

With three games remaining Newport are still in with an outside chance of making the play-offs for promotion to National 2 North. Birmingham and Solihull managed to overhaul Peterborough Lions in the dying minutes of a top of the table clash in Cambridgeshire, restricting them to just a losing bonus point and Newport capitalised with a five point home win over Derby. This means that three five point wins for Newport and any slip up by Lions, will allow a shot at the big time for a small market town club, only promoted last season. Not even the most ardent supporter would have put money on that in September.

Saturday's win came courtesy of eight tries and seven conversions, scored throughout a dominant first half and a somewhat disappointing, disjointed second period. Overall the result makes pleasing reading at 54-19, but Newport's inability to keep their collective foot on the opposition's throat when they are in control, was apparent yet again and is without doubt a headache for the coaching staff.

It has to be said that Derby, safe from any possibility of relegation and not troubling the league leaders, had nothing to play for, save pride. They do have that in abundance though and it was clear from the get-go that they were not there to make up the numbers. A perfectly executed midfield move by the visitors on ten minutes saw Jack Dawson slice open the Newport defensive line, before putting Ben Marlow through to register the first score of the day. A conversion by George Casteldine put them 7-0 to the good.

This try prompted a huge response from Newport and thirty minutes of stellar rugby, which showcased all the training field efforts throughout the season. First Henry Vaka turned on the afterburners and scored a great individual effort on the wide right. This was followed by a period of fantastic teamwork. Huge barrelling runs by the forwards, backed up by slick handling in the back-line. The Derby defence stood firm until the 21st minute, when a huge charge from lock, Will Roach, took him under the posts and with a simple conversion the score stood at 12-7.

The third try of the day was a glorious team effort, involving barrelling runs from Roach, Jack Wells and Kirk Robinson and some footwork by Vaka which left the Derby defence all over the place and even the visiting supporters applauding. Liam Holder was on form with the boot and another successful conversion opened the gap to 19-7. He was not to miss all day and registered seven from seven.

Only five minutes elapsed before another team try. First the ball was spun left and hooker, Tom Cowell, looking every bit like the Raging Potato, Keith Woods, took on the defence out wide. Committed support work by Roach allowed a quick recycle and with the Derby defensive line stretched, the ball quickly went wide right to Billy Wara, who galloped over for Newport's fourth try.

Even when the ball was lost Newport's constant pressure was allowing them to rapidly regain possession. On 37 minutes Roach, who along with Robinson, was proving to be a handful for the visitors, fed Monty Maule, who in turn released Chris Perry. His excellent footwork took him to within 3 metres of the line, whereupon Vaka arrived in support at the ensuing ruck and cheekily collected the ball and ran right through the middle to record a first half hat-trick. With two defenders having clashed heads and requiring medical attention, half time came a minute or two early, with Newport 33-7 to the good.

Bob Adams rung the changes during the break, with Dave Hartshorne replacing Wara on the wing and fit again Jack Price coming on in the back row. Roach, after an impressive first half, was given a rest and Mike Venn moved into the second row, alongside Nathan Parker.

The second half started well enough. Patience and good shape allowed Maule to display some nifty footwork and dance through for the sixth try of the afternoon on 5 minutes. Ten minutes later a perfect take off the top from Oli Buckley at the tail of the lineout allowed Robinson to punch a hole in centre field. The ball then found its way to Vaka on the half way line, with the entire Derby team between him and the try line. How he then managed to evade every effort to stop him is a mixture of strength, footwork, self-belief and a dash of Fijian magic, but evade them he did, to cross for his fourth try of the day. All the more amazing is that he manages this playing with unresolved hamstring issues and carrying twenty pounds too much around the middle.

It has to be said that Vaka, like many players who hail from the South Seas, dances to his own tune, and must at times be hugely frustrating to the coaches and perhaps those players with whom he takes the field, but his natural ability, strength and passion cannot be denied and this effort alone was worth anybody's £5 entry fee.

Newport, now forty points to the good should have gone on and extinguished any resistance from Derby. This however is not how things panned out and the visitors actually won the last quarter 12-7. This was in part down to Newport straying from the game plan, being slow up in defence and thereby allowing the opposition far too much space. Credit must also be given to the visitors, who never let their heads drop throughout the entire match and scored two tries through winger, George Campbell and scrum half, former Namibian international, McGrath Van Wykk. The Derby captain, prop, Martin Kent, was an inspiration to his team and as well as his propping duties regularly appeared in his team's backline. Front row compadre, Peter Wilcox and George Casteldine at stand-off, were also impressive in a team that certainly has a never say die attitude.

Newport also added a late try, again inspired by the direct running of Vaka in centre field. He was supported well by Parker and then Buckley, who continues to show superb form in whichever position he is selected.

Worthy of special mention are the safe hands of Parker under the restart kicks, the text book chop tackles executed throughout this game and many others by Jordan Grass and the fine second half showing of Dave Hartshorne, in only his second first team appearance this season.

A trip to Doncaster Phoenix is next on the agenda and only a five point win will suffice. The dream is still alive and you can be sure that all focus will be on achieving the next goal.

Team: Grass, Cowell ©, Wells, Roach, Parker, Buckley, Venn, Robinson, Brown, Maule, Holder, Vaka, Perry, Wara, Adams, Hill, Price, Hartshorne

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