

Newport (Salop) 31 Sheffield 20

All things considered, Saturday's performance in beating a spirited Sheffield team, can be considered a huge success. There was always going to be some enforced changes to the squad, with the unavailability of Will Roach and Jordan Grass, and injuries to Chris Perry, Kirk Robinson and Rhys Morgan.

Unfortunately, even after naming a match-day eighteen on Friday evening, last minute calls were still being made up to two hours before kick-off, after the late withdrawal of both wingers, Grant Hallam and Meli Navaka.

Adversity does often somehow seem to bring the best out of teams and every player called upon this weekend, showed great character and commitment to achieve a bonus point win and keep the club's ambitions alive.

Chris Campbell made his first appearance this season for the 1st fifteen at blindside and was joined in the back row by the returning Henry Purchase. Along with ever present, Jack Price, they formed a mobile and dynamic set of loose forwards.

Eighteen year old Jake Leonard, the stand-out performer at Scunthorpe, was retained at fly-half and he was joined in the starting line-up by debutant, Alex Haselock, his team mate throughout all of the junior age groups at Newport. Gareth Davies, their coach for many of those formative years, must have been well pleased to see two of his protégés starting for their home town club in such an important fixture.

On the other wing, the versatile Huw Bevan started, after playing the second half at Scunthorpe on the flank. The back three was completed by the returning, Toby Mann.

With Perry out, Liam Holder, another player willing and able to slot into any three-quarter position, formed a new centre pairing with Henry Vaka. So far, in the opening seven games, Holder has taken the field as full-back, wing, centre and fly-half.

The bench was possibly the biggest ever fielded by a Newport 1st team. Debutant prop, Siphwokuhle Bakeni, a South African, living and working locally, was joined by prop Charlie Hill, another making this season's first outing

and Rhys Morgan, who although injured, answered an eleventh hour call-up, to help the cause. I don't think he expected to be the most svelte of the three replacements!

Newport have never played Sheffield and little was known about their team, save for the fact that they had comprehensively beaten Luctonians last time out. From the outset it was clear that they had come to have a real go and they certainly played their part, in what transpired to be an entertaining contest.

The intensity level from Newport was really ramped up from last week and this was particularly evident in the first half. After having fallen well behind against both Sandbach and Scunthorpe before playing any meaningful part in either encounter, Newport got off to the perfect start this time. Holder's kick off was knocked on by Sheffield and from the resultant scrum the ball was spun wide right, with Haselock getting an early touch and Campbell's good footwork, a feature of his game all afternoon, seeing him make good yards. Quick ruck ball allowed Holder to feed Vaka and he had a simple run in, to score with only two minutes on the clock.

Five minutes later, Sheffield scrum half, Steve Depledge slotted a penalty and narrowed the gap to two points after a high tackle. However, Newport continued to dominate the early proceedings and a second try was soon added, this time Vaka returning the favour and unselfishly providing the inside pass to Holder. With the extras added, it was now 12-3 in favour of Newport.

Newport, despite playing some high tempo rugby were committing too many technical fouls and Depledge had another couple of attempts at goal during the first twenty minutes. Fortunately for the home faithful, one missed and the other hit the right upright and was gathered by the alert Price, before the advancing Sheffield players could take any advantage.

Soon after, Sheffield changed tack and opted to go for touch with their next penalty. They then showed that they possessed a very effective catch and drive and Newport's defence had to be top drawer to repel the attack.

On twenty five minutes Newport added a third try. Nathan Parker crashed up at speed and quickly recycled ball was fed to Vaka. As often before his strength

and determination allowed him to break the gain line and then calmly put Holder into a gap, whereby he had a free run in to the line.

From the half hour point Sheffield began to see much more of the ball and were rewarded when hooker, Ianto Jones, powered over from close range, after a series of pick and go had seen them repeatedly challenge the Newport defensive line. Depledge duly converted and it was now 17-10.

Newport did come close to adding a fourth try in the final minutes of the half, however Sheffield displayed commendable counter-rucking skills and after the ball was lost out of the side of the breakdown, it was fly hacked sixty or seventy metres downfield. Determined defence by Mann saw him snuff out the danger and prevent a good attacking situation suddenly becoming a loss of seven points.

