

## Newport (Salop) 61 Syston 3

At the risk of sounding arrogant, despite the eleven tries, the margin of victory and only the three points conceded, this was a below average performance from Newport. There were more than a few, lengthy passages of play, which were controlled, accurate and very effective and in the case of some of Henry Vaka's play, quite outstanding, however the performance was blighted by some miscommunication, in both attack and defence and also the continued lack of patience when in control, resulting in a tendency to attempt the unnecessary low percentage offload, or try a unneeded, pointless kick.

Newport had rung the changes, some enforced and some part of the squad rotation policy. The experienced Jack Wells, making his first appearance of the season, came in for Craig Wilson at tight-head, Nathan Parker packed down with Oli Buckley, in the second row and Rhys Morgan, one of last season's stand-out performers, started at open-side. In the backline Lee Brogan, slotted in at ten and Danny Bournes, stationed at nearby RAF Cosford, made his debut on the right wing. A very experienced bench of Will Roach, Jordan Grass and Jack Price, were on standby to inject some second half impetus.

With the autumnal weather upon us and constant light rain falling, the game began with Syston playing down the slope. Within less than two minutes, the visitors were on the board, after Newport had committed an offence at the breakdown and the penalty kick option, had been successfully taken. Their lead was to be short-lived, as they immediately conceded a penalty from the restart kick, which Liam Holder punted to touch, only eight metres out. A perfectly executed catch and drive followed, with Jon Evans the beneficiary of a great eight man effort.

The man who took the catch in the lineout was Kirk Robinson and his involvement in this aspect of play illustrates how Newport are developing as a squad. Gone are the old days, where the team on many occasions relied so heavily on one, or perhaps two viable catchers. Nowadays, depending on the eight forwards on the field at any given time, hooker, Tom Cowell, always has four and often five solid alternatives available.

Only five minutes later the home advantage was increased, after the already dominant scrum had secured good ball. Lee Brogan fed the ever-willing Vaka, who was brought down in centre-field, before Sam Brown scooped up the ball and went straight through at the undefended breakdown, to score. With extras added it was now 12-3.

Morgan, who always wears his desire on his sleeve, has an intimidatory presence and nearly always seems to dominate collisions, certainly makes the opposition half-backs think twice, about attacking down his channel. He was already wreaking havoc, both in defence and attack, with some strong carries, but ended up scoring his first try of the day, diving over, wide on the left wing, after slick hands from Vaka and Holder.

Newport's fourth try, late in the half, came after a period of five minutes uninterrupted possession. Several penalties kicked to touch, saw clean ball and forced repeated offences, by the desperate defence. Eventually Robinson scored and Holder added the conversion. The bonus point was now secure, but could Newport up their game and become totally clinical?

Newport were dominating the possession, the scrum was putting Syston under enormous pressure every time they packed down, the lineouts were in general successful and the Perry-Vaka combination in midfield, resulted in several large territorial gains, however this was no faultless performance. Twice Vaka made try-saving tackles, that would have given the visitors some hope of making a contest of the fixture, there was confusion in attack between 10 and 12, resulting in several forward passes and often the option in attack could have been varied to take advantage of the misaligned defence.

Grass replaced Evans for the second half, which began with Vaka's first try. Holder fielded a Syston kick and made good ground, before the ball was recycled and put through several phases. Vaka then spotted the gap in the back-peddalling defence and scampered home from halfway. This was the high point in a ten minute period, which was riddled with errors.

Roach then joined the action, replacing Robinson at Number 8 and was quickly on the scoresheet, anchoring a great scrum and dotting down for Newport's sixth try. Midway through the half, Vaka, added a second, initially taking the ball at speed and displaying fantastic balance, then four or five phases later

getting on the end of the move, to keep up his remarkable try scoring record. Minutes later, from deep in Newport's twenty two, he sidestepped, handed-off and totally evaded six or seven Syston players and accelerated deep into opposition territory. He found the supporting Brown, who was hauled down ten metres short and the attack ultimately repelled. It was though, fifteen seconds of brilliance, that belongs at a different level of competition. Strength, balance, self-belief, Vaka has them all in spades. Even some of the visiting supporters were applauding.

Price replaced Purchase for the final twenty minutes and Robinson returned to the fray, joining Buckley at lock. Syston were now visibly tiring and their defensive structures fracturing, allowing Newport to run in four further tries in the last quarter. The best of those was the first, which was a fantastic team effort, showcasing long flat passes, to find Holder on the left wing. The second was again another good team try, created by the feisty Toby Mann, wriggling and fighting his way through the defensive line, to find Morgan, who in turn found his captain, Cowell, on the burst, to score. Cowell, who you wouldn't on appearance guess was overly quick over the ground, actually possesses a fine turn of pace. He put that, allied with good reading of the game, to great use just minutes later, when he intercepted a Syston pass and motored into their half. He found Mann, as ever strong in the tackle. Morgan was in support and then attempted an overhead pass to Cowell. This was one of very few errors on the day by the big openside and he made amends within thirty seconds, by bagging his second try of the day.

The scoring was finished off by debutant Bournes, released on the right wing, after the Perry-Vaka combo created the opportunity. These two have such a great understanding of each other's game and are so reliable in defence and attack.

Sadly only three conversions were successful, all from the boot of Holder. He wasn't having his best day with the boot and handed over the reins to Brown, who then had a few unsuccessful attempts, before Brogan had a go with the last. Ordinarily the score would have been into the seventies for sure.

Syston to be fair didn't give in, battling hard all afternoon and their Number 8, Samuel Harrison, was in my opinion, their stand-out performer, repeatedly

making strong carries and often taking big hits, often without sufficient support to maintain possession.

Although 61-3 is a decent result, Syston, in all honesty, don't have the physicality of Luctonians, or the speed and skill-set of Doncaster, and Newport will do well to keep their feet firmly on the ground. The players, coaches and management all know, that if the silly error count and occasional poor judgement is eliminated and the tempo of the game is picked up another 20 percent then this team are capable of a clinical performance, on a totally different level from what's been played so far. Harsh maybe, after a 58 point win, but standards, both individually and collectively are high this season.

Up next, we are all looking forward to a trip to Warwickshire, to face last season's bogey team, Nuneaton. They were the only side to beat us twice last campaign, with a 17-12 win at the Old Show Ground and a 10-9 win, in conditions that resembled the Somme, at home. Nuneaton seem to blow hot and cold, they lost to Lichfield at home two weeks ago and Doncaster away, the week before, but overcame Luctonians 13-12 away, last Saturday.

We will be preparing for them blowing hot!

Team: Evans, Cowell (C), Wells, Buckley, Parker, Purchase, Morgan, Robinson, Brown, Brogan, Mann, Vaka, Perry, Bournes, Holder, Price, Roach, Grass