

Hookers party but Falcons lose



Hat-trick

By Leipziger
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A hat-trick by Alex Walker and a bonus point try from his replacement Rob Vickers were incidentals as Newcastle Falcons (as it sounded in Welsh) lost on their first visit to the Cardiff City Stadium yesterday.

Ahead of the far more important meeting at Kingston Park in April, Cardiff kept their hopes of an LV= Cup semi-final place alive with a 45-24 win.

Not that yesterday will have any bearing on that game. Both Steve Bates and David Young used this match as an opportunity to share game time around their squads, and Chris Pilgrim, Michael Tait and Grant Shiells made their first starts for the Falcons, although Tait lasted less than a quarter of an hour. For Cardiff, Lions Tom Shanklin and Dafydd James, as well as Aussie back Sam Norton-Knight, were some of the more familiar names.

Cardiff opened the scoring with a penalty by Dai Flanagan after Tom Catterick held on in a tackle but from a penalty lineout Alex Walker went over in a maul to give us the lead, although Rob Miller couldn't convert.

Newcastle competed well in the first half and Mark Sorenson and Danny Williams both threatened when chasing kicks. Our scrum also held up well despite the inexperience of our props.

However, from a lineout on the left Cardiff spread across the pitch and Norton-Knight cut through for a converted try, to which Flanagan added another penalty.

After a third away lineout jumper was pulled down the referee finally lost patience and Scott Morgan was sin-binned on the half-hour. Within a few minutes Miller sent another kickable penalty to the corner, exposing our possibly-sensible game plan, and Walker peeled off the maul to dive over for a second try. Miller's conversion got us to within one point of the hosts.

Unfortunately Flanagan's third penalty increased the deficit to 16-12 at half-time, but if the Falcons had kicked for goal we could easily have been ahead.

At the break Alex Gray replaced Will Welch for his senior debut and he made some powerful runs and good tackles in the second half. I for one really like the look of this kid.

Unfortunately Ed Williamson was sin-binned early in the second half and Cardiff soon scored their second try on the left through Mamma Molitika, Flanagan hitting the conversion.

The home side began to dominate now through some flowing back play, although Newcastle's defensive strength kept the score reasonable. That was until the hour mark when, seconds after he had come onto the pitch, Rob Vickers received a yellow card.

Cardiff looked to have scored but after the referee tried in vain to have a TV referee check if they had scored, a five-metre scrum fed Richard Mustoe to take the score out of our reach.

Ironically it was while Vickers was off that we had our first attack of the second half and Walker, now back on the pitch, was driven over for a hat-trick try. However Norton-Knight secured the Blues' bonus point almost immediately.

Replacement Ceri Sweeney picked up a hospital pass from Miller intended for Pete Browne on halfway and coasted through under the posts for the fifth try five minutes from the end, and easily converted himself, and with the Falcons finally putting a spell of pressure together in the second 40 Vickers found himself at the bottom of a maul over the line and gave us an almost-meaningless bonus point.

Ben White completed the scoring on full-time, and despite the referee apparently wanting to keep the game going as long as possible on the freezing Welsh afternoon, the full-time whistle denied them 50.

The 45-21 win keeps Cardiff in the hunt for a semi-final place, though they may need a favour from us against Wasps on Sunday.

We were already out of the competition before this game so on the face of it the result doesn't matter a great deal, though winning is never a bad thing and conceding six tries won't do morale any good. It was a useful experience for fringe players, and Grant Shiells, Pete Browne and Alex Gray performed well. Tom Catterick missed some tackles but he was far from the only one and he was good in attack and under the high ball. Gcobani Bobo also continued his recent good form.

Another positive is that we are no longer the only team in the LW Friendly Cup on zero points!

Kind-of on that note, as I look at the tournament stats in the programme, I notice that the semis and final could go to a penalty shootout. There's something possibly to look forward to.