

## Newport (Salop) 15 Scunthorpe 16

When you're up against the league leaders, a team who have only suffered one defeat all season, you need to bring your A game. Unfortunately this Saturday, at the Old Show Ground, Newport failed to do that. Their defence was, barring one momentary lapse, committed and solid, but in attack there were too many errors in the red zone, not enough variety in the plays, some poor decision making, and the x factor that has allowed Newport to be so free scoring of late, was sadly absent. Credit must also be given to Scunthorpe, who are well coached, play to their strengths and are formidable opponents.

All of that said, Newport still came agonisingly close to victory. Had Parker's perfectly legitimate try been awarded, had the trajectory of Maule's late, monster conversion from the touchline, been one degree higher, or most tellingly, during the dying seconds of the game, with penalty advantage awarded, had someone had the sense to attempt a kick, or even knock the ball on, meaning the referee would have given the penalty, then the result may have been different and writing this report, a more enjoyable experience.

Newport may feel hard done by. There is irrefutable photographic evidence to prove the referee missed a perfectly good try, and perhaps, given that it was the last play of the game, he could have allowed advantage to run a little longer, however this is sport and you don't always get the rub of the green. Had Newport played to the standard that they have consistently done over the past two months, then these incidents would not have been so important, and they would have won the game. The buck stops with the players, they have accepted that, without making any bones about it, and will be redoubling their efforts in training to ensure that there is a positive reaction to this chastening defeat, next weekend in Sheffield.

With Ricky Bailey having been given the all clear by the physio, he returned at fullback and Jake Leonard was named amongst the replacements, in what was the only change from the Sandbach game.

The healthy crowd, many who had been at the Ex Players Lunch, saw Scunthorpe kick off with the significant benefit of a strong wind on their backs.

Within two minutes the visitors were on the scoreboard, Paul Cook, having knocked over a routine penalty from directly in front of the posts.

Newport spent much of the half being pinned back by some long raking kicks, from Scunthorpe's fly half, Tom Foster, using the dual advantages of the wind and the slope, but were ever willing to keep the ball in hand, and attempt to maintain a high tempo to their play. There was no shortage of effort on Newport's part. Nathan Parker, Will Roach and Tom Cowell, were making some big carries and when the outside backs attacked they always looked dangerous, in particular Max Himbury, who for once was seeing more of the ball than his left wing counterpart, Alex Haselock.

Midway through the half, a Newport lineout throw, about twenty metres out, missed it's intended target, and ended up in the hands of Jack Wells, at the tail. He charged into the heart of the Scunthorpe defence and his efforts were supported by equally committed direct runs from Henry Vaka, Craig Wilson and Tom Cowell. With the try line only a metre distant, Sam Brown had a go at burrowing over, and unfortunately lost the ball forward.

One minute later, Scunthorpe doubled their lead with a second Cook penalty. As the half wore on, Newport had several good periods of attacking play, however errors were repeatedly made at critical times. One well executed catch and drive did look like a sure-fire five points, with their progress towards the try line only being halted by the maul being illegally collapsed. With Scunthorpe's prop Ollie Cole in the sin-bin and having elected to take the scrum option on being awarded a penalty, Newport, despite being a man to the good lost their own feed. On more than one occasion Newport opted to kick for touch, rather than attempt to kick for the posts into the strong wind. The lineout, which has functioned well in recent matches, was, in the main part, during the first half, completely out of kilter though, and no real advantage was gained.

On the plus side Scunthorpe were restricted to six points in the half, and Newport were confident, with the slope in their favour, along with the wind, although not now so significant, they could push on and take control of the game.

The first fifteen minutes of the second half saw some exciting counter attacking play from Newport, in particular one mazy Bailey run, that saw him bamboozle the defence, before losing control of the ball in the Scunthorpe twenty two, along with some resolute, unyielding, first class defence. For a solid period of four minutes, and for a phase count that was well into the high twenties, Scunthorpe battered away at the Newport ranks. Not one single metre was gained and the effort was truly stoic.

Cook added a third penalty in the sixteenth minute, but the restart kick was misfielded, and then fly hacked straight into the arms of Vaka. He needed no second invitation and shrugged off several attempted tackles, to power over from twenty metres. Monty Maule added the conversion, and Newport were back within two points at 9-7.

Newport were now beginning to gain control of the game, the line-out was starting to function and all indications at this stage were good. From a superb Jack Price line-out take, the backs were set alight and the illusive Bailey, made another exquisite, jinking run through past the flailing defensive arms. With the last man to beat he was caught with a fine, last ditch tap tackle. The Newport's forwards then took ball on, and after a Scunthorpe player went off his feet at the ruck, Maule was given the opportunity to kick a relatively simple penalty. Dispatched with no issues, Newport had now taken a narrow lead, 10-9.

Newport continued to enjoy the lion's share of possession. A good steal by Maule, put Haselock away on the left wing and we were yet again reminded what a fine athlete he is. His turn of pace out wide, has been a real boon for the team of late. Jordan Grass had replaced Wilson early in the second half and as always made a significant contribution to the tackle count, including one perfectly timed effort that shook his opponent to the core.

With ten minutes of the game remaining and somewhat against the run of play, Scunthorpe retook the lead, when for once, a gap appeared in Newport's normally impenetrable defence. Sam Morgan had made the initial break, but it was Foster who took full advantage of the hole and crossed for a try. Cook added the extras, and now Newport were trailing by six points.

The latter stages of the game belonged to Newport. There was continual pressure on the Scunthorpe lines with some huge carries by Buckley, Parker and Robinson. One Parker effort was certainly grounded, but was adjudged by the referee to have been held up. Annoying certainly, but over a season these sorts of events tend to even themselves out.

With one minute remaining, Newport took a quick tap penalty, applied some pressure through the forwards and then spun the ball to Haselock, who crossed for a try on the wide left. Maule then failed to snatch victory, when his huge conversion attempt cruelly rebounded off the crossbar.

There was still time for one final effort, and with the referee having indicated that penalty advantage was being played, Newport continued to attack, making headway deep into Scunthorpe territory. The length of time of penalty advantage is entirely subjective to the referee's opinion, and with hindsight, it was foolish to continue to attack and attempt to score a try, when there is a high possibility that a kicker of Maule's ability would have added three points with the penalty kick, but in the heat of battle, with eighty minutes of total physical effort expended, sometimes it's not easy to think totally clearly. The referee eventually called advantage over, and with possession eventually lost, Scunthorpe kicked the ball off the field to end the game.

Newport did get a losing bonus point for their efforts and now sit three points behind their opponents. Broadstreet and Luctonians, occupy third and fourth spots, seven points in arrears.

Next up, a first trip to Sheffield, whose home record is worthy of note. Although they sit in sixth place in the league, they have lost just once at home, and are one of only two teams to have beaten Scunthorpe all season. This is now a pivotal game for Newport, and one which must be won if their title challenge is to stay on track.

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