

Newport (Salop) 56 Nuneaton 0

As the business end of the season fast approaches, Newport have set out their stall in no uncertain terms, with a comprehensive 56-0 defeat of their long time bogey team, Nuneaton. It's fair to point out straight away, that the visitors were not at full strength, with a couple of key players unavailable, but you can only play the team in front of you, and no Nuns team are ever pushovers.

After an indifferent and patchy first half of the season, those that watch Newport every week, will have seen strong indications that squad were finally beginning to click, starting with the pre Christmas defeat of Lichfield. This was followed by a massive win away at Lucs, and a first half at Syston, where they put the basement team to the sword. To win away at Lucs, has been described by one of Newport's more senior players, as one of his best days in a Newport shirt, and it certainly was a major scalp to take, but to be finicky, the first half at Mortimer Park was good, but not totally spot on. It is also irrefutable, that the team's collective eye, was taken off the ball, in the second half last weekend. There is nothing of the sort to report this time, this was an eighty minute exhibition of accurate, high tempo, attacking rugby, supported by unyielding and resilient defence.

A healthy crowd observed a minutes silence for former player Jason 'Frana' Francis and his girlfriend, Alice Robinson, who tragically passed away in December and I hope it was some comfort to Jason's parents, Sheila and Steve, both in attendance, to see and hear how highly their son was thought of.

Will Roach replaced the injured Rhys Morgan on the blindside, and Craig Wilson was preferred to Jordan Grass in the front row, with Jack Wells moving over to the loose-head berth. Toby Mann was drafted in at the eleventh hour to replace Max Himbury, who was laid up with a virus.

Newport had selected their biggest pack of recent years, with four players, Roach, Kirk Robinson, Oli Buckley and Nathan Parker, who have all regularly played in the second row, starting. This was to be a wise decision as the Nuns pack, if anything, were even bigger.

Throughout the first ten minutes of the game Nuns had almost total domination of possession, but the Newport defence was quick off the line, and one hundred per cent focussed on absorbing the attack and limiting any progression over the advantage line. There was some hugely committed chop tackles, such an effective weapon against big opponents, and Craig Wilson executed two perfect examples in the early exchanges. It is hugely encouraging for the future ambitions of this squad, that the most vocal support after both tackles, came from the player left out this week in favour of Wilson, Jordan Grass. On a personal level his behaviour shows great maturity and no little class, and in terms of the squad, it shows a healthy desire for the common good, over individual aspirations.

When Newport finally did get some meaningful possession, the difference between the two teams was immediately and starkly apparent. Newport's tempo in attack was the difference-maker and would continue to be so for the following seventy minutes. Sam Brown's service from scrum-half, which was both rapid and accurate, throughout the entire game, set the tone, and the handling skills of the entire team, the running lines from deep positions, and crucially the very effective clear-out technique demonstrated at the breakdown, constantly forced Nuns onto the back foot and kept them there for extended periods.

The first of Newport's four first half tries was initiated by a well-weighted kick from Alex Haselock, and the all important diligent and energetic chase. Hesitation from the Nuns scrum-half, who had fielded the ball, led to a poor clearance kick and from the ensuing lineout Newport attacked, with hard runs, from Jack Price and then Roach, before the ball was quickly transferred to the right wing allowing Mann to score. A superb conversion from Maule, who didn't miss an attempt all day, put Newport 7-0, to the good.

Nuneaton were certainly shading it during the early scrummages, and their line-out was effective, but in open play, Newport were in another class. Ricky Bailey, now fully settled back in Rugby Union, Haselock, and Mann, all looked dangerous every time they touched the ball. Maule was constantly probing the defensive line for any sign of a gap, and Perry and Vaka, were influencing the game with sublime distribution skills. Up front, the entire eight were all

contributing with hard carries, causing constant disruption to the opposition defence.

The second try followed on 23 minutes, when Nuns made the error of kicking to Bailey. He counter attacked with a mazy run into the heart of the visitors territory, before Maule goose-stepped his way through the gap, ala Campese of old. He was halted just short, and the supporting Brown squirmed his way over to touch down. Another top quality conversion from Maule saw the lead extended to 14 points.

The third score was a forwards effort, with captain, Tom Cowell, as so often this season, the man to ground the ball. The attacking play had been ignited by Mann, who always shows such determination and fight to win the battle once in contact. His run was followed up by patient, well disciplined pick and go, and gradual progression towards the line. Newport were once again showing that they have an all-court game, and are becoming more and more able to read what is in front of them and adapt their game, on the hoof, as the season progresses.

