

Newport (Salop) 34 Lichfield 5

This report on Saturday's bonus point win over visiting mid-table Lichfield is the perfect opportunity to trot out a few well-worn clichés; must-win game, what a difference a week makes, gave a 110 per cent etc. etc., but in reality the levels of enthusiasm, commitment and accuracy displayed, were only what we have been waiting for all season. That Newport should suddenly click as a team, in such awful playing conditions, and score six tries, all through the outside backs, does make you wonder how good they could be on a dry track. I imagine we will have to wait a few months to find out.

Given the conditions; incessant and at times torrential rain, an icy wind, and a heavy and slippery pitch, you could have been excused for expecting a forward orientated bore-fest, but Lichfield, to their credit, came to make a game of it. They attacked at every opportunity, often from deep in their own half, making the fact that Newport's line was breached only once, another very pleasing statistic. Newport have shipped three and more tries, to teams with far less attacking quality than Lichfield this season, and it was unfortunate for the attack-minded visitors, that the line-speed, coordination, communication and commitment in defence were all top drawer on Saturday.

The availability of several returning players meant that there were several changes in the line-up. Monty Maule started his first game for nearly three months, Chris Perry rejoined Henry Vaka in the centres, and Max Himbury was shuffled out to the wing. Up front, Jack Wells got a start at tight-head, and Rhys Morgan joined Roach and Price in the back row, after an enforced sabbatical. On the bench Bomba Bakani, Nathan Parker and Jake Leonard provided the cover.

So often this season Newport have been guilty of starting the game slowly and not waking up until already on the back foot, but not this week. The first fifteen minutes of the game were totally dominated by Newport, both in terms of possession and territory, and this dominance was rewarded with three well taken tries. The first, with less than five minutes on the clock, was scored on the wide left by Alex Haselock. Strong carries in midfield broke the defensive line, and with Lichfield back-peddling, Ricky Bailey opened up the play and found Haselock. Twenty metres out, he still had work to do, but he showed great strength to shrug off three would-be tacklers and sprint home.

Five minutes later, Tom Cowell made a superb line-break and his off-load found Max Himbury, at full tilt. His touch-down made it 10-0. Within another five minutes Haselock had added his second of the day. Newport had gained fully thirty metres from a driving maul off a lineout, before this was held up over the try line. From the resulting scrum, Sam Brown found Maule, whose thirty metre miss pass took two Lichfield defenders out of the game and provided the winger the simplest of run-ins.

The unfortunate Perry, not normally Newport's place kicker, was given three very challenging attempts at goal and the extras were not added on each occasion.

All the passes were sticking, the communication, both in defence and attack was noticeably more vocal, and the ball was being looked after and not needlessly kicked away. All of these factors, along with a massively improved level of enthusiasm all round, meant that Newport were playing with a level of confidence approaching that with which they finished last season.

All of the forwards were working hard and continued to do so throughout the eighty minutes. Roach, Buckley and Robinson made some fine carries, as did Cowell and the returning Morgan. My powers of description fall short of fully encapsulating what Morgan looks like charging into the opposition. Suffice it to say, he is rarely slowed by the first defender and almost always steps out of the tackle and carries several players with him towards their own line. The famous rugby commentator of my youth, who loved to liken players to various animals, would have had a field day with Rhys - 'like a mad buffalo on the hoof', perhaps?

As the half wore on, Lichfield seemed to be reading Newport's plays and the regular scoring of the early exchanges, did temporarily dry up. In the scrum there was parity, or I should say appeared to be parity. Jordan Grass and Jack Wells were both working hard and the devastating scrums late in the game, when the front row had been reconfigured, were only made possible by the gradual grinding down of their opposite numbers throughout the game.

On the half hour an uninvited guest had to be removed from the field by our own Dog Whisperer, Jordan Grass. Fortunately the loose hound decided to lick

him, not bite him when he carried him from the field. That would have been a disaster - losing your loose-head to a dog bite, mid-game!

