

Midlands Premier Division

Sandbach 26pts v Newport 21pts

The depth of Newport's squad was stretched to the limit last Saturday when they were deprived of Jason Francis (concussion), Mike Venn, Jon Evans and Toby Mann unavailable followed by a late sickness bug that meant Will Roach and Dave Archer also withdrew overnight, whilst skipper Tom Cowell was ill shortly before kick-off but bravely took the field to lead his side against a resurgent Sandbach side who were on a run of three straight victories.

Six changes were required in personnel in addition to a re-shuffle in the backs from the side that accounted for Peterborough Lions the previous week but there was little sign of the late troubles with an assured first half performance that saw them go in at the break 6-21 up having played against the elements. Unfortunately they then pressed the self-destruct button in the second period with some poor decision making that allowed Sandbach to take control and finish with an interception try late on to take the spoils.

Newport took command right from the off looking after the ball extremely well that allowed them to go through phase after phase, battering holes in an over-worked Sandbach defence and just as importantly denying the home side any ball with which to exploit the elements. Charlie Hill, given his first start, was mighty impressive making several great carries coupled with some big hits on the opposition. The whole pack were carrying the ball well, with Nathan Parker, Oli Buckley, Rhys Morgan and Kirk Robinson to the fore which allowed them to advance beyond the gain line almost at will.

Twelve minutes in and the home defence finally cracked, Hill and Parker smashing through before slipping the ball to Jake Goulson who crossed by the posts, Liam Holder converting for a fully deserved 0-7 lead. Sandbach's only exits were via the boot but their kicking was poor and merely resulted in more Newport pressure. The visitors extended their lead after twenty two minutes when wave after wave of punishing phases saw the yellow card produced for a Sandbach side entry in the red zone. Monty Maule took advantage immediately dancing through space created by the hard graft of his pack to feed the supporting Jake Leonard who dotted down for the second, again converted by Holder to extend the lead to 0-14.

Leonard was then sent to the sin-bin for ten minutes following a high tackle in the danger zone but great defence kept Sandbach out before they slotted a penalty to make it 3-14. More pressure from Newport and a neat backs move released Henry Vaka who strolled in unopposed for the third try, Holder adding the extras for a 3-21 advantage. Sandbach added their second penalty to make it 6-21 at the interval with Newport having the benefit of a strong wind in the second half. What could possibly go wrong?

Half time instructions from the coaching team lost in the red mist and, just as Sandbach had done in the first half, Newport kicked very poorly and without much thought. Why would both teams kick consistently down the right hand

touchline when the wind was quite obviously blowing to the left hand corner? Easy from the sidelines admittedly but players need to think under pressure and react accordingly and this, ultimately is why they were undone in a game they should quite clearly have won.

Sensing their chance Sandbach upped their game and suddenly it was Newport having to do all the tackling and absorb the pressure, pressure that could quite easily have been relieved with decent, sensible kicks into the right areas. Instead they repeatedly tried to run it out from well inside their own half.

What happened next was inevitable, a poor kick out of defence was run back at them, phases built in the Newport twenty two, then spun wide for a fairly simple try in the corner that was superbly converted by the impressive Benny Elliott who didn't miss a kick all afternoon. All of a sudden it was 13-21 after forty nine minutes, Holder hit the post from long range after fifty six, then more Sandbach pressure drew the resulting penalties and Elliott popped them over to make it 19-21 after seventy three minutes and all to play for in a frantic last ten!

Newport's downfall was confirmed when another attempt to run the ball from the wrong part of the field saw a pass intercepted, Sandbach's young winger sprinting in from 30odd metres, Elliott converting to give Sandbach the lead for the very first time in the match at 26-21, something that had looked impossible half an hour earlier.

Newport battered away at the Sandbach line for the last few minutes but the hosts were in no mood to surrender and heroic defence on their part pressured Newport into a knock on and the game was over.

Team: Paterson, Holder, Perry, Vaka, Pennells, Maule, Leonard, Robinson, Morgan, Buckley, Parker, Goulson, Hill, Cowell (Captain), Grass
Bench: Wells, Howells, Hartshorne

Unbeaten table-toppers Birmingham & Solihull visit Forton Road next Saturday for what is now a crucial game, one Newport must win if they are to remain serious challengers for promotion. All please note KICK OFF is 2.15pm

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