

Midlands Premier Division

Longton 31pts v Newport 57pts

Newport's trip to Longton is never an easy one and despite the emphatic score-line this visit was no different in what was generally a poor game with both sets of defences choosing the near Arctic conditions to have a day off.

That said, Newport got the job done and their bonus point victory gave them their best ever total at this level of 72, overtaking the 71 that were achieved in 2012-13, when they finished in fifth position. With six more games remaining the aim will be to secure the best finishing position in the history of the club whilst still retaining a chance of reaching the runners up spot and securing a play-off spot for promotion to National 2. Much will depend on next Saturday's trip to league leaders Birmingham Bees but more about that later.

Longton won the toss and gave Newport the advantage of wind and slope. Liam Holder's kick off was securely taken by the Longton pack but Sam Hughes stripped out the ball and ran in from thirty metres to score possibly the quickest ever try recorded in Newport colours with no more than fifteen seconds on the clock. On a difficult day for kicking Holder could not convert but Newport had made the ideal start, or so it seemed!

Longton then did what Longton do, retaining the ball for long periods with a pick and drive game played in and around the fringes that isn't particularly pleasing to the eye but effective nevertheless and eventually catching out the Newport defence with a try under the posts duly converted for 7-5. Longton then tried to run the re-start out of defence but when the ball was eventually kicked away, Monty Maule spotted a gap out wide and a neat chip saw Hughes in for his second after fourteen minutes to make it 7-10.

Newport were on the wrong side of referee Richardson at the breakdown and a series of penalties along the right hand touchline saw Longton trundle over for a catch and drive try from the resultant line out five metres out and against the elements they were now 12-10 up. A feature of the game throughout was how quickly the other side responded having just conceded and after Will Roach and Nathan Parker had made good ground to get in behind the home defence Maule danced through and fed Sam Brown who dotted down by the posts, Holder converting to restore Newport's lead at 12-17.

Jack Price then took the restart and moved it left before Hughes broke through to feed Henry Vaka to go in under the posts, Holder's second conversion in as many minutes opening up a bit of daylight between the teams at 12-24. There was more to come with Hughes completing a twenty five minute hat-trick with a converted try to stretch the lead to 12-31. Newport then conceded another set of penalties giving Longton the chance to force their way over again for another short range try, unconverted, to reduce the deficit to 17-31. Holder then put a penalty to within fifteen of the Longton line, Tom Cowell making good ground before Vaka broke and fed Maule for another try just before the end of the half which finished at 17-36.

Longton probably needed the first score of the second period to give themselves a chance -they didn't get it! Newport were penalised for crossing right from the off and Longton put the ball into the visiting twenty two and everyone knew what was coming but the ball was overthrown at the resulting line out, Vaka who was enjoying playing against his old club, being first to react gathering the ball and racing eighty metres to score under the posts, Holder converting for 17-43. Oli Buckley had retired by now with an ankle injury to be replaced by Mike Venn who himself was returning to the squad after illness.

Longton were first to their own re-start, with full back Jack Newton-Taylor taking the ball on the full and bursting through a couple of half-hearted tackles to score a fine individual try, converted to narrow the deficit to 24-43. Brown was then sin-binned for a deliberate knock on before Connor Adams, released by Coventry to play the rest of the season at his home town club came on to replace Dave Archer.

More Longton pressure was met with some good defence at last before Maule and Vaka combined to put Chris Perry through and in under the posts, Holder's conversion bringing up the fifty for the eighth time this season at 24-50.

Roach then broke through several tackles to put in Archer, who had returned to the fray to replace Maule, for Newport's ninth try, again converted to make it 24-57 before some sloppy defence, a feature of both sides display all afternoon, let Longton in for a fifth try just before the end and a final score of 31-57.

Team: Archer, Holder, Perry, Vaka, Hughes, Maule, Brown, Robinson, Price, Buckley, Parker, Roach, Wells, Cowell (Captain), Grass
Bench: Owen, Venn, Adams

Not Newport's finest hour by some distance but some solid, rather than spectacular performances, saw them home with something to spare. There was a hard working showing from their front row of Jack Wells, Jordan Grass and skipper Cowell and the usual strong carries from the back five of Parker, Roach, Buckley, Price and Kirk Robinson whilst the backs took advantage of some fairly slip-shod defending from their Staffordshire hosts especially when exposed to any sort of pace or intensity.

Next week sees the crucial trip to Birmingham Bees where management, coaches and players realise that only victory will do if they are to maintain a realistic chance of second spot. All kick-offs now revert to 3pm for the rest of the season.

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