

## Midlands Premier Division

Newport                      8pts                      v                      Scunthorpe                      12pts

Newport's promotion hopes suffered a setback when they were beaten at home by Scunthorpe in a low-scoring but enthralling contest between two excellent sides, neither of whom were prepared to give an inch in what was a superb defensive showing by both teams. The score-line doesn't suggest such but it was a cracking game of rugby that could have gone either way!

Newport's cause wasn't helped by the continuation of a virus that took out Dave Archer on the eve of the match, his place being taken on the wing by Billy Wara whilst prop Charlie Hill, due to start, was forced to the bench and as he became more ill by the minute was unable to play any part in the match. It was soon clear, also, that centres Chris Perry and Henry Vaka were still affected by the bug but soldiered on to complete the eighty minutes.

It was the home side who kicked off up the hill and applied all the early pressure with strong carries from Oli Buckley, Will Roach, Rhys Morgan and Kirk Robinson but this was met by organised, determined and resolute defence from the visitors, a trait that was to continue throughout the afternoon.

Scunthorpe also had several chances to open the scoring but were met by an equally adept home defence where Jordan Grass, Jon Evans, Roach and Buckley led the tackle count whilst skipper Tom Cowell produced a number of clever turnovers at crucial moments to relieve the pressure.

Having declined a shot at goal in favour of the kick to the corner Newport wasted a potential scoring opportunity but their best chance came moments later when Cowell put Buckley through the gap but as he was tackled by the last defender some five metres out his attempted off-load to Roach went to ground and the chance was lost.

And so it finished 0-0 at the break but it had been a thrilling half of good attritional rugby played in a great spirit.

Newport started the second period just as they had started the first, dominating both possession and territory, but this time they made it count when the outstanding Rhys Morgan wriggled out of several tackles to plunge over by the posts, Liam Holder scuffing the conversion attempt and striking the upright, maybe a costly miss in what was never going to be a points-fest!

Trailing 5-0 Scunthorpe came storming back at Newport who were probably given their hardest defensive test of the season so far but they toughed it out having spent a sustained period within ten metres of their own line, Grass, Evans, Roach and Co again repelling all efforts of the visitors.

Having weathered the worst of it a poor kick out of defence invited Scunthorpe back onto them and from the ensuing ruck space appeared unguarded on the

blind side and Scunthorpe took advantage to scamper in for the equalising score through winger Josh Bird to restore parity at 5-5.

It was still end to end stuff but with neither side really looking like scoring. On sixty nine minutes an aimless Scunthorpe kick ahead was allowed to run dead, whereupon Monty Maule took a quick drop out to himself before weaving his way through into the Scunthorpe half before handing on to the rampaging Nathan Parker who produced some good carries following his introduction from the bench. The big second-rower made it to within five metres before being hauled down but scrum half Sam Brown was then impeded by the Scunthorpe full back whilst attempting to get the ball away. The result was inevitable, penalty to Newport and yellow card for Scunthorpe reducing the visitors to fourteen for the remaining minutes of the game.

Holder seemed to take an age weighing up the shot at goal, possibly trying to erase memories of the hash he had made of his earlier kick, but this one he struck perfectly between the posts to give Newport an 8-5 advantage.

The odds were surely with Newport now but just as they had done previously Scunthorpe set up a series of pick and drives before a gap opened up through the middle of the maul, Scunthorpe flooded through and a simple scoring pass to Tom Foster, the visiting captain gave them the lead for the first time, the conversion extending that lead to four points at 8-12 meaning Newport would have to score a try in the last remaining minutes to take the spoils. Down to fourteen Scunthorpe simply got their hands on the ball and kept it to run down the clock and claim victory.

An enthralling match in which the Newport pack were outstanding in every department but apart from Maule who made a number of telling half breaks that should have led to more, the backs lacked their usual cutting edge and all of their efforts either fizzled out or were thwarted by the outstanding defence of the visitors.

A setback, yes, but Newport's destiny is still very much in their own hands. They remain in third place with games in hand and have all their major rivals to play in the coming weeks. Having won six on the bounce and eight from their last nine Scunthorpe too have now put themselves into the mix along with Newport, Peterborough, Sandbach and Doncaster for that valued second spot.

Team: Holder, Wara, Perry, Vaka, Hughes, Maule, Brown, Roach, Morgan, Venn, Buckley, Robinson, Evans, Cowell (Captain) Grass  
Bench: Hill, Parker, Dorey

Next Saturday a tough trip to Nuneaton awaits where Newport will be looking to avenge their defeat at Forton Road earlier in the season.

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