

Syston 24 Newport (Salop) 35

It was always going to be a tough ask to maintain the level of performance displayed in defeating Luctonians last weekend, but Newport did manage to get close to that target throughout the first forty minutes yesterday. Without doubt they were nowhere near as impressive after the break, and to be fair were outplayed for long periods, resulting in the twenty one point mid-way advantage, being cut to eleven points, by the final whistle. What exactly caused this second-half capitulation will have to be worked out this week by Newport's brains trust, but major contributory factors were certainly the fact that, the second half was played against the elements, the fighting spirit of the Syston team, and their refusal to roll-over and accept defeat, but also the periodic lack of mental strength of Newport's fifteen, to stay composed, focussed and continue to play to the best of their ability.

There is nothing that can be done about the first two issues, it is accepted that the conditions are the conditions, and unlike last week's vanquished Luctonians team, Newport have never claimed to be a warm weather team. There was also a pre-match expectancy that Syston would battle hard, and given that Luctonians, Bridgnorth, and Scunthorpe, have all failed to defeat them by more than ten points, the entire camp knew that their opponents had improved massively from the side that visited the Old Show Ground last September. There was though perhaps an underestimation of how much character Syston would show, and for that fortitude, coupled with some adventurous and skilled play, they should be congratulated.

The third issue is the worrisome one. Newport showed for eighty minutes, against both Lichfield and Luctonians, and again in the first forty minutes on Saturday, that when firing on all cylinders, with brains engaged and sticking to the script, that they will be a tough team for anyone to beat. The flip-side is that straying from the game plan, allowing bad habits to creep in, and attempting off the cuff moves, could completely derail their promotion push.

Only one change was made to last week's starting line-up, with Nathan Parker coming in for the unavailable, Will Roach. Henry Purchase took Parker's spot amongst the replacements.

Under a very dark and cloudy sky, with light rain falling and a vicious, biting diagonal wind, Newport kicked off and enjoyed some good early possession. Max Himbury was able to get an early gallop down the right wing and overall Newport looked switched on and up for the challenge. When Syston had possession, the defence was quick off the line, and committed in the tackle, one fine example being a tandem effort by Jack Price and Rhys Morgan, that absolutely flattened the ball carrier.

On 14 minutes Newport scored the first try of the day. There was confusion at a defensive Syston throw in, and the ball was stolen by Oli Buckley and quickly transferred into the hands of Sam Brown. He fed Morgan on the charge. From the ensuing rapid ruck ball, Monty Maule spotted, then exposed, a half gap in the defensive line, allowing him to feed Bailey, at pace on an arcing run under the posts. Maule added two points with a routine conversion.

Only five minutes later, after repeated hard carries from Kirk Robinson, Tom Cowell, Morgan and Buckley, the ball was spun to Maule. Again his ability to ghost through any available space, allowed him to find the supporting Bailey, who bagged his second of the afternoon. Unfortunately in the lead up to the try, Morgan had sustained a serious injury to his knee and the game was halted for some five minutes, while medical attention was given. When the game restarted, Maule knocked over the conversion and Purchase joined the fray somewhat earlier than he had anticipated.

Syston then gave stark warning that they were not just there to make up the numbers, with a well worked try for wing Luke Williams, after a probing run by scrum-half, Spencer Ross, had put Newport on the back foot. With extras added, it was now 14-7 to Newport.

Newport's defence in general throughout the first half was tight and rock-solid, but it was not only the big fellas making the hits. One tackle from Maule, had him put his opposite number into reverse gear, and he was driven fully ten metres towards his own line.

In the final ten minutes of the half Alex Haselock continued his outstanding start to his first team career. Adding two more tries to his already impressive tally, he has now contributed eight in his first nine appearances. His first, a great individual effort from halfway, showcased his sublime balance and the

second out wide on the left wing, after Newport's eight had dominated the scum, his devastating acceleration. In all honesty I am running out of descriptive words, suffice it to say, Exeter University's loss this season has been a definite gain for Newport. With Maule, accurate on both occasions, Newport were now 28-7, to the good.

There was one final opportunity to stretch the lead. Buckley, who had a fine first forty, gained possession at the lineout, before Henry Vaka put the rampaging Parker through on a bullocking run. Spilt ball meant the score remained unchanged, but all the signs were positive, and the Newport faithful had no reason to expect anything other than more of the same. Syston were full of effort, but for the main part Newport's intensity, pace and class had given them a definite advantage.

The second half started reasonably well. Craig Wilson had replaced Jordan Grass, with the versatile Jack Wells switching to loose-head. Newport shaded the possession stakes over the first five minutes and also took a superb strike against the head, albeit after a line-out malfunction had handed Syston the ball.

On six minutes a clever dink over the advancing Newport defence, was regathered by Ian Smith, who found Sam Reid on the left wing. His pace saw him touch-down, and you could see that this visibly ignited belief in the entire Syston team.

Syston continued to apply pressure and eventually referee Dan Rowlands tired of Newport's indiscretions, and Buckley was dispatched to the sin bin. Newport were having to dig deep, and as the home side continued to apply pressure, they had to work hard in defence, rebuffing a huge forward effort, which was held up under the posts.

Minutes later there was the second prolonged stoppage of the game, after a brutal collision of heads between two Syston players. Jake Leonard replaced Brown at scrum-half on fifteen minutes, and initially after what had been a lacklustre period, Newport did pick up the pace of the game. Vaka on a couple of occasions looked dangerous, and his ability to find space on the gain line and avoid contact has to be admired. Even when half caught, or seemingly without any room to manoeuvre, more often than not, his strength, natural

instinct, and confidence in his own ability, allows him to continue to make ground.

Newport stretched the lead on 17 minutes. Great control by Purchase, packing down at Number 8, in a reshuffled pack, allowed Leonard to flick the ball to Maule. A run-around saw him then hit Perry, who had timed his run to perfection, and he crashed though under the posts, almost unchallenged. Maule added his fifth conversion. It was now 35-12 in Newport's favour.

Unfortunately this was to be the last of Newport's scores, and they then, through a combination of their lack of focus and Syston's will to stay in touch, found themselves in a dog fight. As the half wore on Newport began to stray further and further from what had been successful in the first half. Speculative kicks and passes were attempted, the defensive line speed, communication and coordination, that had served them so well, began to fall apart and certainly in the final twenty minutes, they were out-thought and out-fought in all departments.

Syston scored twice in the latter stages, first through a well engineered catch and drive, with George Newman, the man to ground the ball, and then after Haselock had chased back, and made what appeared to be a try-saving tackle, through Andy Jones who had made a great supporting run.

The final score, 35-24, and a bonus point win. With Bridgnorth's defeat at the hands of Broadstreet, that has meant a gap has opened up between Scunthorpe and Newport, and the chasing pack. Newport have shown over two and half games, that their ability in all areas of the game cannot be questioned, however they would be foolish to not take Saturday's game as a huge lesson. Things can and will unravel very quickly, if game management is not at the very top of their list of priorities.

Next up is the visit of Nuneaton. They are mid-table, but have become Newport's nemesis, having beaten us on seven of nine occasions in recent years. There will be a minute's silence before the game, in memory of our former teammate and friend Jason Francis, who tragically passed away in December, in Australia. Jason's family will be in attendance, and it would be fitting if as many supporters as possible could attend, and show them how much we thought of him as a player and also as a humble, fun-loving Gent.

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