

Scunthorpe 25 Newport (Salop) 19

The losing reports are always the most difficult to write, so let's start with the positives. Newport undertook their longest away trip, to without doubt, one of the strongest teams in the league, and 1) came away with a bonus point and 2) prevented their opponents getting a bonus point, thus staying in close contention near the top of this very competitive division. On the evidence of Saturday's performance, they also seem to have solved the problem of who is going to cover for the increasingly worrying absence of Monty Maule, which is a huge relief to all.

Not even Newport's most ardent supporter would say that their performance on Saturday was on mark, but they managed to find enough resolve and quality in patches, to stay in contention and get something out of the game. Newport must never forget that there are thirteen other teams, who train hard every week, have their own expert coaching, their own strategies, systems and ambitions and they are doing their damndest to prevent them executing their game plan. Newport are not infallible, neither do they have a God given right to win every game of rugby, but if they are to continue to mount a serious challenge for automatic promotion, they must make sure that they are the best at learning from their errors and shortcomings and are able to find the most expedient way to put them right.

Scunthorpe deserved their victory, they played an uncomplicated brand of rugby and played to their strengths. Their game management was sound and when given opportunities they executed well. That said, for much of the game, this was an unusually below-par performance by Newport and the fact that they only came up just short, gives huge confidence for the return fixture next February.

Newport started on Saturday with Jack Wells at loose-head and Jordan Grass covering the front row on the bench. Eighteen year old, Jake Leonard, was brought in at fly-half, the third occupant of the number ten shirt, since Monty Maule's unfortunate injury. Other than that, the team was unchanged from the Sandbach game.

Newport kicked off, into the gentle breeze and on an absolutely perfect playing surface and found themselves immediately under the cosh. No surprises, whatsoever, Scunthorpe's inside centre, Oli Wood, cut inside and ran hard at the first opportunity and when launched upfield by a touch finding penalty, their forwards were clinical at the line-out and powerful and effective with their pick and go tactics. With Newport pinned on their own line, Sam Brown's attempted clearance kick failed to find touch and Colin Chapmans inside pass to fullback, Paul Cook, set him off on a try scoring run, where he took full advantage of Newport's poor defensive alignment. The conversion was narrowly missed and Newport trailed 5-0 within three minutes.

The standard of play throughout the first thirty minutes was not top-notch by either team. There were more than a few knock-ons, missed tackles and turnovers, all round, but it was certainly the home side that were edging the possession stakes and also managing to stay on the right side of the referee. Newport's penalty count was unacceptably high and learning to adapt quickly to the style of the match official, must be near the top of the squad's to-do list.

In brief flurries, Newport's attack looked promising; Meli Navaka had ball in hand several times and made yards, Tom Cowell appeared in the back-line - often a promising sign, and Brown poached well at the breakdown, but on every occasion no patience was shown, no phases were built and the threat was snuffed out almost before it began. The one shining light was that Jake Leonard was showing maturity and control at fly-half, beyond his years. By choice a scrum-half, he slotted in outside Brown, without drama and not only distributed well, but was both a running threat and defensively solid. That he only makes the fourth team at Hartpury University, speaks volumes for the massive talent pool at that establishment.

On the half hour Scunthorpe increased their lead to twelve points, after Cook added his second try and converted himself. The last ten minutes of the half belonged to Newport though. The entire period was spent deep in opposition territory, with the forwards repeatedly pressuring the home side's try line. Several penalties were given, before the referee tired of the infringements and Scunthorpe's scrum half, Josh Bird, was sent to the sin-bin. Finally Newport were building some phases and after a great carries by Nathan Parker, who had earlier replaced Will Roach, and Craig Wilson, Jake Leonard sold a dummy

and side-stepped his way over under the posts. With Liam Holder's successful conversion, the score was now 12-7 and half time was upon us.

Newport certainly picked up the pace and intensity of the game early in the second half. Four minutes in, a moment of sublime skill from Leonard, released Parker, fifteen metres out and with a ounce more self-confidence the big man would have surely scored. Instead of backing himself however, his late inside pass, did not find hands and the pressure was relieved. Both Parker and Rhys Morgan, were making inroads with their bullocking runs and it seemed inevitable that Newport were going to eventually breach the scrambling Scunthorpe defence.

Jordan Grass replaced Wells and Huw Bevan came on for Morgan at blind-side and Newport continued to dominate, however Holder did have to get the team out of jail, with a superb try saving tackle.

With fifteen minutes gone Parker carried well yet again, before Newport were halted right on the Scunthorpe line. The ball was recycled to the blind side and Henry Vaka scooted over to bring the scores level.

With Newport now seemingly in the ascendancy, they then completely lost their way for the next twenty minutes. The ball was lost in contact on numerous occasions, wrong options were taken and unnecessary penalties were conceded. Two of these were slotted by Cook and Scunthorpe were now in control of the game, going into the final minutes. Their line-outs were faultless and their pick and drive continued to cause problems for Newport.

Again, in a period of generally poor play, there were of course beacons of light. Grass was dynamic in the loose, his tackle count for a front row forward is exceptional and he is more than adept at stealing ball at the breakdown. Cowell's throwing to the tail and Buckley's athleticism and safe hands were also notable.

With five minutes remaining, Navaka lost the ball in contact, on the left wing and then Scunthorpe showed fortitude and patience, driving the ball into Newport's half before lock, Nicholas Dyson, saw space open up in front of him and he bolted through to score his team's third try of the afternoon. With the

extras added by Cook, Scunthorpe now had an unassailable lead and Newport had to battle to earn a bonus point.

There is no lack of spirit in the ranks though and the entire last five minutes, the ball was in the possession of Newport. They went through the phases, built pressure and with less than a minute on the watch Roach, back on for Kirk Robinson, forced his way over. Brown rapidly added two points with a drop kicked conversion and there was just about time for play to restart, but sadly not enough for the score to be altered.

A 25-19 loss to a well-drilled, solid team, on their own turf, is no disaster, as long as lessons are learnt. There will be no runaway winners of this division and there are many teams capable of upsetting the 'big guns' on any given day. The team that triumphs in April, will be the one that sticks together through all the ups and downs. Newport can certainly do that, but they need to stop starting games so slowly; 19 and 12 point starts, in the last two games, are unacceptable. They also need to establish what's working in a game and stick to it. I heard someone say in the huddle on Saturday, "Don't get tired of being good at something. If it's working, keep doing it. When your foot is on the throat, keep it there and throttle them!". He couldn't have been more right.

Next up for Newport, another tough game, with the visit of Sheffield, 26-7 winners over Luctonians on Saturday.

Team: Wells, Cowell (C). Wilson, Buckley, Roach, Morgan, Price, Robinson, Brown, Leonard, Navaka, Vaka, Perry, Hallam, Holder, Grass, Bevan, Parker