

Luctonians 22 Newport (Salop) 32

There are very occasionally games, which you are so thankful you didn't miss. Saturday's victory at Luctonians was one such game, a triumph that no doubt will be talked about, over a few pints, for years to come.

The importance of this game to both teams cannot be overstated. Pre-match, only two points separated the sides, and with Scunthorpe and Bridgnorth, both having, what on paper, appeared to be decent opportunities for bonus point wins, whoever came out on top at Mortimer Park, would stay in the hunt, and steal a march on the losers.

This game has been at the forefront of the thoughts of everyone concerned with the team, throughout the festive period, and the decision taken to train several times during the Christmas break, and the buy-in and commitment shown by one and all, was rewarded with one of the best team performances in recent times.

The decision was made to play Will Roach at lock and move Kirk Robinson to Number 8 and this swap was the only change to the side that started in December against Lichfield. This was after a late change at inside centre, where Liam Holder had been due to start, but turned his ankle during the warm up. Henry Vaka, still suffering the effects of a twenty four hour journey back from his Father's funeral in Fiji, and only at the game as a spectator, manfully stepped into the breach. On the bench the experienced Craig Wilson was preferred to Bomba Bakeni.

The afternoon was cold, but there was no significant wind and the playing surface was in great condition, given the time of year. The early possession stakes favoured Luctonians, and Newport's defensive systems were called into immediate action. It was clear right from the get-go that the levels of concentration and application, as individuals, units, and as a team, were going to have to be near perfect, to repel a side, that were well-drilled, skilful and playing a high-tempo game. Chris Perry was to the fore, with three of his trademark tackles, in as many minutes, and Luctonians were unable to register a score, despite the very vocal encouragement of their faithful.

Newport, when in possession, signified their intention to keep the ball alive if at all possible, and attack from all areas of the pitch. Eight minutes in and Vaka, as so many times before, broke the gain line. Not at full fitness, and unable to outsprint the chasing defence, he put a raking kick into touch, deep in Lucs territory.

On eleven minutes, a well-worked blindside attack from a scrum, just in their own half, saw the Lucs, Number 8, Aiden Cheshire show a great turn of pace and gallop over for the first score of the afternoon. His try was converted by scrum-half, Sam Boxhall and Lucs led 7-0.

Newport continued to show great intent in attack, and as in the Lichfield game, the oft under-used tap penalty option, was being preferred to the positional kick for touch. The attacking patterns were being adhered to, and despite several individual errors, in errant handling and overly keen support players getting too close to the ball carrier, there was no sense of panic or deviation from the strategy.

Midway through the half a savage tackle by Rhys Morgan on Lucs centre, Isaac Fanueli, led to a penalty to Newport, which Monty Maule duly dispatched.

Newport continued to back their skill-set and game plan and showed great adventure in attacking from deep within their own territory. Maule, whose eye for the gap, and turn of pace, make him a constant threat, was through on a couple of occasions only for the resulting pass to go astray. It wasn't perfect rugby, but all the indications were good and Newport just had to keep faith, and continue to wear down Lucs, who to be fair, were also playing an adventurous, exciting brand of rugby.

Twenty six minutes had elapsed, when Newport having defended a series of pick and goes with huge resolve, were sliced open when the ball was spun open. Jason Watkins was the try scorer and with Boxhall, adding the extras, Newport were 14-3 in arrears.

Despite the scoreline, there was little to choose between the teams, and both had opportunities to add to their tallies as the half came to a close. Alex Haselock, was set free after a well-executed lineout move and only a fine tackle prevented him adding to his already impressive scoring record. Lucs also

had another dangerous blindside attack and Morgan was shown a deserved yellow card, on thirty minutes, for his indiscretion, in preventing it's advancement. Just before half-time Lucs, Fanuelli got on the wrong side of the referee and he joined Morgan on the sidelines.

Lucs had played almost error-free rugby, and Newport were fourteen points to three down at the break, but it was possibly the calmest changing room all season. There was absolutely no loss of belief, that eventually Newport's physicality would take its toll on the opposition, and that they could seize control of the game's destiny. No one was in any doubt though, that it was imperative to score first, and prevent Lucs increasing their lead, which they could then tactically defend.

