

Newport (Salop) 15 Luctonians 13

After two comfortable victories to start the season, Newport welcomed Luctonians, many of the Midlands rugby sage's favourites for the title, to Forton Road on Saturday. The visitors had been plying their trade up in National 2 North for the last eight years, before being relegated on the final day of last season, but had signalled their intentions of a quick bounce-back, with two convincing wins of their own.

Coached by the experienced Ryan Watkins and with a young and talented team of local lads, bolstered by the return of Drew Cheshire, a starting centre last season for Rotherham Titans, Isaac Fanueli from Auckland and one or two Namibian internationals, Newport knew their work would be cut-out and they would have to be fully focused on the task ahead.

As it transpired, the healthy crowd in attendance, including a large, partisan band from Lucs, were treated to a full-blooded encounter, with no quarter given by either side throughout. This was certainly not a game for the faint of heart, even watching the bone crunching tackles, dished out for the full eighty minutes was painful, and every man that played his part, on both teams, was a true warrior.

Newport's team, welcomed onto the pitch by a guard of honour from the Under 9's squad, was the same as the one that started the season's first game against Doncaster, with only two changes. Jon Evans started at loose head, with Jordan Grass on the bench and new signing, Grant Hallam, formerly of Longton, joined him amongst the replacements.

The mid-afternoon showers had abated when Lucs kicked off, playing down the slope. The early minutes were a good indicator of what was to follow, with the visitors enjoying the bulk of the possession and Newport defending the gain line, as if their lives depended upon it. The cheap tries conceded against weaker opponents in the previous two games, had given rise to general dissatisfaction amongst the players and management alike and it was clear that any breach of the defences this Saturday would have to be hard earned. Luctonians were not, like many at this level, carrying any passengers up-front - they were all fit, mobile and blessed with good skill-sets. Add to that, the

obvious belief that they could take the spoils and you can imagine what Newport were up against.

On fourteen minutes, a routine penalty, made ten metres simpler, by some home team petulance, was converted by Sam Boxhall, to give Lucs the early advantage. The men in black and white continued to dominate the possession stakes, but Newport stood firm, manning up and maintaining a disciplined line and a good defensive shape.

Newport's first meaningful attack did not materialise until the midway point of the half, when Kirk Robinson charged into the heart of the Lucs defence. After making significant ground, he failed to realise that he had the supporting wheels of Henry Vaka on his shoulder and the foray was ultimately snuffed out - Luctonians certainly weren't lacking in defensive technique or commitment either.

Within minutes Newport were to score the first try of the day. The ever-alert Vaka stole the loose ball at the breakdown, made ground and fed Craig Wilson, who crashed up, before Tom Cowell picked a perfect line to add good yards. The ball was then spread left to Toby Mann, who broke the tackle and sprinted down the left touchline. He fed Wilson, again the willing support player, who was bundled into touch, but not before a deft offload to Oli Buckley, who in turn linked with Sam Brown, to score. Wilson's inside pass was timed to perfection and he only just managed to get it away before crossing the line of touch. As fortune would have it, it was the Luctonians touch judge who was patrolling the nearside of the field and who called the play good - one can only imagine the travelling support's furore had it been our own representative who had made that call! With a well taken conversion from Liam Holder, the score now stood at 7-3.

Despite Newport continuing to stand their ground under what seemed relentless pressure, Lucs replied with a try of their own within five minutes. A series of pick and goes, after a lineout take and driving maul, twenty metres out, saw Newport back-peddalling and the line crossed near the posts, by hooker, George Newman. With the extras added and no further score by either team in the dying minutes of the half, it was 10-7 in favour of the Herefordshire team at the break.

Luctonians had had the lion's share of the ball and had attacked with a high-tempo style, the like of which Newport have not faced in recent seasons. Could they continue to hold out and perhaps even steal a march on their esteemed opponents?

If anything, the second period was more of an arm wrestle than the first. Lucs continued to dominate possession, but got no change whatsoever from a defiant home team, whose cause had been made more challenging by the sin-binning of captain, Tom Cowell, in the fifth minute. It had seemed a harsh call, well to the locals anyway, but down to fourteen men, it was backs-to-the-wall-stuff.

Grass came on the front row and Wilson moved to hooker, while Buckley was pulled from the field. Five minutes later and a huge effort from the seven man scrum, saw them lock out and win a penalty to relieve the ever mounting pressure.

Then, still playing a man short, Evans cleaned up an untidy lineout, broke the defensive line and bolted towards the half-way line. As always, Jack Price was up in support and took the pass to sprint in, from fully fifty metres. With the turn of pace that would allow him to start in many three-quarter lines, a natural instinct for the direction of play and a fearless and combative nature, in defence as well as attack, he is already proving to be a real asset to the team this season.

12-10 to the good, but still a man light, Newport even had Vaka packing down at Number 8. However, the pressure was beginning to tell and a scrum transgression, saw Boxhall kick a second penalty, from 38 metres, to retake the lead. It was now obvious to all in attendance, whatever colours they wore, that both teams had abandoned any hope of a try bonus point and were just going all out for the win.

With the return of Cowell, Newport had begun to see slightly more of the ball, but it was still Lucs who shaded the possession. Mann looked dangerous, in particular when picking a fantastic line from a Monty Maule pass in midfield. Maule, so important in bossing the Newport backline and a scorer of four tries last time out, was unfortunate to suffer a repeat injury to his ankle, which saw him leave the field with just over twenty minutes remaining. Henry Vaka, who

was himself, one of the walking wounded, valiantly battled on and took up the reins at 10, with Hallam and Nathan Parker also joining the fray.

Newport continued to attack, with the possession they had and both a Brown-Price combo and a rampaging Roach effort, had the Newport faithful cheering.

It was however, the steady boot of Holder, with only two minutes left on the clock, that gave most important of scores and ultimately, the all important win. A penalty advantage, centre-field and thirty metres out, saw Newport continue to attack, until Chris Leathem saw sense and attempted the drop goal. A narrow miss meant the ever-reliable Holder, stepped up and calmly slotted the ball home. The half seemed to take forever to end and Lucs still had time to win two penalties, which although not kickable, allowed them to gain good field position. Newport, were not giving up the hard earned spoils though and refused to yield.

A 15-13 win may sound like a dreary affair to those not present, but it truly was a thoroughly absorbing battle, with the lead changing hands five times and immense commitment shown by both sides. This was Newport's best defensive display in a long time and that team effort will stay in the memory banks of those combatants for a long time. They will need to draw on that shared experience many times, especially in the cold winter months, on heavy pitches, before this campaign is done. Lack of ball meant that the attacking patterns got limited exposure, but I venture that not too many teams in this league will score two tries against Luctonians and sometimes just grinding it out, living off scraps and finding a way to win, is all that matters.

There is no doubt that Lucs will be in the mix come next April - they are too good a team not to be. I am sure they will be ready with a warm New Year welcome on January 5th - a tougher, first post-festive season encounter, there could not be!

With Scunthorpe recording their third bonus point win, Newport remain in 2nd place in the league. Next up is the visit of Syston, who came up from Midlands West 1 last season, after beating Dudley Kingswinford, in the play-off. They have struggled so far, but there are no soft games at this level and Newport will be ready and fully prepared come Saturday.

Team; Evans, Cowell (C), Wilson, Buckley, Roach, Purchase, Price, Robinson,
Brown, Maule, Mann, Vaka, Perry, Leathem, Holder, Hallam, Grass, Parker