

Second XV freeze in second half



By Leipziger

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After an intriguing first half in which the Falcons' reserves looked like they would make a game of last night's A League clash at a freezing Franklin's Gardens, the hosts pulled away to record a 46-13 win.

Inspired by Alex Gray and Chris Pilgrim, Newcastle didn't let their heads drop when 17-0 down to get within four points of Northampton Wanderers at half-time.

However, the second half curse appears to have infected our whole club and five unanswered scores after the break coasted the home side to their big win.

Both sides included players with a lot of Premiership experience. We started with Matt Thompson at tight-head alongside Alex Walker, and Uche Oduoza and Spencer Davey in the backs.

The Northampton team included Alan Dickens, Barry Everitt, Chris Mayor and Paul Diggin, a try-scorer in last season's Premiership game at Franklin's Gardens. Former black Andy Long packed down in front of Ignacio Fernandez Lobbe.

The Wanderers got an attacking platform immediately thanks to Tom Catterick dropping the kick-off and Everitt knocked over a simple penalty.

The Falcons tried to hit back straight away with Pete Browne setting up Gray for a break deep into the home 22 but Oduoza was turned over. It was a rare positive sight in the first ten minutes, which saw Northampton's pack dominant in the scrum and maul.

After three scrums in quick succession our defence was unable to stop Mark Hopley charging over from the base on the quarter-hour, with Everitt converting the night's first try, and just minutes later a clever switch inside by Grant Pointer set up Nick Greenhalgh.

A penalty by Rob Miller for a late hit on Catterick upfield reduced the deficit to 17-3, and when Diggin messed up a catch near halfway, Oduoza pounced to carry forward and away captain Mark Wilson scored unchallenged from the 22. Miller added the conversion.

Our fly-half then sent over another penalty for pulling down at the lineout on the half hour.

The first half was probably 70-30 in Northampton's favour, and the hosts had dominated the set-piece apart from our lineouts, but the Falcons seemed to be getting themselves together later on and had something to take back out after the break.

Or not. The Wanderers dominated the second half from start to almost the finish, and the Falcons' discipline deserted them. A chip from ten metres out found Chris Mayor over the try-line but the referee had already given a penalty, and from the resulting lineout Sam Barker dived over for an unconverted score.

England's Six Nations tight-head Matt Thompson was replaced with Josh Stones after 48 minutes but it made little difference to our struggle, as soon after Northampton's bonus point was secured.

The greens made steady progress in the 22 through three advantages, and from a break by Long, John Brake was set up. Replacement fly-half Christian Lewis-Pratt added the extras.

Just before the hour the hosts' pack was held up on the right, but as the play came left from the scrum Greenhalgh broke through weak tackles from Catterick and Charlie Ingall for his second try.

Wilson then had to race back and dive on a kick into space on our 22 with Pointer bearing down and certain to score following any mistake.

At 34-13 down the Falcons' Mission Difficult became Mission Impossible ten minutes from time when Shaun English was sin-binned on our line. From the tap penalty Jon Vickers went over easily, although Lewis-Pratt's conversion hit the post.

With five minutes to go Northampton quickly moved left from a lineout and Mayor found Greenhalgh for his hat-trick in the corner, and the conversion completed the scoring.

Finally in injury time Newcastle made it upfield by hacking on a loose ball but replacement centre Fred Burdon was beaten to the touchdown by a defender.

With our reserves already suffering some heavy defeats in the A League this season this result probably does not matter too much, and after all the only team that has to win matches is the first team.

But the second half collapse after an encouraging first 40 is frankly alarming, and suggests the coaches are doing something fundamentally wrong.

There were positives though. Catterick performed well overall and Chris Pilgrim was always looking to supply quick ball while giving his opposite number some worrying moments. Gray showed a lot of speed and skill with the ball in hand and on this evidence would be worth a cup game later in the season. The lineout was decent too, despite other set-piece problems and a number of pull-downs by Northampton.

At one early scrum Thompson had the home front row in a tangle but pretty much every scrum after that went backwards from our point of view, whichever props were on. I've no opinion at the moment on whether this experiment with a player in his late 20s is worth continuing, but it's worth remembering that he will still play hooker for the first team so I might edge towards no.

Anyway, this is my last report before Christmas, so thanks for reading and Merry Christmas to you all!