

GLOUCESTERSHIRE ECHO

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 20, 2004

SINBAD SHOWS HIS ALL-ROUND GAME AT SAINTS

COHESIVE GLOUCESTER SINK NORTHAMPTON

AT FRANKLIN'S GARDENS

NORTHAMPTON 12 GLOUCESTER 18

If people believe James Simpson-Daniel is too flaky for the increasingly physical demands of Test match rugby, more fool them.

Certainly Sir Clive Woodward believed it was in England's best interests to jettison one of the most creative attacking threats in the country because of a missed tackle or two during a summer of hard labour Down Under.

But the man who sounds like an entire back division, can often play like one. Indeed, he can multi-task in the same way Ben Cohen does – apart from trampling over or through defenders in wide open spaces – but completes footballing feats of such daring Cohen would not contemplate in a month of Sundays.

The difference in their individual performances at Franklin's Gardens was almost stratospheric on Saturday, but it was a moment of outstanding Simpson-Daniel defence that caught the eye and summed up a Gloucester performance of such control, discipline and variety Northampton did not have the foggiest idea how to match.

As he powered through and lifted the four-square winger John Rudd off his feet and almost into the middle of next week with the sort of waist-high bone-jarrer usually associated with his mates up front, the Gloucester bench rose in fist-clenched euphoria.

It did not win the match on its own, but as a single statement of intent, it was a mighty offering from Gloucester's favourite human hyphen and went some way to explaining why Northampton had no answer to their organisational subtleties, destructive defence and clinical gameplan. This was a Gloucester victory that suggested they are becoming as tough in the top four inches as they have been in the bottom six foot.

Not only did they match Northampton's abrasive physical approach – from Simpson-Daniel right through to the terrific Terry Sigley, the monumental Alex Brown and the rest – but they so comprehensively out-thought them that Duncan McRae was able to conduct a minor master class of control behind his forwards.

The Australian might look like a bantamweight, but his was a heavyweight contribution of high-class positional kicking and clear thinking that strangled Northampton to death.

He never appears to give a tinker's cuss about what people think of his own performance, but it would not be stretching the bounds of possibility to suggest this was his most effective display in a Gloucester shirt.

In a tough, no-hold-barred exercise of thud and more thud, thoroughly dominated by two packs of forwards, Gloucester possessed the greater threat and sharper brain-power.

It was some victory when you consider Sigley was playing for Pertemps Bees last year, his other prop, the equally impressive Nick Wood, has not featured in a full game since England Under-21 duty last season and Peter Buxton was in only his second transitional game at lock.

But they made a real mess of Steve Thompson's fallibility at the line-out, where Brown and James Forrester excelled, and kept the ball away from the hunter-gatherers in a Saints back row containing Corne Krige and Andrew Blowers, two of the best tacklers in the business.

Their first try came at the end of an opening quarter they dominated and it was a beauty. Generally they played through short phases to ensure maximum control but Terry Fanolua found Marcel Garvey sniping away to the right past Mark Tucker 22 metres out.

When possession came left, Henry Paul used Brown as the decoy runner and sent Sigley barrelling through the middle and he found the typically combustible Olivier Azam on his shoulder for the try.

Gloucester dominated thereafter with McRae running the show to great effect alongside a terrific display from Andy Gomarsall at scrum half.

Where Gloucester were organised, Northampton lacked pattern. Where Gloucester successfully married their physical discipline to a thoroughly potent attacking force, Northampton were so short of ideas it was almost criminal. As an exercise of being smart, the Saints were pretty clueless.

McRae kept them guessing, kicking to expose an out-of-position Cohen or Bruce Reihana or sending Fanolua and Henry Paul into midfield action.

They led 13-6 at half-time, McRae adding a drop-goal to a penalty from Paul and their composure showed no sign of ending after the interval as their forward sharks controlled the murky waters up front.

Indeed, they had enough control to have won the game before they did and their only sticky moment came when Forrester was sinbinned for killing the ball as Shane Drahm added two more penalties to his first-half pair.

McRae pulled Reihana – one of the most dangerous broken field runners in the Premiership – out of position throughout, but in the last 15 minutes, Gloucester had to weather a fierce onslaught inspired by the full-back.

But they made such a mess of Northampton at the tackle area, at least one more opportunity would present itself from a turnover and, when it did, Garvey grabbed it.

He set off after McRae's angled belt, steaming past an asleep Cohen and an equally dozy Thompson to skid down on to the ball and score. The try was awarded via the video referee and completed an outstanding victory that suggests this Cherry and White mix is coming together.

MATCH FACTS

NORTHAMPTON: B. Reihana; J. Rudd, M. Tucker, M. Stcherbina, B. Cohen; P. Grayson (S. Drahm 12), J. Howard; T. Smith, S. Thompson, R. Kempson, S. Boome, D. Browne (M. Lord 58), A. Blowers (D. Fox 58), C. Krige (capt.), G. Seely.

Other reps.: D. Richmond, C. Budgen, B. Jones, W. Human.

GLOUCESTER: J. Goodridge; M. Garvey, T. Fanolua, H. Paul, J. Simpson-Daniel; D. McRae, A. Gomarsall; N. Wood, O. Azam (C. Fortey 53), T. Sigley, P. Buxton, A. Brown, J. Boer (capt.), A. Hazell (A. Balding 53), J. Forrester.

Other reps.: S. Emms, A. Eustace, A. Page, N. Mauger, J. Bailey.

REFEREE: S. Lander (RFU).

ATTENDANCE: 12,093

STAR MAN: There were outstanding performances all over the field against the Saints, but DUNCAN MCRAE'S expert control, tactical awareness and position kicking were superb.

TIMELINE:

TWO MINUTES: Robbie Kempson brings down maul, Henry Paul kicks the penalty.

Northampton 0, Gloucester 3

19 MINUTES: Gloucester stand up in the scrum, Shane Drahm kicks the penalty.

Northampton 3, Gloucester 3

23 MINUTES: Gloucester score first try when Terry Sigley's run is finished off by Olivier Azam. Paul converts.

Northampton 3, Gloucester 10

33 MINUTES: Duncan McRae drops a goal.

Northampton 3, Gloucester 13

38 MINUTES: Drahm penalty.

Northampton 6, Gloucester 13

46 MINUTES: Drahm penalty.

Northampton 9, Gloucester 13

66 MINUTES: Drahm penalty.

Northampton 12, Gloucester 13

80 MINUTES: McRae's kick is chased by Marcel Garvey who beats Ben Cohen and Steve Thompson to slide in and score. Paul's conversion hits the post.

Northampton 12, Gloucester 18

JC