

Newport (Salop) 64 Doncaster Phoenix 21

Newport welcomed the visit of Doncaster Phoenix on Saturday, after the original fixture had succumbed to December's wintry conditions. This was the first time the two teams had ever met and little was known about our opponents, save for some statistics, which indicated a free scoring, open approach to the game. Prior to Saturday's game they had scored the second most points in the league and had achieved a try bonus point in 12 of 17 games.

Newport for their part were forced to make several late changes to the eighteen. Three players were called up from the Legion to make their first team debuts. Scott Mackenzie started at full back, with Liam Holder and Dave Archer on the wings, in a rejigged back three. Sam Sergeant and Nathan Smart were named on the bench, along with experienced prop, Jack Wells. Charlie Hill started at tight head in place of the rested Jon Evans and Will Roach relocated to partner Nathan Parker in the second row. Kirk Robinson locked the scrum at No 8 and Jack Price started on the open side, in place of the unavailable Rhys Morgan.

The winning mentality needed to be restored and it certainly was after a convincing ten try victory, but not before Doncaster had given Newport one hell of a fright in the latter stages of the first half.

Newport had got off to a stellar start and with only twenty minutes gone had already scored three tries. It was not just the score-line that was pleasing, but the manner in which Newport went about their work was hugely impressive, the first two scores being superb team efforts.

On seven minutes Sam Brown finished off a move inspired by a scything run by Henry Vaka, which led to the ball passing through nine sets of hands, before the touch down. On fifteen minutes, an equally fine score by Robinson under the posts, followed clinical, repeated recycling of the ball. Twenty minutes in, and just after Wells had replaced the injured Hill at tighthead, Oli Buckley drove over at the back of a perfectly executed catch and drive off a lineout, five metres out.

Seventeen points scored, total domination in the scrums, the attacking zip that had been absent since the Christmas break, seemingly back and then Newport mystifyingly appeared to press the self-destruct button. What followed was a

mad twelve minute period, from the yellow carding of Vaka to the end of the half that completely and utterly played into Doncaster's hands.

Unnecessary penalties, unnecessary low percentage passes leading to spilt ball, and a total loss of any recognisable defensive structure, led to three conceded tries and a half time score-line of 17-21, a score you couldn't have got odds on after the first quarter.

First, centre, Sam Bottomley, scored for the visitors, followed in short time by winger Sefanaia Bulumakau. No 8 Martin Brink then was released in space and galloped down the right wing to score his team's third on the stroke of half time.

The break couldn't have come at a more opportune time as Newport were able to take a collective deep breath and quickly come to the conclusion, that if a game plan is working, then why change it. With the reset button now having been firmly pushed Newport came out and gave a display of controlled attacking rugby, unparalleled in recent games. Seven further tries were scored and this was backed up by a disciplined, organised and committed defensive display that saw the forty seven points added, unanswered.

Patience was a key factor in regaining control of the game and this must be reinforced at every opportunity. It is not necessary to try to score off every play and with this mind-set Newport went through approaching fifteen phases, before Monty Maule touched down on seven minutes. Having taken over the kicking duties from Holder he could not convert his own try but he was successful with every kick thereafter and more importantly Newport were back in front at 22-21 and from that point never looked back.

Back on script Newport were dominating possession and territory, but Doncaster were playing their part also. Their lineout wasn't really functioning, with numerous overthrows and their No 8 was having to deal manfully with poor ball at the back of a consistently retreating scrum, but when they did have the opportunity, they showed an adventurous spirit and some good handling skills.

On twenty four minutes, after another patient build up, Vaka showed great strength to force his way over from eight metres out. His ability to shrug off would be tacklers and break the gain line time after time, is a huge asset in Newport's arsenal.

The last fifteen minutes saw Newport scoring almost at will. Jack Price seemed to be everywhere at once and on twenty six minutes made a storming midfield break. He was well supported by the two big locks and Nathan Parker made further yards before offloading to Will Roach, who strode over from twenty metres. The size 13's borrowed from the lost property department certainly didn't seem to slow him down.

Price then turned try scorer and added Newport's seventh. A trademark mazy run by Maule released him out on the wide right and he showed an impressive turn of pace to sprint home. Two minutes later Vaka and Price again combined to put replacement, Sam Sergeant, over for a try on debut. Maule's successful conversion pushed Newport through the fifty mark for the seventh time this season and they weren't finished yet.

Vaka added a second, as did Robinson from a pushover scrum in the dying seconds to register a final result of 64-21.

We witnessed sixty plus top-class minutes of rugby sandwiched around a short period of complete and utter implosion. Newport are far from the finished article, but when sticking to the game plan they have attacking options throughout and are defensively very solid.

Price was outstanding throughout the second period. All the forwards carried well, with Roach, Tom Cowell, Parker, Robinson and Buckley all impressive. Jordan Grass did a lot of the unseen hard work around the breakdown area and the options at prop, with Wells slotting in seamlessly are pleasing. Chris Perry ran great lines and his understanding with Vaka always threatens to open up defences.

Next Saturday we eagerly await the arrival of Sanbach, who sit just behind us in the table in fifth place. After a surprise home defeat at the hands of lowly Newbold, they bounced back in some fashion this weekend, inflicting Birmingham and Solihull's first defeat of the season. The away fixture in October, saw us give up a 21-6 half time lead, to lose 26-21. That defeat is indelibly tattooed on the memory of the entire squad and management and every human effort will go into avenging it.

Grass, Cowell (c), Hill, Roach, Parker, Buckley, Price, Robinson, Brown, Maule, Archer, Vaka, Perry, Holder, Mackenzie

Wells, Smart, Sergeant.

Phil Gittus