

Nuneaton 30 Newport (Salop) 22

Newport's thirteen game unbeaten run in league fixtures came to an end on Saturday, away to Nuneaton, a team who have certainly got the upper hand over us, over the last few games.

It's a bitter pill to swallow, but Newport just weren't good enough on the day. All the predictable excuses could be trotted out, injuries, unavailability of key players, the referee's bizarrely different interpretation of our breakdown play compared to the opposition's, but none of these are the reason Newport lost. The plain and simple truth is that we were outplayed in certain areas of the game. Nuneaton had a sound plan, which utilized their strengths and exposed our frailties and moreover Newport made their task so much easier, by firstly refusing to refrain from contesting the breakdown and secondly, continually attempting speculative, high-risk offloads, when the situation cried out for patience and the ball to be recycled.

It's a chastening defeat, but it's by no means time to go back to the drawing board. Newport are still a quality outfit and many of the facets of play on Saturday were heartening. The set-piece work at the scrum and lineout was sound and particularly satisfying were the two tries scored from lineout catch and drive plays, an oft under employed weapon in the team's armoury. There was also no questioning the physical effort of all eighteen players, throughout the eighty minutes. What is required now, is a collective acceptance of the shortcomings and a determination to learn from the things that we didn't do right. It is Newport's reaction to the adversity of losing this game, not the adversity itself, that will define the outcome of the season.

For the second week, circumstances had necessitated changes. Up front, a full strength pack took the field. Jordan Grass started at loose-head, while Henry Purchase was reinstated at blind-side, with Jack Wells and Rhys Morgan providing cover from the bench. In the backline, the absence of regular starters, Toby Mann, Monty Maule and Liam Holder, meant a start at ten for Grant Hallam, ordinarily an outside back. With Henry Vaka switched to full-back, Chris Leathem moved from wing to outside centre and Billy Wara and Meli Navaka, completed a Fijian triumvirate in the back three. Wara, who is studying in Manchester, was making his first appearance of the season and

Navaka, who has spent the last year back in the tropical climes of Fiji, only arrived in the U.K this week. Lee Brogan was providing utility cover for the backs.

The conditions were perfect for rugby, with a sunny sky and very little breeze. The first ten minutes were spent with both teams sounding each other out. Both sets of forwards were making some hard carries and there was resolute defence all round. Newport's intent to get the ball wide resulted in some early touches for Navaka and Hallam showed a deft touch, with a perfectly weighted cross-field touch finder.

On ten minutes, an infringement at the breakdown allowed Ben Cooper the opportunity to put the home side three points to the good. Unfortunately tight-head, Craig Wilson sustained an injury to his hip at the same incident and Wells joined the fray somewhat earlier than was planned.

Approaching the midway point in the half Newport began to make some inroads into the solid defence of Nuneaton. One attack, which saw Leathem released on the right touchline, looked promising, but the inside pass went astray. Minutes later, following sustained pressure and two penalties kicked to within five metres, Newport executed a perfect catch and drive. Jack Price took the catch and with the ball rapidly transferred, the ensuing driving maul could not be halted, with Henry Purchase, the man grounding the ball. Hallam added the extras and Newport led 7-3.

Nuneaton quickly narrowed the deficit after a good passage of play had seen Newport scrambling in defence and ultimately conceding a kickable penalty. Ben Cooper made no mistake and dissected the uprights to make it 7-6, in Newport's favour.

Nuns were employing an effective pick and go game and attacking close to the ruck, rather than in the wider channels, which seems to be the more often used strategy in the early season encounters. Unfortunately the instruction to leave the breakdown alone and just establish a position in the defensive structure, seemed to have universally vacated the brains of the Newport players. There are clear guidelines for who is allowed to compete for the ball and how they are allowed to do this, at this most volatile contest in the game, but there is always the referees interpretation to take into account. Most tend

to blindly support the attacking team, no matter how the defending player has behaved and Newport were to fall foul of Mr. Rowe on far too many occasions.

On twenty eight minutes, a moment of madness from Navaka, saw a speculative kick ahead by Nuneaton, which should have been cleared into touch, flicked back inside and collected by the advancing Nuns attack, with Lee Thompson crossing for a gifted try. There was clearly some miscommunication between Navaka and Vaka, but it's a moment the winger will want to quickly forget. With Cooper's successful conversion, Nuns now led 13-7. They were to add a further converted try after Newport suffered the consequences of a defensive set-up, that was in complete disarray. Newport responded with a second catch and drive effort, this time Kirk Robinson being the beneficiary of Cowell's throw to Price and a powerful and well coordinated, eight man drive to the line.

With the score at 20-12 at the break, there was still everything to play for, but with the difficulties of a completely new three-quarter line being exposed, Newport had to focus on keeping it simple and cutting out the unnecessary errors. In addition, the message regarding involvement at the breakdown was reinforced, but ultimately, to the greater extent, disregarded.

Brogan had replaced Hallam at ten and Rhys Morgan had joined the action for Purchase, towards the back end of the first half. Only two minutes into the second half, he was to be the first to pounce on a an overthrown line-out, five metres out. Throwing to the tail was a risky strategy from Nuns and Morgan added to the two tries scored last Saturday, by carrying the would-be defender over the line. Sam Brown attempted conversion narrowly missed and it was now 20-17.

Ten minutes in, Craig Wilson had recovered sufficiently to swap places with Wells in the front row. There then followed a period of stagnation, with neither team being able to mount any sustained period of pressure. Nuneaton then stretched their lead again, after a fine evasive run from their full-back, Theo Kight, saw him score his team's third try of the day. Cooper, who didn't miss an effort all afternoon, again added the extras.

With ten minutes remaining and Newport now making every effort to chase the game, there were flashes of excellence, including a fine break from Brogan,

supported by the tireless running of Price and some strong carries from Will Roach, Oli Buckley and Robinson, but what was desperately needed and unfortunately lacking, was some calmness, sound decision making and some accuracy.

With the clock running down Newport did add a fourth try, which secured one bonus point. Roach had begun the move driving deep into Nuns territory, before good footwork from Brogan, had released Vaka. His twenty five metre pass to Wara was not the ideal option, but did eventually result in Chris Leathem maintaining his one try, every appearance, record. A successful conversion would have resulted in a second bonus point, for being within seven points, but alas it was not to be and the final score stood at 30-22.

Hats off to Nuns. They did a job on us again. If they play at this level consistently, they will be up there and in with a shout towards the end of the season.

For Newport's part, they have to learn from this lesson and use it as a motivator. If they want to be competitive at the top end of this league, then this is not optional, it is essential. There will be some quiet reflection and then an all-out effort to correct the mistakes and fine-tune the strengths.

Note should be made of the Nuneaton open-side, David Melville, who was a thorn in Newport's side all afternoon and had a great game and also Kirk Robinson, whose defensive efforts, right until the death, did not go unnoticed.

Next up the visit of Sandbach, a team, who despite recent results, can always pose a threat.

Team: Grass, Cowell (C), Wilson, Buckley, Roach, Purchase, Price, Robinson, Brown, Hallam, Wara, Perry, Leathem, Navaka, Vaka, Wells, Morgan, Brogan.