Late in the half Buckley took a fine catch from a Lichfield drop-out and his charge towards the line seemed destined to bring the bonus point try. Alas, the pass to Price didn't go to plan, and the half would end at 15-0.

It had been Newport's best first half this season. Sam Brown was controlling the game well from scrum-half and he and Maule were completely dictating the pace of the game. Newport just had to maintain the enthusiasm and perhaps mix things up, and vary their play a little more.

Parker had come on for Robinson towards the back end of the first half, and he was in the thick of the action as the second period began, with a trademark bullocking charge.

After five minutes a sliced clearance kick from Vaka gave Lichfield a lineout ten metres out. A quick throw to the front, caught Newport napping, and a well coordinated driving maul, saw Lichfield open their account.

Bakeni was brought on at tight-head replacing Grass, with Wells switching to loose-head. Newport had quickly refocused after conceding the try, and the defensive effort was not to drop for the remainder of the game.

In conditions far from favourable for free-flowing rugby, Lichfield continued to keep the ball in hands when in possession, and Newport were also playing an expansive style of rugby, albeit on the foundations of some very structured and well practised set plays. It was a joy to see the massively under-used quick tap penalty being taken by Brown on several occasions, and this along with several sniping runs, certainly kept the Lichfield defence honest.

Midway through the half there were a series of four Newport scrums, where the home eight absolutely destroyed their opposite numbers. On each occasion a penalty was awarded to Newport and three times they opted for the scrum to be reset. After the third scrum, the referee's patience ran out, and the Lichfield loose-head was given a spell in the bin. Immediately the fourth penalty was given, Brown tapped and the ball was sent wide to Ricky Bailey, who showed impressive strength to score in the corner. Brown replaced Perry

for the difficult conversion attempt, but his fortune was no better, and the score now stood at 20-5.

Bakeni, a hugely strong man at the set piece, had showcased what an impact he can make from the bench and is a useful card up Bob Adam's sleeve. He also proved that he is far from a one trick pony, with several strong carries and some powerful clean outs at the breakdown, in the latter stages of the game.

Leonard replaced the tiring Maule at stand-off. It was heartening to see him complete a sixty minute stint with no residual effects from his ankle injury, and his calm generalship was a huge contributory factor in Saturday's performance.

Newport continued to threaten and the instigator was often the marauding Morgan. On 26 minutes he thundered into the heart of the Lichfield defence and as he did so, a Lichfield voice came from the bank, 'He's on his own'. That however matters little to Morgan, who legs pumping and arms flailing, charged onwards. A series of hard carries followed, with the ball eventually being fed by Leonard to Price. He slipped a fine inside ball to Perry, who scampered over for try number five. Leonard, a regular place kicker had the easiest conversion thus far, and routinely added the extra two points.

Robinson returned for Price and Roach moved to the blindside to accommodate him at Number 8. The changes made throughout the game, in no way adversely affected the style of play, or the tempo of the game, and this serves as confirmation that Newport's squad is in a very healthy position at this point in time.

Newport's final try was scored by Bailey, whose nifty footwork allowed him to step through the congested traffic, from fifteen metres out, and score under the posts. Leonard again slotted the conversion and brought the final score to 34-5.

Without doubt Newport's best eighty minute performance of the season, clinical and ruthless in attack, and solid in defence, against a decent team, that have scored four or more tries, in nine of their previous thirteen games.

Up front, all ten players used, put in a manful shift, in heavy, cold and difficult conditions. Behind, the running lines, handling and decision making, were impressive and augur well for the New Year ahead.

With six tries and thirty four points, Newport registered the highest total of the day and the biggest winning margin in Midlands Premier. They have swapped places with Bridgnorth, and occupy second place, behind Scunthorpe, after our county rivals failed to get a bonus point at Bournville. Luctonians, our next port of call on January 5th, 2019, have hit a rich vein of form, and are only a further one point in arrears, in fourth spot. Your support down in Herefordshire would be massively appreciated, in what could be a season defining match-up.

Season's Greetings to you all.

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