

## Sandbach 21 Newport (Salop) 32

Victory never comes easy against Sandbach and Saturday's game was no exception. They are a feisty outfit, well drilled, as you would expect with a current Premiership player on the coaching staff, and also possess the best tactical kicking game in the league. The end result, a 32-21 victory, is very similar to the reverse fixture last October, when the match finished with a 28-22 triumph, but how we arrived at that scoreline, was a completely different story.

In the home game, Newport's desultory and lacklustre first forty minutes, allowed Sandbach to open up a deserved 19-0 half-time lead, and they had to produce an almost faultless second half, to peg the visitors back, with Henry Vaka producing the killer blow, in the eightieth minute. There was to be no such benevolence on the part of Newport this time. Well aware of the dangers that the opposition possessed, and eager to showcase their skills, team-spirit and optimism, on the road, as well as at the Old Show Ground, they took to the field, determined to not only win the game, but win it playing quality rugby

An almost unchanged side was initially named, with the only change being the return of Max Himbury on the right wing, in place of Toby Mann. Unfortunately, for the second time in the last three games, a late change had to be made, less than an hour before kick-off. Ricky Bailey warmed up, but with a hip injury still causing concern, was withdrawn from the

squad. Jake Leonard was promoted from the bench, and the decision to add a travelling reserve, in the shape of Liam Holder, was proved to be a wise one, with the experienced full-back providing back-line cover, amongst the replacements.

With the sun attempting to break through the clouds and a cross-field wind gusting, a healthy crowd was present, to see Sandbach kick off. As with the Nuneaton game the previous Saturday, the opposition dominated the initial possession, but the defence was organised and quick off the line, allowing no significant territorial gain. Lock, Nathan Parker, put in a huge hit in the opening minutes, setting out his personal stall, in what was to be a performance that even surpassed his efforts of last weekend.

After waiting five minutes to get hold of the ball, Newport when they did, immediately attacked with purpose and aggression, their high tempo style causing chaos in the home side's defence. With the ball being transferred to the right wing, and an early Newport try looking imminent, the final pass from Leonard was read by left wing, Elliot Morris. He showed a fine turn of pace, to sprint fully ninety metres and score the opening points, just evading a despairing dive from the back tracking, Chris Perry. Full back, Ben Elliot, added the extras, for a 7-0 lead.

Despite this initial set-back, Newport continued to play with both confidence and a sense of adventure and it was only a

matter of time before a breakthrough would be made. The forwards were running intelligent lines and gaining good yardage, especially Paker, Robinson and Oli Buckley, another who has come into a fine vein of form in recent weeks.

Monty Maule was pulling the strings for those around him and his speed of thought and calmness, whilst playing right on the gain line, is a huge asset to the team. On fifteen minutes, with his trademark step, he ghosted through a half gap and then found the supporting run of Himbury. His passage was thwarted, but the recycled ball was spread to the left flank, where openside flanker, Jack Price, showed a clean pair of heels to the retreating Sandbach defence.

Maule added a routine conversion and the scores were level.

One aspect of the play that was not favouring Newport, was the scrummage. The first three or four were worryingly ineffective and despite having the physically bigger eight, they were very much on the back foot.

Another slight cause for concern was that the referee's interpretation of the breakdown contest was not consistent with those that have been encountered in recent weeks. This cannot be used as any excuse, as this area of the game is policed in so many different ways, and the ability to learn on the hoof and adapt coping strategies quickly, is the same conundrum for both teams. Much as we'd like to blame the match official, and on a couple of occasions he did seem to penalise Newport somewhat harshly, for what from the

sidelines appeared to be legitimately contested ball, he is the man with the whistle, and failure to conform to his requests, only ever has a poor outcome.

As the game moved past the midway point of the half, it was finely balanced. Newport were playing high-tempo attacking rugby, but were also having to contend with some fine tactical kicking from Elliot, and some robust forays, by the home pack, who were certainly up for the challenge and full of belief.

They say lightning doesn't strike twice, but unfortunately for Leonard it did on Saturday. Twenty five minutes in, whilst attempting to attack from their own twenty two, another errant pass, was plucked from the air by Jack Leach and he had a free run in under the posts. With a successful conversion added, Sandbach were back in front at 14-7.

Newport however remained calm and despite gifting the opposition two scores, there was not one sign of disharmony within the team. In a combination of intelligent and forward-looking coaching by Bob Adams, in keeping faith with the young full-back, and an immense showing of resilience and maturity, in not allowing his head to drop, Leonard picked himself up and did not fade into the background. He continued to play a full and important role in the remainder of the game and landed a 45 metre penalty late in the game, that effectively put the nail in Sandbach's coffin. A coach less in tune with his squad would have perhaps substituted the

unfortunate Leonard, especially with an accomplished full-back on the bench. A player with less fortitude would have completely folded, or gone missing. Neither happened and the saying "your mistakes don't define your character. It's what you do after you have made the mistakes that makes all the difference", couldn't be more apt.

