

Leeds win mud fight



By Leipziger
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The Falcons ended 2009 as we started it – with a defeat as demoralising for fans as it was for the team. In front of almost 9,000 at Kingston Park but under a barrage of rain and on a pitch that looked like a mixture of mud and a little slow our boys never got to grips with either conditions or a combative Leeds side to suffer a third home league loss of the season.

We've probably had a better start to this season than 2008/09 but one win from six home league games is poor, and it's becoming quite crowded down at the bottom of the table, in which we sit seventh.

With Leeds being at the bottom of the Premiership hope was obviously high that we would end the year with a win, especially with first-choice props Jon Golding and Carl Hayman back in the team alongside Rob Vickerman. Gcobani Bobo moved to the wing after his first try last week, while for Leeds Andy "It's cold under these posts" Gomarsall was the most recognisable name.

Leeds seemed to have decided we were weak under the high ball and both Bobo and Alex Tait were tested early on, but didn't spill any and Tait and Charlie Amesbury made a few runs forward. With Bobo often involved in the play too Filippo Levi, having one of his quieter games I thought, was often found on the right wing.

Jimmy Gopperth missed his first kick at goal but then scored a penalty to put us ahead early on, before Ceiron Thomas equalised. On the soggy pitch neither side put on a lot of fast running rugby, although Vickerman missed two men on the outside on the right and a kick to the far left from Tane Tu'ipulotu bounced into touch before Amesbury could get to it.

Gopperth and Thomas kicked further penalties and then after our third penalty, everyone (probably jokingly) expected referee David Rose to give Leeds a penalty as soon as they attacked. Incredibly, he did, and pointed to the posts almost as soon as he finished blowing the whistle. Replacement Joe Ford levelled the scores again at 9-9.

A couple of minutes before half-time Leeds attacked our line, the pack moving forward several times as the Falcons seemed reluctant to challenge for the ball, and finally as Tu'ipulotu argued with the referee on the line Alfie To'oala crashed through him to score a try that Ford converted.

9-16 down at the break, and with little prospect of scoring ourselves, we could at least think that we might get a better second half for once.

Gopperth kicked a penalty early on, but that was the last those in the South Stand saw of the Falcons for a while as we struggled to get past Leeds's pick-and-drive plan, Gomarsall slowing the game down and marshalling the forwards well. Leeds missed a chance to regain a seven-point advantage as the touch-judge twins ruled a penalty went wide, and finally with ten minutes left we managed to gain a foothold in their half.

Henry Paul, who had bent the rules around the breakdown all afternoon, knocked over Tu'ipulotu as the man of the match chased a kick in the 22 and was sin-binned, and the crowd bayed for the Falcons to keep playing and look for a try. Gopperth knocked over the kick, taking the deficit to one point.

As always seemed to happen, the losing team attacked in the late stages, now reinforced with Mark Sorenson, Will Welch and Hall Charlton, but we were unable to get good ball consistently and at one point Charlton took probably a minute to get the ball out as Gopperth lined up the drop-goal. Seeing he didn't have room to kick in the end, the fly-half ran the ball but we still couldn't get close enough to the line.

Following two minutes of injury time (well, after the clock hit zero) we finally dropped the ball in front of goal and though it went backwards, Leeds won possession and kicked it out to send their players and probably fans too wild. I now see why – they wouldn't have known Bath won and so they could've been off the bottom of the table.

Plenty has been said about the game so I won't dwell on it – people wanting to give up their season tickets before January says it all about how poor we have been at home so far this season.

And so there it is for another year, a better one than 2008 no doubt but there is still much work to be done, initially to make sure we don't get pulled down into the relegation battle. Wasps away it might be next week but a win would still be very useful.

Then it's Gloucester, when we hope to start another six-match winning run as last season and with any luck a lot of the 8,766 at KP yesterday will be back. Maybe.