

Derby 29 Newport (Salop) 21

With half of the 2018-2019 season completed, I can now report that Newport are suffering from some kind of Jekyll and Hyde syndrome. There are irrefutably two distinct sides to the team's personality. One, Dr. Jekyll's, implements the game plan, and allows structured, quick, high tempo rugby, coupled with impressive defensive line-speed, that has opposing teams in complete disarray. The other, Mr. Hyde's, completely ignores any game plan whatsoever, and dictates that the game is played at a ponderous, pedestrian pace, that dominant tackles aren't made, that possession is repeatedly and aimlessly kicked away, and that concentration on simple basic skills isn't of paramount importance. Unfortunately, right now, Mr. Hyde's half of the personality seems to be gaining the upper hand week by week, and if control is not wrested back pretty soon, Newport's challenge at the top of the table is in danger of fizzling out.

Several changes were made for the visit to the new 4G pitch at Haslams Lane, with Kirk Robinson coming in to the starting line-up, to partner Oli Buckley in the second row, and Chris Campbell packing down at blindside, meaning Henry Purchase would be used from the bench. In the backs, there was only one change, Max Himbury, formerly a Newport junior player, who has had spells at Chester and Caldy, made his senior debut, replacing the injured Chris Perry, at outside centre. Amongst the replacements was the very welcome return of Vice Captain, Monty Maule, who has been sidelined with a broken ankle for the last ten weeks.

Newport started the game playing with the significant breeze and for the first fifteen minutes enjoyed the bulk of both possession and territory. The initial signs were all positive, patience was being shown, allowing the team to go through the phases, both Vaka and Haselock made dangerous breaks and Campbell showed what an asset he is at the lineout, providing the luxury of some cleanly taken ball.

For all Newport's dominance the game remained scoreless. A couple of chances had gone begging, with the last pass going astray and Derby buoyed by the fact they had survived the early onslaught began to mount some concerted attacking play themselves.

Again, initial indicators were that Newport were marching to the right beat, the defensive line stood firm, and Derby having reached the 22 metre line, made no further progress, despite upwards of fifteen phases of play. Collective line-speed held the ground, but it was individual discipline that prevented any score.

As the game went into the second quarter, Newport again showed the self-restraint required to go through the phases, with strong carries from Tom Cowell, Will Roach and Craig Wilson, amongst others, eventually sucking in the defenders, and allowing the ball to be spun wide and Himbury to register a debut try. An excellent Jake Leonard conversion gave Newport a 7-0 lead.

All good you would imagine. Newport had taken some time to breach a resolute Derby defence, but would now push on and impose themselves, take total control and win handsomely. Wrong, Mr. Hyde now made an unwelcome, but for those who have watched Newport this season, a not a totally surprising appearance.

Individual errors began to creep into the performance, but it was the decision making and the tempo of Newport's game that were their undoing. Derby, very much like Burton last week, have a great team spirit and are willing to battle hard for every scrap of possession and every inch of turf, but their creativity in attack was limited. All Newport had to do was continue to maintain their defensive speed and effort, and most importantly keep hold of the ball and starve Derby of any meaningful possession.

I am not going to list the mistakes that were Newport's undoing, that's just depressing, but unnecessary box kicks, handling errors, lazy defensive play and a refusal to attack in the wide channels, meant that things began to unravel and as they did, Derby sensed that an upset might be on the cards. They scored two tries in the final ten minutes of the half, which meant a 12-7 lead for the home side at the break. The first came from a quick throw in taken by the prop forward, and a resulting counter attack, catching Newport completely off-guard. The second, exposed the drop off in defensive coordination and effort by Newport, and despite a fine try saving tackle by Ricky Bailey, the line was breached seconds later and Newport were very quickly on the back foot.

The break was timely for Newport and every single man knew what needed to happen in the second period. Tackles need to be lower and more dominant, line-speed in defence quicker, the kicking away of possession reduced, but foremost was the willingness and desire to be smarter, to play the game with width and not become embroiled in an arm wrestle with the Derby pack, and the resultant slow paced, stop-start game that the home side would thrive on.

Jack Wells had replaced Jordan Grass, who had suffered a nasty cut to the head, as the first half ended, and the other two bench players were brought on at the commencement of the second half. Purchase replaced Price, and Maule came on for Leonard.