The half closed with a second successful Sheffield penalty from Depledge, after Newport were adjudged to have been offside in open play. At 17-13 this game was still in the balance, although Newport did have the advantage of the slope to come in the second period.

After the break, Sheffield started the better of the two teams and Leonard had to come up with a fine touch finding kick to relieve the mounting pressure. Newport then began to work their way back into the game and it was pleasing to see correct decisions being made at critical times. The ball was being put through the hands when opportunities arose, but play was also being kept tight at other times, with pick and go, under-used in early season, not only gaining valuable yardage, but also permitting the attacking lines to reset.

Ten minutes in, Henry Purchase, along with Campbell and Price, quietly and steadily going about their business, scored the bonus point, fourth try, which was converted by Leonard. This was by some way Purchase's best showing for Newport. He is not a flashy player, but gets through a lot of unseen work at the breakdown and for someone constantly involved in this facet of the game, where referees give the majority of penalties, concedes very few.

Bakeni was introduced for the injured Wilson and immediately made his presence felt in the set scrums, but it was Sheffield who were next to score,

Ianto Jones adding to his first half effort and Depledge slotting a superb conversion.

Once again there was nothing in it and at 24-20, with twenty minutes to go, Newport were going to have to work hard for the full eighty, for any victory.

Morgan, who had made a brief appearance in the first half, replaced Purchase and was straight into the thick of the action. Newport for the first game in some time were showing patience and building phases, whilst waiting for the right opportunity. After a penalty kick to fifteen metres out, the forwards rumbled up and repeatedly smashed forward. Bakeni and Morgan were leading the line, but it was captain, Tom Cowell, who forced his way over to score the team's fifth try. After Leonard converted, it was 31-20 and ten minutes remained.

Newport had to see the game out without the services of Bakeni, the recipient of a rather harsh yellow card. Charlie Hill, another hulking, wrecking ball prop, did however join the fray and so Sheffield still had their hands full in defence.

Sheffield continued to believe they could get something from their long trip south and it was only determined, cohesive defending by Newport, that prevented them adding to their tally. They played the game in the right spirit and their players, coaches, management and supporters were not constantly appealing to the referee at every opportunity, sadly not something you could say about a couple of the teams to have visited the Old Show Ground this season.

The bonus point win sees Newport move up to second place, after Bridgnorth narrowly lost at Lichfield. With Scunthorpe failing to score four tries at Nuneaton, the gap is now only two points, with just over a quarter of the season gone.

There are some huge pluses to be taken away from Saturday's game. The squad is deeper than some perhaps believed. Campbell showed that he is an accomplished rugby player. He uses good footwork and cleverness to make headway, rather than pure brawn, is a good reader of the game and a more than useful lineout operator. Bevan and Haselock both made good showings. Haselock, like Leonard is confident, without being cocky and is also physically

robust for a lad still eligible for age-grade rugby. Bevan, not an orthodox wing, causes the opposition defence different problems, as he is built like a forward and more likely to run over his opposite number than round him. Leonard, a scrum-half playing at ten, again gave an assured display. OK, his kicking game needs some work, but his general play is that of a mature, confident and remarkably cool performer. He also displayed tenacity and strength, showcased by the excellent choke tackle, late in the game.

With Bakeni and Hill joining Wells, Wilson, Grass and Evans, Newport have six props capable of playing at this level. Another huge bonus, with nineteen games ahead of them.

This Newport team, who many would have looked at and perhaps worried that they may be on the wrong side of the score, did themselves proud. They followed the script, did the simple things right, showed patience and composure in defence and attack, built phases and waited for opportunities. Not only that, they played with intensity and tempo and demonstrated that high risk off-loads, no-look passes and scoring from first phase possession are not necessary to triumph.

There will be selection headaches, of the good kind, in the coming weeks and we can go to Bournville next week, quietly confident that we can overcome the challenges put in front of us.

Team: Wells, Cowell (C), Wilson, Buckley, Parker, Campbell, Price, Purchase, Brown, Leonard, Bevan, Holder, Perry, Haselock, Mann, Bakeni, Morgan, Hill