Saturday to maintain their second placed position in the Midlands Premier Division. There was more good news to follow when it was learnt that both their nearest challengers Peterborough and Sandbach had lost equally tight games extending Newport's advantage over those two clubs to four and six points respectively.

Toby Mann's availability gave Newport a timely boost during the week meaning he could slot in at scrum half and the rest of the backs could revert to their more favoured positions. Jordan Grass had recovered from his shoulder injury but with front row unavailability next week it was decided not to risk him. With all other forwards fit and ready eleven into ten doesn't go so it was the unfortunate Jake Goulson who missed out with Oli Buckley moving from flanker to second row.

Whilst work continues on their artificial surface Derby's games are played on an alternative pitch just a short walk from the main facilities but which presents a wonderful marketing opportunity to be sponsored by Evo-Stick. Joking aside the players of both sides coped superbly well with the conditions but neither team were able to show their true flair for attacking, free-flowing rugby but it was a pulsating encounter nevertheless.

Derby kicked off with a slight advantage in the elements but Newport demonstrated their appetite with a series of strong carries particularly from Nathan Parker, Will Roach and Oli Buckley. Whilst Derby enjoyed slightly more possession they were, perhaps, guilty of kicking too much of it away when in good territorial position. This eased the defensive burden for the visitor's somewhat but still the Newport defence was outstanding throughout and it was this resilience that probably carried the day.

Newport were reduced to fourteen when Liam Holder was adjudged to have tackled an opponent without the ball which saw Derby put several penalties into the corner which the Newport eight did fantastically well to defend before turning the ball over and clearing the danger.

The visitors then worked their way up towards the Derby line with another series of good carries before Mike Venn was held up over the line. A five metre scrum ensued but after a couple of phases round the fringes Newport were penalised and the chance was lost.

Chris Perry, filling in at full-back during Holder's enforced absence, pulled off a try saving tackle before Derby exerted more pressure in the Newport red zone and finally Derby picked and went through the middle of the ruck, finding space where there shouldn't really have been any, easy conversion and 7-0 to Derby after twenty six minutes.

Newport's reply was immediate, Mann darting through a gap and getting in behind before the ball was re-cycled left and Perry scampered in at the corner. The difficult conversion was missed but Newport returned the re-start right back into Derby territory and after a series of penalty advantages and good carries again from Charlie Hill, who had an excellent match over a full 80 minutes – a rarity for a prop these days, Venn, Rhys Morgan, Parker and Roach eventually produced space out wide for Dave Archer to cross in the corner for a 7-10 advantage.

There was just time for something from the Comedy Playhouse as Derby returned to the Newport danger zone and a scuffed clearance kick out of defence found Morgan with his dunce's cap on in a blatantly offside position preventing a clear scoring opportunity. Not only was the seven point penalty try awarded but Morgan was dispatched to the bin. Holder was able to add a penalty but Newport would start the second half with reduced numbers and 14-13 down.

Newport were confident they would have the edge in fitness as they opened the half with an early Holder penalty to restore their advantage at 14-16. Derby's much vaunted No8 Luke Wilmott was having a torrid time being crunched in the tackle with every one of his carries resulting in either being knocked back behind the gain line or spilling the ball in contact. Chief architect in this was Vice captain and fly half Monty Maule who was revelling in the physical challenge being presented in what was generally agreed to be a man-of-the-match performance.

It was Maule who orchestrated Newport's third try on fifty seven minutes with a clever break out of defence followed by a kick to the Derby twenty two. The hosts won their own line out sure enough but when their clearance kick went out on the full from outside Newport sensed their chance. Kirk Robinson had already replaced the hard working Parker adding even more beef to the Newport pack and he was to have an immediate impact. A perfect catch and drive saw the Newport eight shunt back their opponents fully twenty odd metres and had the try line not suddenly appeared they would surely have carried on into the adjoining car park. Excellently executed, it was Roach who emerged from the bottom of the pile to claim the score, Holder squeezed over the conversion and Newport led 14-23.

Search as the visitors did for the bonus point score Derby held out and after a couple of very close calls by referee Carl Adams eventually worked some space out wide to cross for the try. The crucial conversion was missed meaning a further try would be required for the hosts to snatch it but Newport clung on for a vital and most rewarding victory.

Team: Holder, Archer, Perry, Vaka, Hughes, Maule, Mann, Roach, Morgan, Venn, Parker, Buckley, Hill, Cowell (Captain), Evans
Bench: Wells, Robinson, Wara

A young and exciting Doncaster Phoenix make their first ever trip to Forton Road next Saturday when a large crowd will be expected to watch Newport try and stretch their lead further at the top end of the table. Kick Off is at 2.15pm

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