

## Bournville 32 Newport (Salop) 39

Newport made their first ever visit to the new home of Bournville at Avery Fields, Edgbaston and managed to adapt to playing on their state of the art, all weather 3G pitch, to come away with a hard fought bonus point victory.

Throughout the entire season thus far, there has been a perpetual and ever increasing state of crisis, regarding the unavailability of key players through injury, work commitments etc. This week was no exception and Newport travelled without the services of Monty Maule, Will Roach, Kirk Robinson, Chris Leathem, Toby Mann, Chris Campbell, Liam Holder and Jon Evans. The fact that yet again, they found a way to win the game is testament not only to the strength in depth of this year's squad, but also to the developing sense of team spirit and genuine togetherness that is apparent week after week.

The only changes in this week's pack saw Henry Purchase revert to blindside and Rhys Morgan, a man for all positions, pack down at Number 8. So far this season he has started at blindside, openside and Number 8 and also spent periods of games at inside centre and even loosehead prop! In the three quarters, Chris Perry, despite still carrying a niggling injury, put his hand up and rejoined Henry Vaka in the centres. Grant Hallam came in at full-back and the bench was made up of two props in Siphiwokuhle Bakeni and Jordan Grass, alongside winger, Dave Hartshorne, making his first appearance this season.

Newport who started the game playing into a stiff and icy cold breeze, spent the first fifteen minutes trying desperately to settle and find some rhythm. There were sporadic flashes of potential, but in every instance, lack of patience and accuracy, saw moves break down. One example was a fine break by Jack Price, who had been put through the gap by Craig Wilson, only to attempt an off load in the tackle. The resulting fifty metre touch finding kick, was a stark reminder that any mistake whatsoever was going to be punished by a team comfortable and confident playing on the artificial surface.

Their inability to get going from the first whistle saw them concede ten points in as many minutes and for the third game in the last four, had ceded early control of the game to the opposition. Bournville took full advantage of a lineout steal and simple hands saw centre Mark Colson score on the wide right.

A fine conversion , along with a routine penalty, from former Newport player, Rhys HARRY, had Newport on the back foot and needing to quickly respond to stem the flow and give Bournville some defensive problems to think about.

As the mid way point of the half approached, Price took a fine lineout catch following a penalty touch kick and the driving maul which ensued, gained fully twenty metres, before being illegally halted. With the touch kick option again taken, Tom Cowell's throw sailed over the intended target, but was gathered by Morgan, who charged towards the Bournville line. Now displaying the previously absent patience, Newport went through six or seven phases and eventually, Oli Buckley, forced his way over, to get their account open.

There was then a quick exchange of scores, first with Bournville's, Ethan Walker, bagging a fine opportunistic try, before Vaka was the beneficiary of a trademark Cowell charge, after the restart kick had been won by Alex Haselock. Haselock was to win the ball back from three restarts throughout the game and this, along with some committed defensive work, saw the eighteen year old have an assured all-round performance, in only his second senior appearance.

With both conversions successful the game was finely balanced at 17-12 in favour of Bournville. The latter stages of the half saw Newport take the lead with a Rhys Morgan try, quickly surrender that advantage, after conceding a penalty for offside and then retake control after Jack Wells scored the bonus point fourth try.

Morgan's effort from close quarters, followed a superb eighty metre sprint by Vaka down the right touchline, with Huw Bevan providing a perfect supporting run. Again, patience with the pick and go, allowed Morgan the opportunity to barge his way over. His strength in ball carrying cannot be overstated. On several occasions throughout the game, he not only managed to fend off the would be tacklers, but was able to move the ball from away from contact under one arm to the other arm, whilst aggressively driving the opposition players backwards. I think it unlikely he will often lose a one on one collision.

The final try of the half saw Newport take advantage of a lapse of concentration on Bournville's part. Cowell threw to the undefended Wells at one and he crossed for the simplest of tries, from five metres out.

24-20 at half-time was a decent score considering Newport would have the advantage of the significant breeze in the second period. They were also one man to the good, after Bournville's Ethan Walker had been yellow carded after a deliberate slap down.

The second half started in positive fashion with Cowell flattening the opposition Number 8 with a seismic shoulder barge, but Newport's cause was made more difficult with the loss of talismanic Vaka to a fourth minute injury. Bevan moved to outside centre, Hartshorne taking his place on the right wing.

Bournville were the first to score and retook the lead after Colson added to his first half effort, but Newport regrouped quickly and after a period of sustained pressure, simple hands found Hallam join the line at speed and sprint over. Neither try was converted and Newport were ahead 29-25.

Midway through the half there was an incident as rare as Haley's comet appearing on a white Christmas in the Sahara, Nathan Parker was lifted and took a fine catch at the tail of the lineout. Clearly, the early morning sessions in the gym are working for Jack Wells, as he and Craig Wilson managed to achieve this feat of strength with apparent ease.

Midway through the half the lead was extended, with a second try for Morgan, after great midfield carries by Perry, Bevan and Morgan himself. This was excellently converted from the touchline by Leonard, who then added a simple penalty goal to put Newport fourteen points to the good.

The final twenty saw both props replaced and Bakeni and Grass really gave the tiring Bournville pack a torrid time in all the latter stage scrummages. Whether Newport will continue to carry two front row replacements on the bench, when the availability difficulties are over is doubtful, but it certainly has been a boon to bring on fresh legs in this most physically demanding of positions in the last two games.

With five minutes remaining Bournville gave themselves a glimmer of hope of salvaging an unlikely draw, with a converted fourth try, after a lineout steal. This was the second score from such an occurrence and there is no doubt that some extra sessions will be called for before the next fixture.

Newport were forced to dig deep in the dying minutes. Price, Purchase and Morgan all won turnovers with perfectly executed choke tackles, whilst Hallam prevented a nailed on try, with a magnificent defensive effort, this despite being hampered with a late injury and choosing to soldier on due to the lack of any suitable replacement.

The final score of 39-32 gave Bournville two fully deserved bonus points. They played a huge part in what was an entertaining game throughout. Newport for their part will be buoyed by the fact that Scunthorpe, for the second game running, failed to achieve a bonus point and therefore the gap at the top has been narrowed to one point. Bridgnorth are still managing to live up to their own hype, defeating Luctonians on Saturday and the game in two weeks promises to be a cracker.

Note should be made yet again of Newport's youth programme and for the second week running the starting line-up featured two eighteen year olds, Leonard and Haselock. There has been criticism in some circles recently over the lack of local players coming through the ranks. Hopefully their selection evidences the excellent opportunities for players with the requisite talent and credentials.

In a far from faultless, but all the same commendable squad performance, Perry, a player who rarely makes a wrong decision, gave a determined and gutsy showing. Purchase got through a ton of work, especially at the breakdown and with Morgan and Price operated as a very effective back-row trio. Wells and Wilson certainly sapped the strength of the Bournville front row and were thoroughly involved in both attack and defence throughout the first sixty minutes. Despite being the senior props in the squad, they are holding down the starting spots right now, but with Grass, Bakeni and Evans all in contention, this is one area where we have no worries at all.

Team: Wells, Cowell (C), Wilson, Buckley, Parker, Purchase, Price, Morgan, Brown, Leonard, Haselock, Vaka, Perry, Bevan, Hallam, Bakeni, Grass, Hartshorne.