The bonus point try came late in the half, and actually slightly against the run of play. Nuns were seeing a little more of the ball, and mounting some attacking sorties in Newport's half, but the defence held firm and when the ball found its way into the hands of Mann, he counter attacked from deep. This led to an outstanding and inventive final pass from Maule, who put Haselock away on the left wing. He completely outstripped the defensive cover, backing his pace, to beat his opposite number on the outside, and sprint home from fifty metres.

At the midway point it was 28-0 to Newport and what was now required, was for Newport to display the game management to replicate the first half and extinguish any hope of a Nuns revival. This they did in stellar fashion, with another four converted tries, and keeping a clean sheet for the first time this season.

Parker was first to score. He has spent much of the early part of the season on the replacements bench, but is certainly grasping his opportunity in the starting line-up, and this was certainly one of his best performances in a Newport shirt. He was safe under the restart kick, solid in defence, with one

memorable huge hit and simultaneous steal of the ball, and made not only some very hard carries, but also picked intelligent lines to run, coming from deep and at pace. This try was created by Brown, with a sniping run, Robinson with a supporting charge, and then Maule with a bit of magic, to allow Parker to barrel over.

Newport were using the short side to great effect throughout the game, allowing the attacking pods to regroup, and Nuns, despite a total and committed defensive effort, were not able to deal with the intensity and speed of Newport's relentless attack.

After ten minutes, Newport rung the changes. Henry Purchase replaced Price, Grass replaced Wells, and Perry left the field, with Jake Leonard coming on at stand-off, and Maule and Vaka, shuffling out one position.

Brave play by Brown, dropping on spilt Nuns lineout ball, allowed Mann to attack on the right flank. He evaded two tackles and then fed the supporting Bailey, who made headway into the Nuns half. Several phases followed, before Brown found Leonard and with the slightest of shimmies, he put Wilson through the gap for his first Newport try.

Midway through the half, we were treated to a flashback to the old Henry Vaka. This season, more of a provider, we have not seen too many of his trademark, magical runs, but on 22 minutes, a tap penalty from Brown was fed Vaka, and he accelerated on an arcing, jinking run, only being caught after sixty metres and just short of the line.

Two fine examples of the effort, and fitness on display were a determined chase of a Mann kick by, Number 8, Robinson. His speed and commitment, forced the receiving player into touch and resulted in a good gain of territory, and a huge driving tackle by Maule. Last Saturday, at Syston, he drove his opposite number back towards his own line, in a massive hit, this time he chose the towering opposition lock forward, a man outweighing him by at least five stones, to put into reverse gear. There was no to be no let up of endeavour from any quarter this week.

The sustained pressure by Newport meant there was still two more tries to come in the final three minutes. The first scored by Mann on a cut back run,

after a well-timed pass by Purchase, and the second, another gallop home by Haselock, after hard yards gained by Cowell and Roach.

Nuns, to their absolute credit did not stop tackling all afternoon. Many sides would have let their heads drop under such relentless pressure, they did not. We have had to deal with some defeats at their hands over recent years, and I am sure they will bounce back from this game.

For Newport's part, all eighteen players, without exception were a credit to the club and provided an entertaining display, on a cold, damp afternoon. Up front Buckley and Parker, had their best games of the season, Mann slotted into the back three as if he's never been away, and Brown's service from nine, which gets better week on week, allowed him to give an assured performance. Maule and Vaka are forging a great partnership, and are a dangerous combination, of a thinking stand-off, and an instinctive, naturally gifted inside centre. In the front row there is wealth of talent. Wells is having a fine season, and as well as his front row duties, is enjoying more and more involvement in open play. Wilson, another to have his best showing this season is an accomplished ball carrier, and Grass is without doubt, one of the fittest forwards on the field, whose tackle count is always second to none.

The urgency, accuracy and discipline were all commendable, and when allied to the genuine pace of the backline, the fitness and hard edge of the pack, and the obvious advantage reaped from all the hard work being put in, every Tuesday and Thursday evening, it is now permissible to believe something very special might be on the horizon. Every single one of the squad and management, have their feet firmly on the ground. They know that every team in this league, is capable of beating any other on their day, but the bar was set high in the close season, and nothing has changed. They have ground out some narrow wins, and taken a few valuable lessons on board pre-Christmas. There are nine tests ahead, and each will be approached in the same meticulous fashion, with the same positive mindset.

With Scunthorpe also picking up a bonus point win at Lichfield, Newport remain one point adrift in second place. Bridgnorth suffered a second consecutive defeat and slip to fourth, behind Luctonians, who overcame Sandbach in the dying minutes.

Sandbach are next Saturday's opponents and they always provide a stern test and are never taken lightly. If Newport can sustain this present rich vein of form and discipline, then they are in charge of their own destiny. Only time will tell.

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