

Newport (Salop) 39 Burton 31

On a gloomy, grey and chilly afternoon, Newport had enough quality in attack, to finally overhaul and see off a determined, physical and gutsy Burton team. They did this, with all of their six tries coming from the three-quarters, five of them, and thirty four of the total points, courtesy of three local lads, all schooled at Burton Borough and formerly of the Newport Junior set-up. There has over recent years been criticism levelled at the team management, for not selecting more up and coming players. Here is the absolute proof, if the players are good enough, they will be selected, and they will be encouraged and allowed to thrive. Ricky Bailey (21), Alex Haselock (18), and Jake Leonard (18), were the stars of the show on Saturday, and with talent like this on our books, the future looks very bright.

The overall reality is though, that yet again, Newport as a team, made far too many errors, especially in the basics, such as receiving restart kicks and at the lineout. This, coupled with the fact, that instead of playing to their strengths out wide, they seemed hell-bent on damaging their cause, by becoming embroiled in a confrontational forward battle, made for a much tighter game than it should have been.

Newport knew what to expect, every encounter with Burton in recent years has been a close game, and oddly, they seem to perform better on the road than at home. They have a combative set of forwards and an excellent team spirit, that allows them to give just about everyone, a decent game, and their current lowly league position belies their competitiveness.

The same three-quarter line as at Broadstreet, the previous week, was selected, but a couple of changes were made up front. Jack Price returned for the unavailable Chris Campbell, and Jordan Grass slotted in at loose-head, with Jack Wells dropping to the bench. Burton's team included three South Africans in the pack and a debutant Argentinean fly-half.

Newport, who have been guilty of starting most games slowly this season, were behind in record time this week. Burton's kick-off was spilt forward by Newport, regathered by Burton, and with less than ten seconds on the clock, a drop kick from Lloreno was sailing between the uprights. This lead was doubled

only four minutes later, when Simpson kicked a routine penalty, awarded for offside. Six points in arrears and Newport had not had any possession whatsoever.

After these initial set-backs, Newport did begin to work their way into the game and after a lengthy period of pressure, about ten minutes in, they scored their first try of the afternoon. Burton had showed some resolute defence close to their own line, including one outstanding tackle on Henry Vaka, before conceding a penalty, which Newport opted to kick to touch. The forwards then made some valuable yards, before Sam Brown found Leonard, who accelerated through the gap and under the posts. His conversion attempt was charged down and thus Burton still held a slender lead, at 6-5.

Newport were now beginning to dominate both possession and territory. Vaka made a fine steal at the breakdown, Brown was making some probing runs and overall there was an air of confidence about Newport's work. It was however a Burton error, which led to the next score and the beginning of a memorable afternoon for Haselock. A speculative pass was thrown in the direction of the Burton right wing, however it fell short of its target, and was scooped up by Haselock, who then sprinted in from fifty metres. Leonard's conversion from a difficult angle narrowly missed, and Newport now were 10-6 to the good.

Possession stakes were still being shaded by Newport, and despite some handling errors, the pace, positive intent and creativity in attack was pleasing. However, on 23 minutes Burton, who were certainly making a good contest of the game added a second penalty from the boot of Simpson.

Again, Newport were applying all of the pressure and as the game entered the final ten minutes of the half, a Burton clearance kick failed to find touch and was fielded by Haselock. His inside pass found Bailey and the rugby league convert, then set off on a run, that proves the art of the sidestep, is alive and kicking, in this part of Shropshire. He not only displayed phenomenal balance and vision, to weave his way through all the midfield traffic, but nearing the line, impressive strength and determination, to fend off the last line of defence and score in the corner. On this occasion the conversion attempt hit the right upright and the score was now 15-9.

It was Burton who were to have the final say in the first half though, with a well taken try from Oxley, on the left flank. With the extras added they now led 16-15.

Considering the fact that Newport had bossed both possession and territory, being behind didn't seem just, but it was clear that if the error count was reduced and the ball was shipped a little sooner to the back line, success could be found. Although the line speed in defence was not as sharp as it might have been, the defence in general had been resolute. Grass in particular had made his presence felt, with some perfectly executed tackles and Purchase and Price were both working tirelessly off the ball.

The half started well. Initially there was a first minute, counter-attacking charge by Price, down the left wing, with Nathan Parker providing a great supporting run. Just minutes later a high tackle on Bailey led to a penalty deep inside the visitor's 22. The scrum option was taken, and a huge eight man effort, with a second sustained shove, had Burton backpedalling and conceding a further penalty. Again, the scrum was reset, and with the same result, Roach was able to pick up and flick the ball to Brown, who had the easiest of touch downs. Leonard added the extras with a superb conversion, and it was now 22-16.

Kirk Robinson came on to replace Parker, and Roach moved into the row to join Oli Buckley. A change was also made in the front row, with the versatile Wells replacing Tom Cowell at hooker. Frustratingly, more and more errors were beginning to creep into Newport's game. The ball was lost in contact several times, penalties were being conceded at the breakdown and as a result, Roach was sent to the sideline for ten minutes. Burton sensed their opportunity and bravely passed up an easy three points, for a kick to touch. Their forwards, who were certainly up for the contact all afternoon, then produced a great driving maul and the resulting try by Davies, put them back within a single point.

With their tails up and Newport in temporary disarray, Burton quickly added their third try, through Number 8, Gemashe, after a fine run by Joshua had gained valuable ground.

28-22 down, only twenty minutes on the clock, and on the back foot. It's fair to say hearts were in mouths, and what had started on Friday night, as a big

weekend of celebration at the Old Show Ground, looked like it may well come to an ignominious end.

Once again though Burton contributed to their own downfall, with another wild pass allowing the poacher's instincts of Haselock to come to the fore. He took ruthless advantage, snapped up the loose ball, broke the tackle and darted home to bring Newport back in contention. With Leonard, again hitting the target, Newport were now edging it 29-28.

As with all bar one restart, Newport failed to take possession cleanly and immediately put themselves under pressure. This directly led to the conceding of a penalty, converted by Simpson, and the loss of the lead once again.

The final ten minutes saw a Leonard penalty go wide, before a high tackle on Bailey gave him another attempt, which he coolly slotted. Victory was then sealed with a hat-trick try for Haselock, - we will have to check with our stats man, whether an eighteen year old has ever achieved that feat at Newport before - who displayed superb handling skills and also proved to all in attendance, that there is no substitute for speed on the rugby field. A world-class, final conversion from Leonard, sealed the win and meant that Burton, now eight points in arrears, would go home empty handed.

If the Broadstreet win was two steps forward, then despite the hugely encouraging performance of our young guns, this was one step back. The penalty count was too high, as was the error count, both with individual and unit skills. Fortunately Burton are a side that also commit a lot of mistakes, but there are challenges ahead where we know the opposition will not allow us that luxury. It's in the DNA of all forwards, the world over, to try to win their battle, but why continue to take a side on up front, when you clearly have the better of them out wide - it's a conundrum that will be given much thought this coming week.

With Bridgnorth slipping up at Sandbach, and only achieving a draw, they drop to third spot, and Newport retake second place, one point behind Scunthorpe. Those two sides meet next weekend, while Newport travel for another test on the artificial surface at Derby.

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