

GLOUCESTERSHIRE ECHO

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VICTORY DESPITE A POOR DISPLAY

CHERRY AND WHITES KEEP UP WINNING START

BUT ARE LESS THAN CONVINCING

GLOUCESTER 23 LONDON IRISH 16

The less than convincing reality of Gloucester's start to the Premiership goes beyond the simple balance sheet of two performances, two victories and eight points.

Not even the home comforts of Kingsholm could disguise what was generally a poor performance, hindered greatly by the skidpan conditions following a torrential downpour but also a nagging inconsistency.

Gloucester will thank their hustling abilities against a supremely efficient London Irish effort that ensured there was no mishap, but they will have to be markedly better to avoid something seriously nasty at Northampton next week.

They won without playing well – a useful talent to have at the start of the season in anyone's book – but they looked fitful and frustrated at a lack of cohesion.

London Irish were everything we know they can be and more.

In Ryan Strudwick, their underrated line-out tactician and his partner in crime Bob Casey, they possess one of the sharpest set-pieces in the business and defended against the Gloucester throw magnificently to deny the home side a meaningful platform.

They are also arch scrappers at the breakdown, contest the ball fiercely on the floor and made life as difficult for Gloucester as humanly possible.

Although they struggled in the first-half scrummages, an area where Gloucester dominated, there are added dimensions to them this year which suggest they may well be capable of snatching the odd away victory.

Mike Catt still possesses one of the sharpest footballing brains in an increasingly claustrophobic midfield. Scott Staniforth is big, physical and wonderfully gifted on the wing and Paul Sackey is capable of creating tries from nothing.

It is a package that threatened, but could not quite deliver victory.

Staniforth was at the heart of a swift and clinical move that created the first score after 10 minutes.

Kieron Dawson tapped down from a line-out on the halfway line. Barry Everitt angled a high and accurate cross-field kick and Staniforth, who had already slalomed around Marcel Garvey, took a brilliant catch before unloading an even better pass for Geoff Appleford to score past Jon Goodridge.

It put the Irish 10-0 up, following a third minute penalty after James Forrester paid the price for lingering offside, before a downpour of Biblical proportions took the steam from their sails.

As disruptions go, it was crucial and the game never recovered. Ball was lost in contact, possession was traded too frequently and neither team established a credible pattern in the slip and slide.

Requiring a foothold in the match, Gloucester found their way into the contest from a line-out – a significant achievement considering it was at best average and at worst an increasing jumble of alterations and manoeuvres.

The catch was taken by Adam Balding – the third time lucky [for] the blindside flanker after the two previous throws to him had squirmed free – and Olivier Azam, the hooker, was driven over for the score.

The try was crucial but it did not signal an all-out upturn in fortunes. Gloucester always had a semblance of control but lost their way because of individual mistakes at crucial times.

But another wonky throw close to the line – Azam’s delivery was intended for Alex Brown but found its way through to Forrester – Gloucester scored again after 24 minutes. The number eight was quick enough to catch and worked hard to deliver an exceptional pass under pressure for Jake Boer to score.

Henry Paul’s conversion left Gloucester only a point behind at 13-12 down at half-time and although it was a continued struggle, they kept Irish at bay in the second half.

For that they can thank a workaholic effort from Boer and a superlative tackling performance from Brown, the lock forward making a record-breaking 82nd consecutive top-flight appearance. Roche, Phil Murphy and Staniforth all felt the force of his napalming techniques at various intervals in the wide open spaces.

Staniforth was the one who really felt it – Brown arrowing into his space and slicing him in half at waist-height in the second half – a serious bit of business from one of the best second row defenders in the country.

Considering his usual area of expertise was not an area of beauty, Brown made his presence felt elsewhere as Gloucester’s forwards, warming to their task, got down and dirty.

Andy Hazell, a replacement for Forrester, was equally as thirsty to cause havoc with his pace and unsettling tackle power, while props Gary Powell and Terry Sigley both have a bit of dog about them and Gloucester went ahead for the first time after 44 minutes, with a Paul penalty that finally hinted the tide had turned.

But they were still fragmented. An Andy Gomarsall break and a surge from Powell raised the temperature and allowed Paul another penalty chance that made it 18-13. However, it was not until the Irish were sucked in by a Fortey-Gomarsall one-two from the front of a line-out that the game was safe.

Fortey probably doubled his career yardage with a sizeable break from the halfway line, and after clever running from Paul and Terry Fanolua – Gloucester’s most effective back – James Simpson-Daniel sent a lovely pass into the arms of the waiting Hazell who scored with serious delight.

GLOUCESTER: J. Goodridge; M. Garvey, T. Fanolua, H. Paul, J. Simpson-Daniel; D. McRae, A. Gomarsall; T. Sigley (N. Wood 73), O. Azam (C. Fortey 58), G. Powell, P. Buxton, A. Brown, A. Balding (A. Eustace 70), J. Boer (c), J. Forrester (A. Hazell 40).

Other Reprs.: S. Emms, A. Page, J. Bailey.

LONDON IRISH: D. Armitage; P. Sackey, G. Appleford, M. Catt, S. Staniforth; B. Everitt (M. Mapletoft 68), D. Edwards (P. Hodgson 53); N. Hatley (P. Durant 60), A. Flavin (R. Russell 52), R. Hardwick, R. Strudwick (c), B. Casey, P. Gustard (N. Kennedy (58), K. Dawson (P. Murphy 40), K. Roche.

Other Rep.: N. Mordt.

REFEREE: D. PEARSON (RFU).

ATTENDANCE: 11,265

STAR MAN: Alex Brown was tackle-hungry on the day he broke the Premiership appearance record but skipper JAKE BOER drove Gloucester forward with his workrate and a crucial try.

TIMELINE.

THREE MINUTES: Barry Everitt penalty after James Forrester off-side.
Gloucester 0, London Irish 3

EIGHT MINUTES: Geoff Appleford try, converted by Everitt.
Gloucester 0, London Irish 10

14 MINUTES: Olivier Azam try from line-out. Henry Paul missed conversion.
Gloucester 5, London Irish 10

21 MINUTES: Everitt penalty.
Gloucester 5, London Irish 13

24 MINUTES: Jake Boer try; Paul conversion.
Gloucester 12, London Irish 13

29 MINUTES: Terry Sigley and Rob Hardwick are sinbinned.

44 MINUTES: Paul penalty.
Gloucester 15, London Irish 13

55 MINUTES: Paul penalty.
Gloucester 18, London Irish 13

72 MINUTES: Mark Mapletoft penalty for Irish.
Gloucester 18, London Irish 16

78 MINUTES: Lovely try scored by Andy Hazell. Paul misses conversion.
Gloucester 23, London Irish 16.

JC