

## Newport (Salop) 22 Bridgnorth 13

Derby games are rarely classics in terms of rugby excellence and Saturday's encounter was no exception. What we did get was eighty minutes of hard work, passion, desire and commitment from both teams, with Newport retaining the bragging rights in Shropshire, with a 22-13 win.

With no specialised scrum-half available, Henry Vaka bravely put his hand up and was moved from his usual berth at inside centre, to take up the challenge, with Dave Archer moving in from the wing to fill his shoes. On the wings were Jason Francis, making a first start after a recent injury and Sam Hughes making his first appearance of the season.

With a healthy and vocal crowd filling the bank outside the clubhouse and the rain having abated, the game got underway, with Bridgnorth playing down the slope. It was the visitors that had the lion's share of the possession throughout the first twenty minutes. Scrum-half Gareth Bladen was marshalling a quick tempo, high intensity game, with wave after wave of attack, but for all the pressure, the defensive line could not be breached and the solitary reward was a penalty for an offence at the ruck on 17 minutes. This solid defence by Newport has been a key ingredient in their success so far this season and there is an obvious complete trust throughout the team, in each other's ability and commitment to the cause.

On twenty minutes Newport finally got some meaningful possession and a superb passage of pick and drive play, with Will Roach to the fore, saw the ball spun wide to Sam Hughes, who was bundled into touch. Only two minutes later it was Hughes who was the recipient of a high tackle by the Bridgnorth prop, which resulted in a yellow card. Newport continued to keep the pressure on and a trademark mazy run by fly-half, Monty Maule, saw him register the game's first try, which was duly converted by Liam Holder.

Newport's physio, Jemma Perry, had already had to deal with a bang to the nose of Rhys Morgan and was now called upon to sprint to the far side of the pitch, after a sickening collision between wing, Jason Francis and lock, Nathan Parker. A groggy and clearly disappointed Francis was helped from the field and Parker also left, the recipient of a yellow card for an alleged deliberate knock-on.

Newport edged further ahead on 33 minutes after a Holder penalty and it was apparent in the closing period of the half that their attacking systems were beginning to operate. With the final play, an overthrow at the lineout was collected by the ever-alert Vaka, who showed excellent footwork and strength, to muscle his way over the line under the posts. A simple conversion by Holder took the lead to 17-3 at the break.

Only four minutes after the restart, Newport were awarded a penalty 5 metres out and opted to take a scrum. Vaka, clearly not a natural scrum-half, but a handful wherever he plays, was too strong for the defending players and he forced his way over for his second try. The conversion not being successful, the scoreline stood at 22-3 and with the advantage of the slope, the Newport management could surely begin to relax a little.

Unfortunately this couldn't have been further from the truth. Newport, as they have done on several occasions this season, frustratingly seemed to push the self-destruct button and what followed was 35 minutes of unnecessary nail-biting, from the Newport faithful.

First a yellow to lock, Will Roach, for his involvement in an off the ball scuffle, followed almost immediately by a piece of nifty footwork by Bridgnorth centre, Jimmy Gore, allowing him to skip away from three would-be tacklers and score under the posts, meant that it was now a 22-8 game. Fortunately for the home support, the conversion was missed from the simplest of positions.

Next to see yellow was prop Charlie Hill, dispatched on 15 minutes and his departure was again immediately followed by a Bridgnorth try, prop Joe Cave, barging over from close in.

With twenty minutes to go the pressure was mounting and Newport needed to slow the game down, refocus and prevent Bridgnorth from gaining any further momentum. Several multiple phases of simple pick and drive rugby helped steady the ship and despite a further injury to Morgan and a fourth team yellow, showed to Mike Venn, the team were able to repel the visitor's considerable efforts, led by their impressive replacement scrum-half, Richard Addison. There was no further addition to the score over the final quarter and the game finished 22-13, in favour of Newport.

This was not Newport's best offensive display and the tendency towards reacting to being niggled by the opposition and not focusing on the game plan, has to be rectified in short time. That said, the defensive effort was massive,

the total buy-in to the system is obvious and the months of training is paying huge dividends in that regard. The other huge-plus is that despite not achieving parity in the possession stakes, Newport were able to outscore Bridgnorth, three tries to two - the ability to capitalise on opportunities is critical.

With Sandbach narrowly defeating Peterborough Lions, Newport have regained second spot, a fantastic start for a newly promoted team.

A potentially tricky trip to 5<sup>th</sup> placed Derby awaits next Saturday. Your support, as always is appreciated.

Evans, Cowell (C), Hill, Venn, Parker, Buckley, Morgan, Roach, Vaka, Maule, Francis, Archer, Perry, Hughes, Holder,

Goulson, Wells, Wara

Phil Gittus.