

Newport (Salop) 67 Doncaster Phoenix 17

Newport manfully weathered an early onslaught from visiting Doncaster Phoenix on Saturday, before steadily growing into their first league fixture of the season. By the second half the forwards superior physicality in the set scrummage, at the breakdown and in general play, created a platform from which seven tries were plundered and a fifty point margin of victory achieved.

Competition for places in the squad has been fierce over the last few weeks and there is definitely now an unprecedented depth in quality, which augurs well for the long campaign ahead. Three were selected to make their debuts, experienced tight-head, Craig Wilson, Bath University student, Henry Purchase and Royal Irish Ranger, Chris Leathem. They slotted in alongside seasoned teammates, who came so agonisingly close to glory last season.

There were no surprises whatsoever in Doncaster's approach to the game. Despite recording two convincing wins last season, Newport had had to deal with the most high-tempo style of play of any of their opponents and had shipped three tries in both encounters. Saturday's game followed suit in just about every respect.

Those who were not in position on the bank at kick-off may well have missed the inauspicious start to the season, a poor box-kick being well fielded and spun wide by the live-wire Doncaster back-line. Poor defensive alignment and weak tackling contributed to the score, but Donny had set out their stall within thirty seconds.

Doncaster had arrived with the intention of running everything and keeping the ball alive at every opportunity. They had also added some steel in defence and were fearlessly tackling Newport's big ball carriers, with well executed technique that was preventing the quick off-load.

On eleven minutes Phoenix stretched their lead to twelve points, after a poor midfield kick was gathered and run in under the posts. Team spirit, confidence in the game plan and most of all patience, were now to be given a very early examination.

Newport elected to take a penalty shot at goal minutes later, the resulting three points from the boot of Liam Holder were welcome, but perhaps the minutes break and the chance to regroup were more beneficial.

Doncaster continued to play a no-fear brand of rugby and few in attendance could be critical of their positive approach, athleticism and handling skills. Newport though were gradually growing into the game. Jordan Grass and Kirk Robinson in particular were making solid carries into the heart of the Donny defence and it was surely only a matter of time before the defensive line would be breached.

In fact it took fully thirty two minutes for this to be achieved, but that Henry Vaka effort, after a bullocking charge by Will Roach and a typically fully committed follow-up by Jack Price, sparked a turn around, which meant that Newport led 22-12 at the break. Vaka, now in his fifth season with Newport, created the second and scored the third, on both occasions showing a great turn of pace and as many times before how illusive and inspiring he can be.

There seemed to be a touch of fortune to the second try dotted down in the end by Toby Mann, but there was no doubting the third, Vaka the beneficiary of hard yards made by Wilson and Roach.

Pre-match rumours abounded that Vaka only needed one more try to bring up his hundred for the club proved to be misinformation. He passed that milestone last season and has in fact now contributed 109 tries to the cause. Only another 91 and the promised bucket of chicken will be delivered!

Newport came out for the second period clearly determined to take control of proceedings and stamp some authority on the game. Within three minutes a turnover from Wilson led to a text book driving maul, allowing the ball to be spun wide right to Leathem. He was stopped up inches short, but Brown was able to pick up and touchdown to increase the margin to fifteen points.

Leathem only had to wait another five minutes before he scored his first try for Newport. A poorly executed chip ahead by Phoenix was collected by Mann, who made 25 metres, before basic draw and pass created the space on the right wing. At 32-12 Newport now had the game in the bag. The relentless tackling of Newport's strike runners was beginning to take its toll on

Doncaster- who despite having a couple of heavy props, were man for man, much the lighter team - a job not made easier by the introduction of Nathan Parker to the fray.

Midway through the half Roach was propelled high into the Summer air to collect a perfectly timed throw from Tom Cowell. The resulting driving maul was then steered towards the Doncaster posts by Wilson, with Roach then forcing his way over at the base. Monty Maule, who had taken over the kicking duties from Holder added the extras.

Bob Adams was able to ring the changes and Jon Evans and the versatile, Jake Leonard, were able to get some decent game time from the bench. The scoreboard continued to tick over with three tries being added in quick succession. First, Donny's Number 8, at the base of a scrum that was now retreating at a rate of knots, attempted to flick the ball to his scrum-half. Sam Brown's poachers instinct allowed him to intercept and sprint fully 60 metres to record a brace for the day. Again a totally dominant scrum allowed Leonard to release the hard running Mann in midfield. His line break and subsequent pass put Chris Perry away to score. With five minutes remaining a catch and drive straight from the training field gave Cowell the opportunity to burrow through the defensive line and breach the 60 point marker.

All credit must be given to Phoenix, who displayed true Yorkshire grit and despite clearly tiring in the second half, never stopped battling. Some nifty footwork and good hands gave them a third try with one minute remaining. Unfortunately for the visitors, in their desperation to add fourth and pick up a bonus point from their long journey, their normally sound handling went awry and Holder was able to collect the ball and gallop away for Newport's tenth try of the day.

A final score of 67-17 was very satisfying, but Doncaster will not be taken lightly in the return fixture. They are dangerous in open play and the two early poor kicks were punished in short time. This is a lesson that would be well remembered.

There are many positives, aside from the margin of victory, to be taken away from this first game. Despite going behind early on, Newport stayed calm and showed the requisite patience required to work their way back into the game,

they kept the foot on the throat when Doncaster began to wilt, extinguishing any possibility of a comeback and the six or seven positional changes made during the game, had no impact whatsoever on the team's effectiveness. With an abundance of players, who were not included this Saturday, pushing hard for selection, tough decisions will have to be made every week. Added to that, six of the seven starting three quarters scored tries. Those in this league who believe Newport are just a big pack crashing the ball up, or a team totally reliant on the South Sea brilliance of Vaka, will not know where the next attack is coming from. It was truly an multi-dimensional performance.

Next up are Lichfield, who suffered a heavy loss to Luctonians on Saturday. Concentration and clinical execution will be the watch words and Newport will only be thinking about that one game and how the all important win can be achieved.

Team: Grass, Cowell (c.), Wilson, Roach, Buckley, Purchase, Price, Robinson, Brown, Maule, Mann, Vaka, Perry, Leathem, Holder, Evans, Leonard, Parker