

Scunthorpe 18 Newport (Salop) 52

Newport's superb start to the season continued on Saturday, with a comfortable victory over Scunthorpe, a team who were relegated from National 2 North in April.

The game was played on an excellent surface at Heslam Park, with a healthy sized crowd in attendance. Newport were forced to rearrange their back-line after Dave Archer's knee took a knock in training on Thursday. Tom Cummings came in for his first team debut to partner Henry Vaka in the centres, Chris Perry moved to full-back and Liam Holder took Archer's place on the right wing. Tom Cookson was recalled to the bench, in an otherwise unchanged line-up.

The first quarter of an hour saw Newport dominate possession, without being able to register any score. This was due to some resolute defence by the home side and it shocked no one involved with the team that their opponents in green were 'up for the challenge' and keen to be the first to burst Newport's bubble.

On 16 minutes the pressure finally told and after some strong forages were repelled in centre field, the ball was spun through several pairs of hands allowing Chris Perry to cross near the right touch-line. An excellent conversion from the ever reliable boot of Liam Holder gave Newport a 7-0 lead.

Only three minutes later, after good work by Will Roach, Henry Vaka seized the ball and his deft footwork allowed him to carve the defence open and register his first try of what would prove to be a remarkable afternoon for the Fijian points machine.

At 14-0 Newport were in control and all looked good. Scunthorpe were not about to roll over so easily though and on 25 minutes a well-executed catch and drive from a 5 metre lineout saw lock forward, Tim Dunk, reduce the arrears. The conversion attempt having hit the upright, the score stood at 14-5.

The gap was further closed when Jake Goodwin successfully landed a penalty after Newport were adjudged to have crossed in midfield and obstructed the Scunthorpe defensive player. With the end of the first half approaching, Newport stole a lineout and after driving into the heart of the defence recycled the ball to Vaka. If the footwork for the first try was nifty, then this was truly top-class. He just seemed to ghost through four or five players, who were left off balance and giving each other bewildered and accusatory looks.

Scunthorpe rallied quickly though and mounted a sustained period of pressure deep in Newport territory. Vaka was to go from hero to villain, after a one handed attempt at an interception forced the referee to show him a yellow card for a deliberate knock-on. By the letter of the law he was completely justified, but those of us who have watched Vaka over the years know he can quite easily take one handed interceptions and therefore he probably felt a little hard done by. From the resulting tap penalty the impressive flanker, James Dyson, forced his way over to register the home side's second try.

At half-time the score stood at 19-13 and Newport were being tested for the first time this season.

The second period did not start well for Newport with Scunthorpe taking full advantage of Vaka's absence and exploiting their one man advantage in the three quarters. Only 3 minutes had passed when Scunthorpe swept towards the Newport line. A try saving tackle by Jason Francis only

temporarily halted the advance and the quickly recycled ball found its way to left winger, Colin Chapman, who touched down to bring his team within a point.

From this juncture Newport showed that they not only are playing an exciting, high-intensity, fast paced, free scoring brand of rugby this season, but that they have the ability to manage the game in a way that makes them very difficult opponents indeed. With Tom Cowell leading his pack from the front, he must have taken at least six pressure restart kicks cleanly, and the ever calm Monty Maule showing great generalship behind, Newport took the game by the scruff of the neck and scored 33 unanswered points.

The entire squad have bought into the ethos this year and that has been reflected in all of the performances thus far, but no more so than in the second half of this game. Every single man knows his role and although it's not the finished article this 'work in progress' is a joy to watch. The squad is deeper this year and there is competition for places in every position. Worthy of note is that we played the latter part of the game with props aged 19 and 21.

Scunthorpe were punished at regular intervals and as the game wore on they were pulled out of shape and their defence fell apart. Vaka added another brace of tries to finish with four, Francis another two, to keep his impressive strike rate going. His second was scored after he chased a raking kick from Maule and put the defending winger under such pressure that he misfielded, allowing him to poach the ball and gallop away to dot down. Cowell also got on the scoresheet after receiving a brilliant off-load from Vaka at pace and steamrolling the last defender on his way to the try line.

A final score of 52-18 makes for good reading, but it's the manner of the win that is so pleasing. Scunthorpe are a decent team and despite being under immense pressure as the game wore on, their effort did not drop. This was no walk in the park, it was a true rugby test, just one handled very effectively.

Next up are Nuneaton, who over the years have proved to be tough opponents. All focus is on next Saturday and registering another W. Nothing else will do.

Newport Team

Grass, Cowell, Evans, Goulson, Roach, Venn, Morgan, Robinson, Paterson, Maule, Francis, Cummings, Vaka, Holder, Perry, Hill, Parker, Cookson.

Phil Gittus