

Midlands Premier Division

Lichfield 24pts v Newport 76pts

Newport made a breathtaking return to Level 5 and the re-titled Midlands Premier Division with an outstanding team performance that blew their hosts away in a first half that oozed quality, class and physicality. Five debutants were included in their starting line up for this opening fixture, Will Roach, Oli Buckley, Rhys Morgan, Dave Archer and Jason Francis and all five made telling contributions, whilst a sixth, Luke Stevens got twenty minutes from the bench.

The visitors were invited to kick off playing up the slight slope and into a breeze but were into their stride immediately when Monty Maule, who controlled matters superbly all afternoon, found touch with a raking kick to the Lichfield twenty two. The hosts won their line out but turned it over, Henry Vaka, Kirk Robinson, Morgan and Ash Paterson all handling before the latter off-loaded to skipper Tom Cowell who crashed over for the season's opening try, converted by Liam Holder. Newport's forwards drove back into Lichfield territory immediately from the restart and after a series of phases Maule broke and fed the ball inside to the supporting Paterson to add the second after just four minutes, Holder again converting to make it 0-14

Lichfield then had the ball for the very first time and launched a menacing looking attack before it was intercepted and spun left where Francis raced in at the corner for the first of what proved to be an impressive hat-trick to extend the lead to 0-19. Lichfield at last got themselves into the game and created some space out wide to dot down for a converted try and thus it became 7-19 after just nine minutes of play. Holder was then yellow carded for a tip tackle, a ten minute period that Lichfield would have to exploit if they were to challenge a rampant Newport whose back five of Jake Goulson, Roach, Buckley, Morgan and Robinson were destroying the home pack and constantly making inroads behind the Lichfield defence and proving very effective at the breakdown.

It wasn't to be – even down to fourteen, Newport continued the onslaught, Paterson adding a penalty and converting a second Cowell try from a well executed catch and drive try to extend their advantage to 7-29.

There was a great chase and hit from Archer before Lichfield were penalised, the kick to the corner producing another catch and drive, Buckley the man to profit this time with the fifth try, converted by the returning Holder for 7-36. There was some brief respite for Lichfield when they benefitted from a scrappy line out and pounced on the loose ball to score and reduce the arrears to 12-36.

Still only thirty one minutes gone when Francis burst through a gap and produced a memorable off-load that had the Newport following purring with admiration and sending in the impressive Perry under the posts, Holder tacking on the extras for 12-43.

The fifty was up by half time when Archer finished another flowing move with a try that Holder again converted to bring an exhilarating half to a close with the scoreboard reading 12-50 to the visitors.

It had been a game of few scrummages but it was obvious from the few that there had been that Newport had the upper hand. The established front row of Jordan Grass, Cowell and Jack Wells providing the foundations for the back five to thrive.

The second period was never going to live up to the excitement of the first and what must have been a shell-shocked Lichfield were first to get themselves on the scoresheet, Perry making a wonderful try saving tackle in the corner before they eventually forced their way over to reduce the deficit to 17-50. There then followed a well-controlled pushover try for Robinson, converted, followed by a lovely chip over the defence from Maule that was collected on the full by Francis to score out wide and it was 17-62 after sixty eight minutes.

Four minutes later Lichfield were penalised for a high tackle and a quickly taken tap saw Cowell feed Paterson for a converted try that extended the score to 17-69. Francis then produced a big hit on his opposite number just outside the Newport twenty two, the winger snapping up the loose ball and sprinting the seventy odd metres to complete what was a remarkable hat-trick and extend the lead to 17-76. A remarkable performance from someone who was playing football only six months ago and was appearing in only his tenth or eleventh game of rugby, having been persuaded by his close friend Mark Lowbridge to "give it a go" - He looks to be a real find!

The only real disappointment of the day was that they let Lichfield in for a late try which gave the hosts a bonus point for their four tries. It was, however, a magnificent performance that promises much for the future but it is, of course, early days and there will be much sterner tests to come starting this coming Saturday when close neighbours Longton visit Forton Road for a 3pm kick off.

Team: Holder, Archer, Perry, Vaka, Francis, Maule, Paterson, Robinson, Morgan, Buckley, Roach, Goulson, Wells, Cowell (Captain), Grass
Bench: Evans, Bates, Stevens

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