

THE CITIZEN

MONDAY, OCTOBER 25, 2004

GLOUCESTER WRAP UP A WIN GIFT FOR STADE CHERRY AND WHITES PAY PRICE FOR LOSING HEADS IN MANIC THIRD QUARTER

STADE FRANCAIS 39 GLOUCESTER 31

The margins between success and failure at the summit of Europe's mountain can be about as narrow as a dingy Paris back street.

Just ask the luxuriously gifted Clement Poitrenaud, the Toulouse magician, about the consequences of self-induced calamity.

He was left watching in jaw-dropping helplessness when Rob Howley chased down his own little roller that hugged the Twickenham touchline to steal the winning try in last year's Heineken Cup final.

Toulouse, by common agreement the real deal last season and substantially the more incisive team when the silver was handed out, were smithereened by Wasps' unstoppable juggernaut, largely thanks to one moment of extraordinary generosity.

Gloucester will know exactly how Poitrenaud and his chums feel. For a good deal of this thrilling contest, they looked the genuine European article – forceful enough at the how's-your-father end of the game and seriously hot in the match-winning department – and yet they came away with nothing, zilch, zero, despite scoring three tries and 31 points in this unforgiving French suburb.

In a crazy 20-minute spell midway through the third quarter, Gloucester undid all their good work with a stream of self-induced mayhem that turned the match on its head and indicated there are still plenty of bridges they need to cross on the way to Heineken Cup salvation.

They led 14-10 after 50 minutes when David Skrela, hardly the quickest or most incisive outside-half ever to play international rugby, nudged a bouncing time-bomb behind Gloucester's defensive line.

A shoal of Cherry and White defenders appeared capable of defusing the damage but left the mopping up job to Jon Goodridge, who was forced to clear with his wrong foot five metres from the line.

There had been plenty of forewarning about the mastery of Stade's driving line-out, particularly with David Auradou and Mike James in insultingly domineering form at the set-piece and from the drive, and the monstrous Sylvain Marconnet burgled his way over to score.

If that wasn't enough, Gloucester then coughed up another piece of primary possession seven minutes later when Henry Paul could not hold a sloppy pass from Duncan McRae beneath the shadow of their own posts. Three phases later and the ants-in-his-pants Agustin Pichot darted between two marksmen to score.

And there was more to come.

When Paul was harshly adjudged to have cut Mirco Bergamasco in half with a tackle that was deemed illegal, another specialist short-range line-out manoeuvre created a second try for Marconnet. It was like taking candy off kids.

When Bergamasco himself kicked through a thicket of defenders with 10 minutes remaining to score to the right of the posts, Gloucester's four-point lead had evaporated to a 39-17 catastrophe in about as much time as it takes to say Christo Bezuidenhout.

It is not over-egging the pudding to suggest that they would have disappeared down the Heineken Cup U-bend after the first weekend of competition had the margin of victory remained so distant because they faced a mountainous recovery job at home.

They will certainly kick themselves all the way back to Kingsholm for letting this one go because it was there for the winning, but will take heart from their salvation job in the last 10 minutes which resulted in two brilliant tries for the sensational James Simpson-Daniel.

But they have been gift-wrapping points to opponents in the Premiership and while they may escape relatively unscathed in those surroundings, Europe is a whole different story.

There will have to come a time when enough is enough because the mix is almost there. They are physical, switched on, disciplined and threatening but yet commit crimes at crucial times.

Even after they had created a lovely opening try when the aforementioned Simpson-Daniel cut a pass to the ever-industrious Olivier Azam bursting up the middle before James Forrester streaked away to the line, Gloucester successfully cut their own throats.

From the re-start, Andy Gomarsall and Marcel Garvey set in motion an attack of sublime skill and adventure that resulted in Terry Fanolua sending Simpson-Daniel slaloming around two defenders from his own 22 and into vast open green space inside Stade territory.

With Christophe Dominici sprinting across to cover, Simpson-Daniel opted to go inside to the three-man overlap attacking the posts. The ball was too far ahead of McRea but both Fanolua and Goodridge dropped the golden egg and a certain seven-pointer was kissed goodbye.

It was too early to suggest it would have won the game but Gloucester would have been 15-3 to the good and in serious control. But on such small margins do games change and five minutes later, from a line-out of all things, Pichot nipped low and hard beneath the bodies to score his first try.

Gloucester dominated the first period and should have been further ahead with the wind at their backs and an ocean of solid field position supplied by some accurate kicking between Gomarsall, McRae and Paul.

They were also robust enough in the scrums and dangerous when driving possession but spurned too many opportunities and the crocs in the Stade pack ruled the waters after the break.

When the avalanche of generosity finally ended, there was still time for Simpson-Daniel to take Paul's pass on his opposite wing to score in the corner before Nathan Mauger, making his first serious contribution in a Gloucester shirt, delivered a lovely ball to send Simpson-Daniel on the outside of his man.

The watching England coach Andy Robinson would surely have loved it to bits because after Simpson-Daniel got away from Dominici, his leg power and pace took him to the line for the try.

On another day he may have had a hat-trick, but on another day Gloucester may have been celebrating four away points in the Heineken Cup, but that will have to wait.

STADE FRANCAIS: C. Dominici; J. Arias, S. Glas, M. Bergamasco, N. Bergamasco; D. Skrela, A. Pichot (J. Fillol 74), R. Roncero (P. Lemoine 47), M. Blin, S. Marconnet (R. Roncero 72), D. Auradou (capt.), M. James (O. Brouzet 74), R. Jechoux (C. Moni 65), P. Rabadan, S. Sowerby.

GLOUCESTER: J. Goodridge (N. Mauger 70); M. Garvey, T. Fanolua, H. Paul, J. Simpson-Daniel; D. McRae, A. Gomarsall; C. Bezuidenhout (T. Sigley 53), O. Azam (C. Fortey 55), P. Vickery (G. Powell 64), A. Eustace (P. Buxton 55), A. Brown, J. Boer (capt.), A. Hazell (A. Balding 69), J. Forrester.

REFEREE: A. Rolland (Ire).

ATTENDANCE: 10,000

TIMELINE

10 MINUTES: David Skrela drop-goal.
Stade Francais 3, Gloucester 0

12 MINUTES: Henry Paul penalty.
Stade Francais 3, Gloucester 3

22 MINUTES: James Forrester try. Paul missed conversion.
Stade Francais 3, Gloucester 8

29 MINUTES: Agustin Pichot try, Skrela conversion.
Stade Francais 10, Gloucester 8

35 MINUTES: Paul penalty.
Stade Francais 10, Gloucester 11

45 MINUTES: Paul penalty.
Stade Francais 10, Gloucester 14

50 MINUTES: Sylvain Marconnet try. Skrela missed conversion.
Stade Francais 15, Gloucester 14

52 MINUTES: Skrela penalty.
Stade Francais 18, Gloucester 14

57 MINUTES: Pichot try, Skrela conversion.
Stade Francais 25, Gloucester 14

62 MINUTES: Paul penalty.
Stade Francais 25, Gloucester 17

67 MINUTES: Marconnet try, Skrela conversion.
Stade Francais 32, Gloucester 17

70 MINUTES: Mirco Bergamasco try, Skrela conversion.
Stade Francais 39, Gloucester 17

72 MINUTES: James Simpson-Daniel try, Paul conversion.
Stade Francais 39, Gloucester 24

78 MINUTES: Simpson-Daniel try, Paul missed conversion[*sic*].
Stade Francais 39, Gloucester 31

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