

## Newport (Salop) 28 Sandbach 22

It may seem trite to start a report with an overused cliché, but there's no other way to describe Saturday's game. It was a classic game of two halves and Newport managed to come out on the right side of the result, but only just. A lacklustre, error-ridden first forty minutes, had allowed Sandbach to score three unanswered tries and open up a nineteen point half-time lead, before Newport reinvented themselves, started playing some proper rugby and doggedly pegged back the deficit, culminating in a last-play, Henry Vaka try, to break the hearts of the visiting faithful.

Kirk Robinson had been reinstated in his preferred position at Number 8 and Nathan Parker joined Oli Buckley in the second row. Yet again, due to injuries and unavailability, the back-line had to be rejigged, with Lee Brogan at fly-half and Grant Hallam reverting to wing. Liam Holder started at full-back, allowing Vaka to rejoin Chris Perry in the centres.

Sandbach won the toss and chose to play down the slope in the first half. Ordinarily I would suggest that this was a in ill-thought-out decision, but to be fair to them they took full advantage of the conditions and Newport's inability to maintain possession, dodgy handling, ineffective defence, poor lineout play and general abysmal performance.

There were fleeting moments of genius, in particular from Vaka, whose footwork, guile and strength, allow him to find space in the most congested of situations. All too often though, there was yet again, an overall lack of patience in building the phases and the forced last pass was to prove costly time and again. Despite decent mid-week training sessions, a good warm-up and all the right things being said pre-game, the curse of the Nuneaton game, had not been eradicated. Newport were flat, unenthused, inaccurate and undisciplined, in both attack and defence.

That Newport played so poorly and got to the mid-way point of the first-half still level, at 0-0, was quite miraculous and may cause the Sandbach coach to be asking some questions of his team next week. For the following twenty minutes though, his charges taught Newport a lesson that they would do well to imprint on all of the player's brains. You cannot just pitch up and go through

the motions, it's not enough at this level, you will get punished, that's the bottom line. Sandbach ran in three deserved tries, the first the result of an intercepted Vaka pass, scored by Joe Jepps, the second minutes later, created by a sniping, unchallenged blindside run, by scrum-half, Kieran Allsop, and the third, after a missed mid-field tackle allowed the gain line to be breached and the supporting flanker, Andrew Nash to gallop home. With the addition of two successful conversions from Sam Winstanley, Newport were nineteen points adrift and completely under the cosh. Alarm bells were ringing loudly and it really did feel like we were stuck in some self-destructive Groundhog Day loop. The half-time whistle could not come quickly enough.

Ten minutes of reflection was all that was required. The stark reality of the situation, that the team had got themselves into and the potential consequences of such a poor first-half showing, did not need to be reinforced to any level. With the factory reset button firmly pressed, Newport retook the field with a handful of positional changes. Holder replaced Brogan at fly-half, Hallam switched to full-back and Huw Bevan, back with Newport after a six year absence, took his place on the left wing. Will Roach had already replaced Parker before the break, in the second row.

Immediately, it was plain to see that Newport had upped their energy level massively, had begun to impose their superior physicality and they tore into the opposition from the kick off. For the entire first eight minutes, Newport maintained possession, all within Sandbach territory and put them under intense pressure, forcing several penalties to be conceded. Eventually the relentless phases and strong carries, released the quick-stepping Perry, in tandem with his equally elusive partner, Vaka. They made good yardage, before a couple of barging attempts were foiled inches short. Captain, Tom Cowell, then picked up and dived over to register Newport's first points of the afternoon and get the 'Great Escape' on track. Holder added the extras to bring the score to 19-7.

With confidence now reinstalled, Newport followed up with a second converted try within two minutes. A superb forty metre carry from Robinson was supported by Sam Brown, who found the marauding Rhys Morgan on his shoulder. He truly is a defending three-quarter's nightmare, when in full flight, and more often than not requires two or three defenders to halt his progress.

His pass found Navaka on the right wing and he had the requisite strength to force his way over for his first competitive try in Newport colours. Holder's conversion from the touchline was top class.

At 19-14, Newport were now in control of the game, but had to show the discipline and patience to convert this dominance into points. Jack Wells replaced Jordan Grass in the front row and Newport continued their revival. Sandbach did extend their lead, with a Winstanley penalty, but never looked likely to add to their try tally throughout the second period. Newport's scrum had been gradually getting the upper hand and by the final quarter, had gained total ascendancy. All of Newport's big ball carriers were making inroads and on 24 minutes, the tiring Sandbach defensive line was breached once again, after Jack Price showed both speed and canniness, to zigzag through under the posts. A third Holder conversion made it a one point game, at 22-21, in Sandbach's favour.

Four minutes later Newport chose to take a penalty kick for the posts, but Holders effort sailed agonisingly by, inches wide. Newport continued to crank up the intensity and with eight minutes remaining ,were making solid headway, with a series of pick and drives, which looked almost certain to result in a try. Unfortunately in defending this attack, one of the Sandbach forwards took a knock to the head and play had to be halted, in order that he receive medical attention. From the resultant scrum, which Newport took with consummate ease, the ball was spun wide left and then wide right, where Morgan charged at the line like a man possessed. He was close, very close, but was rightly adjudged to have lost control of the ball on grounding.

The constant pressure was telling on Sandbach, a couple of kicks went directly into touch, they were having to scramble in defence and it was clear that they were just hanging on by their fingernails. Newport needed now, more than at any time this season, to show complete patience and trust in one another and the game-plan. This they did. The line-out was now back functioning and Cowell bravely threw to Roach at the tail, as the game neared its end. Again strong, battering carries were made by one and all, the clear-outs at the breakdown were precise and totally dominant, and with seconds remaining on the clock, after Cowell had been repelled inches from glory, Vaka continued his phenomenal try-scoring record and fully redeemed himself for the errant pass,

which led to the first score of the day. The last kick of the day being successful, the final score was 28-22.

I doubt there has often been such a massive difference between performances either side of half-time, at the Old Show Ground. It was pleasing that our new sponsors from Besblock, were able to witness what Newport are capable of doing to teams, in the second half.

Newport, when on song are a force to be reckoned with. The momentum and go-forward created by the big men and the accomplished handling of the three-quarters in attack, can cause problems for any team at this level. In defence the team are solid. It's just the mind-set that needs to be fine-tuned. It's eighty minutes of concentration and effort, that are required every single game. Silly mistakes, errors, lethargy and indiscipline will be costly and there are teams, that if allowed a three try advantage, will no doubt be able to manage the game and protect that lead.

With Scunthorpe being on the receiving end of a comprehensive defeat at Luctonians, Newport have moved to the top of the league, on points difference over Scunthorpe. County neighbours Bridgnorth, continue their winning run and are in third spot, although, as every other week, they will no doubt get top billing in the local papers!

Next up, the visit of Hereford for a North Midlands Cup quarter-final, before a huge game away at Scunthorpe in the league on October 20th. We would welcome all support on that day.

Team: Grass, Cowell (C), Wilson, Buckley, Parker, Morgan, Price, Robinson, Brown, Brogan, Navaka, Vaka, Perry, Hallam, Holder, Wells, Bevan, Roach