

## Newport (Salop) 43 Newbold on Avon 19

Newport's push for promotion to National 2 North is still on track after defeating Newbold on Avon 43-19 on Saturday. It was a game they never looked like losing, but it was far from a walk in the park.

Newbold, who were promoted along with Newport last season, are struggling near the foot of the table, but they are a team with immense spirit and pride. Despite going behind in the first minute of play and facing an unassailable lead for the majority of the game, they never displayed any negativity, kept their chins up, encouraged each other and for periods of the second half took the game to Newport. I for one hope that they can begin to register some wins and escape an immediate relegation.

Their opponent's backbone aside, discipline, or rather lack of it, was the major contributory factor in making this a closer encounter than it really should have been. I have never witnessed such a grossly unbalanced penalty count at any level of rugby and although at times, it did seem that the referee was only interested in penalising one team, there can be no question that the majority of awards were justified. A continuance of this level of offending will eventually derail Newport's fantastic season and that would be an unthinkable tragedy.

Newport had registered the first try of the game before many of the spectators had taken up their places on the bank. Will Roach broke on the blind-side from the base of the scrum, fed debutant scrum half, Sam Brown, who fixed his man and released Liam Holder to sprint home. Holder then added the extras for a 7-0 lead. Simple rugby, well executed.

A second try was added by Monty Maule after some nifty footwork evaded three or four would-be tacklers close to the line. Despite the missed conversion, Newport were 12-0 ahead and enjoying the lion's share of possession. Only repeated infringements, many at the breakdown were allowing the visitors to relieve pressure and gain some territory. Midway through the half, with Newport on the attack, an attempted pop pass went to ground. This was seized upon by a defending Newbold player, who galloped home unchallenged. Shortly afterwards Tom Cowell added Newport's third and despite conceding 14 penalties and ending the half with Billy Wara in the sin-bin, the score stood at 19-5.

The second half mirrored the first somewhat, in that Newport played some attractive, fast-paced, high intensity rugby, in patches, but repeatedly incurred the wrath of the match official, which meant that sustained pressure could not be maintained. Four tries were added throughout the half, the first from a full-blooded charge by tight-head Charlie Hill, followed by a second for Holder, after a trademark bullocking run by Rhys Morgan. Mike Venn and man of the match, Jake Goulson also crossed the whitewash, as did Newbold on two occasions.

Goulson, originally not named in the squad and drafted in due to Kirk Robinson succumbing to a virus, deserves special mention. His work-rate and willingness to make some hard yards, throughout the entire game, was outstanding. Sam Brown also showed that he is a classy addition to the team. He has all the skills in his repertoire, including a pinpoint box-kick and is already comfortable bossing the team.

An honourable mention should also go to Newbold Number 8, Danny Facer. Despite looking more like he would be at home anchoring the scrum at tighthead, he carried relentlessly and dealt manfully with the ball at the back of an oft retreating scrum. Looks can be deceiving!

There are many positives to be taken from this first outing of 2018. A convincing win was achieved, despite conceding an inordinate amount of penalties and suffering the loss of both Wara and Maule to the sin-bin. The scrum was dominant against an outfit, who were bulky and clearly relish a full-on physical battle. Loose-head Jordan Grass is only 21 and tight-head Charlie Hill, just 20. Both are quickly mastering the tricky art of channelling aggression and imposing themselves on their opposite number with increasing success. The entire team has a decent level of fitness – there are no passengers whatsoever. Two players, Sam Brown and replacement back, Lewis Dorey, slipped seamlessly into the team, all the more impressive given the five week break and limited training opportunities over the festive period. We have a plethora of second and back-row riches in the squad Roach, Buckley, Morgan, Venn, Goulson, Robinson and Parker are all inter-changeable. Add to that the newly arrived Jack Price and waiting in the wings, Howells, Bates, Few and Jiminez. There are many battles ahead and I would not be surprised if all of these players are called upon before the season ends.

Newport's destiny is entirely in their own hands. There is no reason whatsoever that National 2 rugby cannot be achieved this year. However it will

require total buy-in, by all, to a possible squad rotation policy, total commitment to training and an eradication of needlessly conceded penalties.

Grass, Cowell (C), Hill, Goulson, Buckley, Venn, Morgan, Roach, Brown, Maule, Archer, Vaka, Perry, Wara, Holder

Evans, Parker, Dorey

Phil Gittus