With five minutes of the half remaining it was Maule again who initiated the play that led to the second Newport try. A show and go deep inside his own half created the narrowest of gaps, but that was enough. Once through the defence he found Sam Brown, who made thirty plus metres, before being brought to ground. Leonard was quickly up to cover at the base of the ruck, and he fired the ball out to the left. A big miss pass from Craig Wilson hit the in-form Alex Haselock on the left wing. He kicked, regathered and outpaced the defence, to keep up his amazing start to his first team career.

14 apiece at half-time and Newport were quietly confident. They had looked dangerous every time they had had possession. The errors needed to be eradicated and focus and belief maintained. Sandbach were looking to niggle and harry at every opportunity, and thereby create opportunities from Newport's mistakes. Without doubt, given the chances, they had the ability to capitalise, but they had created little of note from their own locker.

The second half began with rain starting to fall and Newport were immediately on the front foot. An early break from his

own half by Maule, with Wilson and Haselock in support, one blowing a little harder than the other, only broke down a couple of metres short of the line, when the grubber kick through was knocked on.

Jordan Grass replaced Wilson after six minutes and Jack Wells moved to tight head. One minute later, Brown took a quick tap penalty after a lineout infringement by Sandbach and fed the ever willing Tom Cowell, who charged forward. The recycled ball was then spread left to Henry Vaka, who showed incredible strength to carry three defenders over their own line. Maule got two attempts at the conversion, after the charge by Sandbach was adjudged to have been early, but on both occasions his radar was off and Newport now led, 19-14.

Newport were now playing some quality rugby and there was some passages of superb interplay between forwards and backs. Buckley, Roach, Robinson and Parker were making some huge carries and the latter absolutely wiped out his would-be tacklers on several occasions. The Maule-Vaka-Perry triumvirate was totally in sync, and it is a fantastic blessing that Newport have three quality players, whose skills complement each other so well. Vaka displayed a sublime piece of speed, strength and rugby nous, when he tackled a Sandbach player, released him, got back to his feet, stole the ball and escaped, all before the tackled man had moved a muscle.

Newport's scrum were gradually getting on top of the home side at the set piece and overall the relative fitness of the two teams was beginning to show.

On nineteen minutes Buckley took the ball at the lineout , and Brown put Parker away yet again. His thirty metre charge was only halted after a huge collision with the full-back, but a penalty was forthcoming as the stunned Sandbach player failed to roll way from the contact. Maule knocked over the penalty to increase the lead to eight points.

Newport continued to make good yardage through the forwards, Grass, Wells and Cowell, also joining the strike big runners, and proving that we have no shortage of attacking threat from one to eighteen. There was also a huge amount of work being done off the ball with dummy runs and options constantly available.

With fifteen minutes to go Henry Purchase replaced Buckley and Roach moved to the second row. Purchase was straight into the action, with several solid tackles.

Vaka was then the recipient of a yellow card for a high tackle and Newport had to play almost all of the remainder of the game a man short. On seventy minutes Leonard, added his three points with a huge penalty from almost halfway, but with a numerical advantage Sandbach picked up their game and redoubled their efforts.

With five minutes remaining Nick Allsop burrowed over for his team's third try, after a well coordinated and persistent effort by his forwards. Elliot added the conversion and it was now 25-21 in Newport's favour.

This is now a squad that is settled, well balanced, fit, trusts each other and is clearly enjoying their rugby and that was so apparent at this juncture. There was no sign whatsoever of panic, or anything other than sticking to the game plan. On seventy nine minutes they were rewarded with a valuable bonus point try. Robinson picked up from the back of the scrum and made good yards. Sandbach transgressed at the breakdown and the alert Brown tapped the penalty and put Parker away to barge his way over. There couldn't have been a more worthy scorer. Safe under the restart kick all day, his ball-carrying stats were impressive, as was his tackling. After being left out of the eighteen as recently as December and being a bench replacement for much of the season, he is certainly grabbing his opportunity with both hands. Maule added the conversion for a 32-21 scoreline.

Sandbach, seeking a fourth try that would have given them two bonus points, battled right until the death, but there was to be no further score.

A satisfying performance against a tricky team, always capable of causing an upset. I thought in particular the Sandbach back row players, Jack Seddon and Ross Sutherland put in tremendous shifts, both tackled solidly all afternoon

and were clever at the breakdown. Elliot's kicking from hand was also instrumental in keeping his team in the game and he would be an asset to any team at this level or higher.

With the fourth consecutive bonus point secured and Scunthorpe failing to record one, Newport are now level on points with them, at the top of the table. Importantly, there is now a nine point gap to third placed Bridgnorth.

It's the tie of the season next. Scunthorpe visit the Old Show Ground on Saturday 9th February in what could be a season defining game for both teams. Our opponents beat us 25-19 last October and we know that they are a skilled and well-drilled outfit, who although not huge points scorers - Newport have scored nearly 200 points more than them so far this season - nearly always find a way to win.

More than any other time this season the lads would value and appreciate your support. This is without doubt Newport's biggest ever game - 1st vs. 2nd in Midlands Premier. There's the Ex Players Lunch, on that day, which guarantees a good crowd, lets add as many as possible to that number, and make it a day to remember.

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