

THE CITIZEN

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 8, 2004

GLOUCESTER FORCED TO DEFEND FOR THEIR LIVES

JOHNSON PROVES THE DIFFERENCE IN BRUISING
PREMIERSHIP ENCOUNTER

LEICESTER 28 GLOUCESTER 13

Martin Johnson, by common consent one of the meanest and moodiest wolves in English rugby, is renowned as the mother and father of all in-your-face forward dominators.

He has made a living by tearing apart opposing line-outs, delivering eye-balling threats to opponents and administering doses of summary justice on the hoof that means he possesses outstanding knowledge of the Rugby Football Union disciplinary system.

It is safe to say Johnson has accumulated a touch of previous down the years, but it is doubtful if even he has played with such freedom as he did on Saturday.

He has always figured in one of the downright nastiest packs of forwards in the Premiership – a date down a dark alley of Johnson's choosing is almost preferable to an afternoon's hard labour at Welford Road – and this was a slugfest of almost mythical proportions.

But when he was not causing Gloucester all sorts of grief in the line-out, breaking them up on the floor or talking to the referee, he was delivering scoring passes, appearing in wide open spaces like a sprightly three-quarter and generally having a damn fine time of it.

Already with a face only a mother could love, Johnson is assured of his place in rugby's gargoyle hall-of-fame and now, bless him, he has the scar to match.

After requiring 10 stitches to his forehead, the Leicester skipper returned to oversee a thoroughly dominant and deserving home victory in which both teams beat each other black and blue. On this evidence, whatever these guys earn, it simply is not enough.

John Wells, the Leicester coach, could not prevent a little laugh at his skipper's misfortune.

"He has gone through his entire career relatively unscathed but now he has a great scar to go with the bumps," he said.

"The stitches opened up and now it's even bigger, he looks a mess – but people like him make a difference – I thought it was a great performance."

But Johnson was not the only one to impress. Julian White, regarded as the Premiership's leading power-scrummager, was excellent, Martin Corry, built for such large public disturbances, was a no-nonsense nuisance throughout and hooker James Buckland had a stormer.

Throw into the mix the Tuilagi brothers – Henry and two-try Alex – not to mention the great bull of a midfielder Seru Rabeni, and it is easy to appreciate the size of the task facing a Gloucester side short of half-backs Andy Gomarsall and Duncan McRae, lock Alex Brown, and wing James Simpson-Daniel.

But they gave it one hell of a go – Johnson's head told you that much – and in Andy Hazell, a tearaway loosie who enhanced his England claims by playing a blinder, Mark Cornwell, Pete Buxton, Jake Boer and the front row, Gloucester made it a distinctly sweaty afternoon for the home side.

Hazell, scrum-capped and all over the place, was terrific. At one stage, he raced back to fell Johnson with a seismic tackle, leapt to his feet, returned to his side and ripped the ball clear from the former England skipper.

He comfortably out-shone Lewis Moody in the number seven stakes and he will learn his red rose fate today.

Gloucester can be rightly proud of their efforts but with a novice half-back pairing of Alex Page and Brad Davies, who both performed manfully against a never-ending wave of home pressure, an away victory was always unlikely.

Page, forced to forage for almost everything, was never guaranteed quick ball as Leicester got themselves all over possession and Davies had to contend with a barnstorming midfield that made his life a misery with the Tigers' ability to hunt right on the gain-line.

That Gloucester were still in the game at half-time was nothing short of a miracle given the amount of pressure they weathered.

Despite an excellent Kingsholm line-out, the Tigers cancelled out Henry Paul's third minute penalty with a try that should have been prevented. Andy Goode's flat pass allowed Rabeni to smuggle away from Paul, through a gap and past Jon Goodridge and James Bailey for the try from 40 metres.

It is rare for Gloucester to concede tries from first phase ball and they spent the rest of the half tackling themselves into oblivion as Johnson and Co. cranked up the pressure in the steam room.

Gloucester kept them at bay and even nicked another Paul penalty before the break to trail 10-6, but Welford Road is not a place to defend for your lives.

At times, they drove the ball well and were as competitive as humanly possible up front, but Leicester took their lead out to 18-6 in the third quarter. Johnson was involved twice, first in his usual sphere of expertise when he stole possession away from a line-out on Gloucester's throw.

Henry Tuilagi thundered up the middle and with the Cherry and White defence sucked close to the ball, Johnson, like all good second rows, appeared in midfield to send Alex Tuilagi racing in for the score. It broke the game open and forced Gloucester into a more expansive and risky pattern to get back into the match.

They needed something to stick – an overhead pass, a James Forrester break, a surge from Marcel Garvey – but when the winger came across from his flank, his attempted pass was taken by Alex Tuilagi, who beat Goodridge's attempted tap-tackle to score from good distance.

Leicester were 28-6 ahead and sensing the possibility of a bonus point but outstanding Gloucester defence prevented further intrusion.

And the visitors had the final say – Paul running onto a lovely angled grubber for Davies to score and convert.

LEICESTER TIGERS: S. Vesty; D. Hipkiss (A. Tuilagi 53), S. Rabeni, D. Gibson, T. Varndell; A. Goode, S. Bernard; D. Morris (G. Rowntree 61), J. Buckland (R. Cockerill 74), J. White, M. Johnson (capt.), B. Kay, H. Tuilagi (B. Deacon 65), L. Moody (N. Back 71), M. Corry.

GLOUCESTER: J. Goodridge; M. Garvey, T. Fanolua (N. Mauger 70), H. Paul, J. Bailey; B. Davies, A. Page; C. Bezuidenhout, C. Fortey, P. Vickery (G. Powell 78), A. Eustace, M. Cornwell (A. Balding 58), P. Buxton, A. Hazell (J. Forrester 53), J. Boer (capt.).

REFEREE: T. Spreadbury.

ATTENDANCE: 16,850

TIMELINE:

3 MINUTES: Henry Paul penalty.
Leicester 0, Gloucester 3

11 MINUTES: Seru Rabeni try, Andy Goode conversion.
Leicester 7, Gloucester 3

16 MINUTES: Goode penalty.
Leicester 10, Gloucester 3

39 MINUTES: Paul penalty.
Leicester 10, Gloucester 6

44 MINUTES: Goode penalty.
Leicester 13, Gloucester 6

56 MINUTES: Alex Tuilagi try.
Leicester 18, Gloucester 6

77 MINUTES: Goode penalty.
Leicester 21, Gloucester 6

80 MINUTES: Alex Tuilagi try, Good conversion.
Leicester 28, Gloucester 6

80 MINUTES (PLUS NINE): Paul try, Paul conversion.
Leicester 28, Gloucester 13

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