

Newport (Salop) 22 Birmingham & Solihull 23

There is rarely any denying the cold hard truth in clashes between teams at the top end of the division. Make fewer errors and you will be victorious. That's not to suggest that Newport made many mistakes, this was definitely one of their better performances this season, but their opponents were clinical at the line-out, efficient at the scrum and more than competent in defence. Overall Bees are an unflashy, but very sound outfit, with a class act at No. 8 in Umraan Dixon Jadwat and they provided Newport, with by far, their sternest test this season.

Newport had the benefit of the strong breeze in the first half and Liam Holder used that to his advantage with only 3 minutes on the clock, to register an early lead, converting a penalty with a little assistance from the right upright. Thereafter there was a period of sustained Bees pressure. This culminated on the 10-minute mark, with a catch and drive from a line-out and a reverse pop pass, which put the fast-arriving Jadwat through the defensive line.

Only four minutes later Jadwat picked up from the base of the scrum and showing a blistering turn of pace, ran fully fifty metres, before off-loading to the supporting Nathan Tilsley to score. With a superb conversion from the touch-line into the wind, the score now stood at 12-3.

Newport knew they were in for a testing afternoon, but retained their composure and mid-way through the half Holder was able to reduce the arrears to six points, with a penalty awarded for offside.

Minutes later, Rhys Morgan, who has been Newport's most effective player at the breakdown all season, had to leave the field with a shoulder injury and was replaced by Kirk Robinson, with Oli Buckley moving to the open-side.

Newport were seeing little of the ball and critically the possession they did see was occasionally wasted, with kicks to touch going out on the full.

On 33 minutes, debutant 19 year old winger Billy Wara announced his arrival to the Forton Road faithful. Having been put into space by Chris Perry at full tilt, he unceremoniously flattened the brave Bees full-back, in a shuddering collision, before being bundled into touch.

As the half drew to a close, a trademark jinking run from Henry Vaka, led to good Newport pressure deep in Bee's territory. Another transgression of the

defensive offside line and its resulting penalty gave Holder a simple third penalty and the half closed with Bees leading 12-9.

Having narrowed the gap, Newport gave that advantage straight back, conceding a penalty in the first minute of the second period, for not rolling away at the breakdown.

Almost immediately Holder was given the opportunity to cancel this out after Vaka and Wara had made good yards and Bees had infringed at the ruck. The penalty attempt, yet again hit the post, but this time was diverted wide.

Newport were generally playing composed rugby and the effort of the entire team could not be questioned, but on 9 minutes Bee's third try, finished off by their pacey left wing, Tawanda Chiadza, put them two tries in arrears at 20-9. Fortunately for home supporters, the conversion attempt again hit the upright and bounced wide.

An immediate penalty allowed Holder to keep the Fishes in striking distance though. The infringement was forced, after pressure created by a superb chase of the restart kick by Monty Maule and his text book tackle of Jadwat on arrival.

Both sides were continuing to play some entertaining and attractive rugby, but the defining factor was that the visitors were managing their possession of the ball slightly better.

On 20 minutes live-wire Toby Mann replaced Dave Archer, with Holder moving to full-back. Archer, whose laid-back, almost casual approach to the game, has several times been underestimated by opponents this season, had had another decent showing.

Five minutes into the final quarter Newport put themselves within reach of snatching an unlikely victory, when the referee finally tired of offences in the Bee's twenty two and dispatched the guilty defending player to the sin bin, as well as awarding a simple penalty. 20-15, and coach, Bob Adams, chose to ring the changes, in an attempt to breach the visitors resolute defence. Charlie Hill, perhaps unlucky not to start, after an excellent showing at Sandbach last week, replaced Jordan Grass, the latter having toughed out the entire game with a damaged shoulder. Morgan also returned to the fray replacing Robinson.

Newport continued to carry the ball hard in midfield and their desire and courage was plain to see, but the dream comeback was made that bit more

difficult and ultimately thwarted, when the home scrum was penalised and a wobbly, flat penalty attempt scraped over, creating an eight point margin, with only six minutes remaining.

Newport did eventually get that elusive try, ignited by the quick thinking efforts of scrum-half, Ash Paterson, in taking the under-used tap penalty option. He made good yards, before some thunderous ball carrying by the forwards, close to the Bee's line, allowed Nathan Parker, showing nimble footwork for a big man in the last minute of the game, to force his way over. Holder added the extras with his sixth successful kick of the day, leaving Newport agonisingly one point short at 22-23.

This was a quality game of rugby and Newport are unlikely to face a better, or fitter outfit than Birmingham & Solihull this season. The return fixture will be eagerly anticipated by both clubs and could prove to be all important in Newport's promotion bid. It's worthy of note, that our visitors, were not only the best team we have faced, but also their entire club; players, management and supporters, conducted themselves in a sporting and magnanimous fashion throughout.

A hugely important game looms next week, with the away league fixture at Bournville, doubling as the North Midland Cup Semi-Final. It was honours even last season and Newport will not underestimate the quality that their next opponents have in their ranks.

Newport

Grass, Cowell (C), Evans, Parker, Roach, Venn, Morgan, Buckley, Paterson, Maule, Wara, Vaka, Perry, Holder, Archer

Robonson, Hill, Mann

Phil Gittus