

## Midlands Premier Division

Newport                      24pts                      v                      Sandbach                      18pts

In what proved to be a mirror-image of the game up at Bradwall Road earlier in the season, it was Newport who prevailed this time around after gradually pegging back an early 0-15 deficit built up by the visitors after a whirlwind start.

Newport's depth of squad is being severely tested of late with four key forwards missing for this eagerly awaited and crucial clash. Rhys Morgan, Charlie Hill and Mike Venn were ruled out by a combination of injury and illness whilst Jordan Grass was unavailable due to College commitments. The back division still looked strong, however, despite the absences of Toby Mann and Billy Wara and Jason Francis's recent emigration to Australia.

Sandbach won the toss and chose to have the elements in their favour so it was Newport who kicked off into the breeze. It was a cagey start from both teams before some raking touch finds from visiting fly half Benny Elliot forced Newport onto the back foot. A lovely move from the visitors created enough space to allow winger Elliot Morris to squeeze in at the corner for the opening score after just four minutes to give the visitors a 0-5 advantage. Liam Holder then made a good break before Monty Maule produced a neat chip and chase that caused panic in the Sandbach defence and drew a penalty that Maule just failed to convert, shaving the post with his attempt which drifted agonisingly wide.

Newport's back three were, perhaps, not quite sitting deep enough allowing Elliot to find another good touch in behind them close to the Newport line, their line out proving highly effective in driving over prop Gareth Caen for their second try, duly converted to give them a 0-12 lead after just nine minutes. Four minutes later Elliot drilled over an excellent long range penalty to make it 0-15 and give the visitors the start they would have been looking for and endorse the decision to play with the elements first up.

To their credit there was no sign of panic in the Newport ranks and there was certainly plenty time available to redress the balance. As the half progressed the hosts came more and more into the game with strong carries from Kirk Robinson, Will Roach, Nathan Parker and most notably skipper Tom Cowell who was immense throughout the afternoon. A number of good phases drew another penalty and there was no mistake from Maule this time as he dissected the posts to get Newport up and running and reduce the deficit to 3-15.

Twenty two minutes in and there was a moment of magic down the left when Henry Vaka broke from half way before feeding the supporting Sam Hughes with a lovely "blind" pass, the winger making good ground before drawing the last man and feeding Vaka with a perfectly timed pass to go in under the posts for a beautifully created try, converted by Maule to make it 10-15.

There was a chance for Sandbach to extend their lead when Newport were penalised for a high tackle but the usually metronomic Elliot pulled his attempt wide, a miss that was to prove costly as Maule took Newport almost to the Sandbach line with a superb break before the supporting Roach was held up resulting in a five metre scrum. The Newport shove was well held but when the ball was moved left, several phases of good tight control of the ball saw Jack Price, who had another excellent game, squeeze over for Maule to convert and give Newport the lead at 17-15, something that had looked most unlikely after the first quarter.

Elliot then missed another opportunity after Newport were penalised at scrum time but made no mistake moments later when the home side were penalised again, this time for a deliberate knock on. Maule then took Newport to within five metres of the Sandbach line but the half time whistle sounded to bring to an end what had been a marvellous half of rugby with the visitors leading by just a single point at 17-18.

Having extricated themselves from a tricky position Newport now needed to play some clever rugby, preferably in the Sandbach half.

A good position was wasted when Newport were penalised for not releasing but they were soon back in the bottom corner when Liam Holder planted a kick to within five metres, Cowell then peeling blind off a driving maul to feed Sam Brown for the all important first score of the second period after just five minutes of the re-start, Maule converting for what would prove to be the only score of the second half.

That said the game was still full of incident, excitement and entertainment with both teams still in contention but defences very much on top. Both sides manufactured some good field positions but were unable to take advantage. Debutant Kai Owen replaced the hard working Jack Wells and helped maintain Newport's slight advantage at the scrum.

Just as at Sandbach back in October it was the visitors who finished the stronger, pounding away at the Newport line after a series of catch and drive efforts at which Newport were penalised twice, finally resulting in a yellow card for Oli Buckley to make the task that much harder. A try in these last minutes would give Elliot the chance to win it for Sandbach but Newport held on for a memorable win in what was a cracking game of rugby and a superb advertisement for the game at this level.

Team: Archer, Holder, Perry, Vaka, Hughes, Maule, Brown, Robinson, Price, Buckley, Parker, Roach, Wells, Cowell (Captain) Evans  
Bench: Owen, Jimenez, Leonard

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