

## Lichfield 19 Newport (Salop) 45

The primary aim was achieved on Saturday, a bonus point win, but it was some way short of a totally satisfactory performance. To be fair, Newport have already racked up 112 points in their first two games and scored seventeen tries in the process, but it's the defensive lapses that are causing more than a little concern. Without wanting to be disrespectful, despite an early wake-up call against Doncaster, Newport have been in no danger of losing either of their games so far and there is every likelihood that they will remain more focussed against stiffer opposition. They will certainly need to, as next on the agenda is the visit of Luctonians, who have set out their stall from the get go, with two convincing home wins.

The unavailability of Henry Purchase saw a debut for Royal Irish Ranger, Clive Van Rensberg, in the back-row and a late reshuffle was required in the three-quarters. Toby Mann was nursing an injury and the on-set of a sickness bug, meant that Henry Vaka, was removed from the starting line-up and sat on the bench, as last resort cover. Liam Holder was moved to the right wing, with Jake Leonard slotting in at full-back and, in what turned out to be an inspired move, Monty Maule, moved to inside centre, with the second debutant of the day, Lee Brogan, starting at stand-off.

Intermittent showers made for a damp pitch and a greasy ball, but that did not prevent Newport racing out of the traps, scoring two tries and going 12-0 up, in the first nine minutes. The first was achieved after a three minute period of total possession. The ball was carried up repeatedly by Newport's forwards and after well over ten phases, Monty Maule was released and found a gap in the back-peddling defensive line. His trademark footwork saw him evade the full-back and touch down under the posts. Adding the extras himself, an early marker had been put down and that was soon to be backed up with a second try, with Maule again the man on the end of the play. A superb charge by Tom Cowell in midfield saw him make valuable yards and punch a hole in Lichfield's defence. Good distribution by Sam Brown, saw several attempts at the line by the big men stopped short, before Maule, a man not normally used on the crash ball, picked a perfect line.

Throughout the first half Lichfield were being bossed up front, both in the scrums and the loose. However, from the little clean ball they were gaining, they showed that they have a skilled and dangerous back-line, who ran great lines and were not afraid to put the ball through the hands at any opportunity. On twenty minutes Newport's resilience was properly tested for the first time, after a Lichfield steal at a defensive line out saw them repeatedly pick and drive, in their effort to breach the try line. Good technique, strength and discipline saw the attack repelled, but minutes later another mistimed line-out throw, was again poached by the home side and the resulting attack, which was thwarted only metres out by a quite superb Chris Leathem tackle, was a clear indication of their attacking potential.

That said, it is a truism that the game is won and lost up front and Newport's big men were clearly troubling the home side. With ten minutes of the half remaining, Maule, displaying speed of thought, to match his turn of pace, intercepted a midfield pass and sprinted in for a thirty minute hat-trick. Another Maule line break minutes later put Chris Perry away, but his pass to Leathem went astray and the score remained at 19-0.

Just as the half came to a close, a superb team effort pushed the lead out to 24-0. Neither side's lineout was functioning perfectly and on this occasion Oli Buckley stole a Lichfield throw 5 metres from the Newport line. Smart handling put Leathem away on the left and he made some forty metres, before being hauled down. The recycled ball was crashed up by Cowell, but turned over at the resulting breakdown. The threat was only allayed momentarily, as Leathem fielded the attempted clearance kick on the left wing, then collected his own pin-point grubber kick past his opposing player, before releasing the supporting Brogan to score Newport's bonus point try.

Lichfield definitely shaded the first twenty minutes of the second half, getting on the scoreboard following a resurgent scrum five metres out, backed up by some neat footwork from Number 8, Richard Burton. Newport rung the changes with Jon Evans replacing Jordan Grass and Nathan Parker taking over from Will Roach. The three-quarter line was also reshuffled; Maule moved back to stand-off, Leathem slotted in at outside centre and Brogan took his place on the wing. There was however a sense that collectively the team had lost their way somewhat, wrong options were being taken, the defensive

shape was at times ragged and there was a general lack of accuracy in all facets of the game.

It was midway through the half and against the run of play before Newport added to their total. Leathem was put through a gap by Holder and had a simple run in to register a try in both of his first two appearances.

This score seemed to rally Newport and there followed a period of the sort of rugby we have become more accustomed to witnessing. Some powerful carries by Cowell and Parker and one particular crash ball by Leathem at full tilt in centre-field, began to retest Lichfield's mettle in defence. On 26 minutes the pressure was rewarded when Maule's dancing feet put him over for his fourth try of the day, after good solid work from Leonard, Roach and Parker.

Sadly, Newport, now seemingly back in control of the game, immediately switched off and a clever chip and chase allowed Charlie Milner to score Lichfield's second try.

Newport did then refocus and there were several sorties into Lichfield territory, with Brown, and the hardworking Cowell, to the fore. It was though, from the home sides errors, that the final try was to be gleaned. An untidy Lichfield lineout led to poor handling in the backline and ultimately spilt ball. Jack Price, whose energy level never seems to dip below 95%, pounced on the loose ball and sprinted home from 20 metres.

The score now stood at 45-14 and Newport should have closed the game down. However, Lichfield, who it has to be said battled hard throughout, had other ideas. Repeated charges at the Newport line forced some desperate defence and in the end, a breakdown transgression. A quick tap penalty saw the ball spun left to give Matt Fairweather a simple touchdown.

The final score read 45-19 in favour of Newport. As previously mentioned a seven try, bonus point win, may satisfy some, but the bar has been set high at Newport this season, not in terms of final league position - that will take care of itself - but in terms of accuracy, maintaining focus, commitment in defence, as well as attack and most of all remaining true and honest to the game plan. There is much, much more to come from this squad.

Team: Grass, Cowell (C), Wilson, Buckley, Roach, Van Rensberg, Price,  
Robinson, Brown, Brogan, Holder, Maule, Perry, Leathem, Leonard, Evans,  
Parker, Vaka