As with the first half, the second period began well. There was a noticeable injection of intensity in all aspects of Newport's game. Maule was immediately comfortable orchestrating things from fly-half and Haselock had an early run, making fifty metres with an arcing run - he is surely going to be a future star of the Newport team, blessed, both with seamless acceleration and perfect balance.

Alas, Newport were soon on the back foot again. A period of Derby pressure began with a huge scrum by the home team, and ended with a third try, after what was very poor Newport defence. With the extras added, Newport now trailed 19-7.

Derby were now playing with confidence and as often happens when things are not going to plan, Newport were compounding one error with another. On fifteen minutes, Bob Adams rung the changes again. Price returned to replace Campbell, and Leonard came on at scrum-half for Sam Brown.

Newport did then begin to pick up their energy levels and the pace of their game and midway through the half, after three minutes of constant pressure and twenty plus phases, Maule, showed that his recent injury has not affected his footwork, to dance around the edges of the breakdown and touch down under the posts. A routine conversion by Leonard put Newport back in touch at 19-14.

The rain, which had started at half time, continued to hammer down, and the game became somewhat of a dog-fight, with neither side gaining control for

any significant period. Newport's forwards were carrying strongly, with Wells, Robinson and Roach to the fore, but to what avail? Derby were not lacking in effort whatsoever, and they were willing to defend in the narrow channels all day long. Newport's reluctance to release their dangerous three-quarters, played into the opposition's hands and would ultimately be their undoing.

On 27 minutes, Derby kicked a drop goal that increased the margin to eight points and more importantly two scores. As with the previous game, Newport always looked dangerous in broken play and a fifty metre run from Bailey, where he again displayed the armoury of skills at his disposal - speed, strength, hand-off and side-step - kept hopes of a come-back alive.

A late injury forced Hallam from the pitch and Brown returned at scrum-half with everyone shuffling out one position. With the clock running down, Newport, with Maule at the helm, marshalling the attack, put immense pressure on the Derby line and were finally rewarded with a penalty try, after a deliberate knock on.

Back within a point now at 22-21, and into time added on, Newport attempted to attack from deep in their own territory. With almost certainly only one play remaining, cool heads and clinical precision were demanded, but to their chagrin, a pass to Vaka, went to ground, and was fly hacked through to be collected by a Derby player. He won the race to the line and touched down under the posts for a converted try, and a final score of 29-21.

This meant for the first time this season, Newport came away empty handed. Newport have lost by eight points, one point outside the requirement for the losing bonus point, twice this season, but on the other occasion, a bonus point was awarded for scoring four tries. Let's hope those small margins don't come back to haunt the team, at the end of the season.

In conclusion, it must be said first and foremost, that Derby deserved their victory. They played to their strengths, dictated the pace and style of the game, and worked hard throughout.

Newport have to banish Mr. Hyde from their make-up. They have to replicate training field form and changing room talk, into on-field, in-match action. In every position Newport are blessed with players who individually could

challenge for a Midlands Premier All Star team, however, as a squad they are not achieving anywhere near their potential. Both Burton and Derby have given Newport a lesson recently, no win is going to be easy, you have to bring your A game, you have to get your basic skills spot-on, and most of all you have to play to your strengths and at your tempo. Nothing less will suffice. Nobody will be interested in how good we could have been. Action and results are the only things that are remembered.

With Scunthorpe and Bridgnorth sharing the spoils, Newport are very much still in the mix, in third spot. Luctonians seem to be finding some form though, and are now close on Newport's heels, in fourth place.

Next up, the enigma that is Lichfield. They sit mid-table in seventh, with six wins, including victories over Bridgnorth and Sheffield, and seven losses, including two where they shipped over seventy points. They score a lot of tries (9 try bonus points in 13) , but also have the leakiest defence, bar none, in the league. It is to be hoped that Newport play a controlled, accurate game, become lethal through their structures, not just dangerous in broken play and finish the year on a high.

Team: Grass, Cowell (C), Wilson, Buckley, Robinson, Campbell, Price, Roach, Brown, Leonard, Hallam, Vaka, Himbury, Haselock, Bailey, Purchase, Maule, Wells