Nathan Parker had preplaced Oli Buckley as the first half came to a close and Morgan returned and the second began. Newport, who had shown good intensity throughout the first period, upped the level right from the first whistle, and immediately put Lucs on the back foot. The pressure applied by this gain in momentum led to a raft of penalties, and ultimately a fine catch and drive from a lineout, with Tom Cowell burrowing over from the back of the maul. A fine conversion by Maule from the right touchline lifted spirits even further and Newport were now within four points.

Lucs did reopen the gap to seven points after a penalty was gifted by Newport for a high tackle, but it was to be Newport's show for the next twenty five minutes. The forwards continued to carry hard, with Robinson, Morgan and Parker all effective amongst others, and gaps were finally beginning to open up in the Lucs defensive line, although these were few and far between. Maule, now approaching somewhere near full fitness, after a lengthy spell out with a broken ankle, was clearly enjoying his afternoon, and was showcasing the trickery and deceptiveness of his running, along with calm leadership of his back-line cohorts.

Prop, Wilson joined the fray, replacing the hard-working Jordan Grass, and quickly found himself in the back-line, and executing a between the legs pass, more often seen being performed by Fijians at the Hong Kong Sevens. To his credit, the pass was timed perfectly and found Parker, outside him. Whether or

not he would have attempted this move, had Newport not had a penalty advantage, is up for question, but it has to be said it did look good!

Fifteen minutes into the half, a penalty was kicked to the corner, and a catch and drive, saw Jack Wells touch down, and give Maule a conversion from the left touchline. Equally as accurate from this side of the pitch the scores were now level at 17 all.

Newport continued to utilise the driving maul as an attacking weapon to great effect and their technical excellence in the facet of the game was an integral part of the team's success. They took ruthless advantage and a third try from the same source, again the scorer, Cowell gave Newport the lead, one which they never looked like surrendering.

Jake Leonard replaced Sam Brown at scrum-half and Buckley returned for Robinson, with Roach reverting to Number 8. Newport continued to dominate and the fourth, bonus point try, came on 33 minutes. A bit of magic from Maule saw him find space and a simple, but perfectly timed draw and pass, put Perry away to sprint home. With the conversion added, Newport were now 29-17 to the good.

With three minutes remaining, the only poor decision of the half, saw Newport unnecessarily attempt to attack from a defensive scrum deep in their own half. The ball was knocked on and from the resultant Lucs scrum, good hands saw the ball spun wide and Drew Cheshire score his side's third try.

A late Maule penalty pushed Newport out to a ten point victory at 32-22, and denied Lucs the losing bonus point.

All in all a very satisfying afternoon's work, and against the team I would rate as the best we have played by some distance. Both of the games against Lucs have required Newport to be at, or near to top form, and although we have lost to four other teams, Newport were far below par on those occasions.

For the first time this season Newport have had back to back high standard performances and this is all the more pleasing given the three week break. Every single man gave a fine account of himself and I think that the idea that success or failure ultimately comes down to attitude, approach and commitment has finally been driven home.

An honourable mention goes to Jack Wells, for his tackle count. This text-book tackling is clearly contagious, and he has caught it from Grassy. Also to Max Himbury and Alex Haselock, both safe and assured under the high ball, and with Ricky Bailey, an attacking threat that will trouble any team at this level. Finally to Jack Price, whose energy level never seems to dip, no matter the opposition, conditions, or time left on the clock and his back row partner Morgan, who inflicted some shuddering tackles throughout the game.

We had intended to have a minute's silence for our former team-mate and friend, Jason 'Franna' Francis, and his girlfriend Alice, who so tragically passed away, just before Christmas, in Australia. Unfortunately we didn't manage to do that, but Franna, that win was for you mate. We know you'd have loved a game like that, against top opposition, at a great facility, especially as we came out on top.

Bridgnorth got their bonus point on Saturday, but Scunthorpe didn't, and it's now extremely tight between those two sides and Newport at the top. Next up Syston, bottom of the table, with only one win, but they have run Scunthorpe, Bridgnorth and Lincs close, with none beating them by more than nine points, so they will be given every respect.

Many thanks to the many who travelled to Lincs. Your support is very much appreciated by the team and we hope to see you in Leicestershire next Saturday.

Team: Grass, Cowell (C), Wells, Buckley, Roach, Price, Morgan, Robinson, Brown, Maule, Himbury, Vaka, Perry, Haselock, Bailey, Leonard, Parker, Wilson