

## **Newport (Salop) 41 Peterborough Lions 21**

Unbeaten Peterborough Lions arrived at The Old Show Ground on Saturday, music blaring, with a general air of confidence and apparently little concerned about the challenge that lay ahead. By 5pm, they and the rest of the Midlands Premier Division teams watching the results filter through, will have gathered that Newport are not to be taken lightly and are true contenders for promotion. We had all witnessed one of the finest performances in Newport's recent history.

Brave decisions had to be made in selection and with the weather forecast, long in advance, set to be inclement, a plan was put in place to play a simple brand of rugby, but to execute with precision in all areas.

Newport captain, Tom Cowell, elected to play up the slope and into the significant prevailing wind in the first half. The first ten minutes were spent with both teams feeling the other out and no quarter given. Newport were then penalised for bringing down an advancing maul and Lions elected to kick for touch. A perfectly executed catch and drive saw the first try of the game, which was duly converted and the visitors led 7-0.

Right from the earliest moments of the game it was apparent that there was a calm cohesion throughout the entire Newport ranks and Ash Paterson and Monty Maule were bossing the forwards and backs with authority.

On 15 minutes, clean ball from a lineout on the right touchline, saw Henry Vaka make good yards in midfield, before releasing the rampaging Will Roach. He charged to within two metres of the line, before off-loading to supporting winger Jason Francis, who dotted down for his ninth try of the campaign – an amazing start for the 28 year old former footballer, in his first full season of rugby.

The difficult conversion being unsuccessful, the midway point of the first half was reached with the scoreline at 7-5 in favour of Lions. Newport were consistently building solid phases and constantly pressuring the Lions defence. Every single man was hungry for work and relentless in smashing the ball up. The pick and go was working well also, with Paterson directing the play to the right areas of the pitch.

On 32 minutes Peterborough were awarded a penalty just inside Newport's half. However, in attempting the quick tap penalty, the Lions player failed to kick the ball out of his hands. It proved to be a costly mistake, as from the ensuing scrum, Monty Maule executed a text book wrap around move and his injection of true pace saw him majestically ghost through the confused and scrambling defence, untouched, to register Newport's second try and give them a narrow lead at 10-7.

As the half came to a close, Newport suffered a triple setback. First, on-form wing, Jason Francis, was knocked out cold making a tackle from behind. Fortunately, this season our squad is deep and the experienced utility back Toby Mann slotted in, with Francis unable to continue. Moments later Newport were adjudged to have deliberately collapsed Peterborough's driving maul on the far right touchline. Nathan Parker was shown yellow and a penalty try was awarded. The visitors lead was restored at 14-10 and the half closed without further incident.

The second period began with two early turnovers, signifying Newport's intent to increase the physicality and pressure on the men in blue. Only five minutes had passed when the alert Oli Buckley took a quick tap penalty, releasing the supporting run of Tom Cowell, before the ball was passed to Vaka and then Perry to score. With the conversion attempt missed, Newport had regained a slender three point advantage.

Peterborough immediately rallied and for the next ten minutes Newport's defence had to hold firm. Every single man was putting his body on the line and there was a growing sense that it was going to be a truly memorable afternoon.

As the final twenty minutes approached Newport were exerting immense pressure and showing patience, which at times has been absent in the less competitive fixtures. This was rewarded on 19 minutes, with a try for marauding flanker Rhys Morgan and the lead extended to 22-14.

Newport then suffered a huge blow in the loss of Vaka to the side-lines, after he too was knocked out. With no three-quarter available, Morgan had to join the back-line and the pack was rejigged, with Kirk Robinson joining the action at No. 8.

Peterborough are far and away the best team Newport have faced this season. They have a solid pack, a clinical line-out and were not too shabby in open play either. On 25 minutes they reminded Newport that they too are all-out for promotion and they scored an excellent converted try, through their Tongan No. 8, Taufui.

Now a one point game, Newport had to initially repel a rejuvenated Peterborough, who dominated the next seven or eight minutes. Dave Archer, as with many, played his best game this season and a try saving tackle by him on 30 minutes may well have changed the destiny of the game.

As it transpired, Newport showed their all-round fitness, huge belief and a growing maturity as a team and plundered three tries in an enthralling closing ten minutes. First, Rhys Morgan, turned the ball over to set up another patient pick and drive attack resulting in a try for Robinson. This was followed, two minutes later, by a penalty try, awarded for a high tackle on Mann as he raced home on the left wing.

At 36-21, with the bonus point secure, the game won and now deep into stoppage time, the home supporters were shouting for Newport to kick the ball dead. However, Peterborough to their credit, were still fighting for the four try bonus point and their huge pressure on Newport's kickers did not allow them any time, or space, whatsoever. What initially started as somewhat desperate defence, then led to the try of the day. Venn charged out of the 22, before releasing Archer, who now displayed his trickery in attack, supported by Maule and Perry. It was Archer who finally touched down, to close out the game, with a 41-21 win registered on the scoreboard.

Overall it was a team performance with few errors, great discipline and for the first time this season, total adherence to the game-plan. The team has an exciting blend of ball carrying forwards and slick, skilful backs, with the bonus of an ever improving set-piece, which is providing plenty of front foot ball.

Peterborough, well coached and with quality players throughout the team provided true opposition and there is no doubt that the return fixture next year will be a huge hurdle to overcome. That is far into the future though and complete focus is now on the trip to Sandbach, a team who have won their last three games, including a 72-0 thrashing of Longton.

Team

Grass, Cowell, Evans, Parker, Roach, Venn, Morgan, Buckley, Paterson, Maule, Francis, Vaka, Perry, Holder, Archer, Robinson, Wells, Mann

Phil Gittus