

THE CITIZEN

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 22, 2004

GLOUCESTER ARE SUNK BY SARACENS

A MEAGRE RETURN FOR IMPROVING GLOUCESTER

PATCHED-UP CHERRY AND WHITES EDGED OUT
BY A CLUELESS SARACENS SIDE

SARACENS 14 GLOUCESTER 9

In the last three weeks Gloucester have discovered more about themselves in a hat-trick of Premiership defeats than any number of victories could provide.

It has been a torrid examination of squad strength and inner determination. They have been ruthlessly exposed and bitterly analysed by Nigel Melville and Dean Ryan, but the signs of improvement were visible on a miserable afternoon at Vicarage Road yesterday.

Gloucester have an injury list so long it almost defies belief – the only two players eligible to turn out at this level who were not in the squad yesterday are Ryan Lamb, the outside-half with no Premiership experience and veteran prop, Andy Deacon.

And yet, with all the disruption, all the mend and make-do with 13 available, Gloucester's patched up team did enough to steal this shabby, drab contest that was split by only one try.

If they had possessed an ounce more attacking penetration and control, they would surely have stolen a priceless victory against a Saracens team who were almost clueless, despite being at virtual full strength.

The forwards were once again superlative and should wear their medals of honour with pride because the effort was staggering, as it has been in more demanding environments against Leicester and Wasps.

Despite three defeats, Adam Balding has established himself as a thoroughly excellent number eight and ensured Hugh Vyvyan, a man of such celebrity he played for England last week, was virtually anonymous in the street battle up front.

Chris Fortey, a competitor who can get into trouble in a phone box on a bad day, is playing better than ever with a grown-up maturity and Adam Eustace, never anything less than totally committed, had his best game of the season.

Throw in Pete Buxton and James Forrester, who both operated out of their skins and out of position because of a late injury to Jake Boer, and it is easy to appreciate the size of the task facing Gloucester up front, and that is before you contemplate the virtual kindergarten behind the scrum in terms of experience.

The visitors were so stretched that when Gary Powell, Eustace and Buxton all received treatment for injuries at various stages in the second half, Melville and Ryan simply had no alternatives on the bench to use as replacements so they had to grin and bear it.

Despite the alterations, Gloucester dominated a far more celebrated pack of forwards. Even with Taine Randell, a man who has skippered the All Blacks, Vyvyan, the no-nonsense Cobus Visagie and Raphael Ibanez, the brilliant former French hooker in their ranks, Gloucester got the better of Saracens at scrum time and set about them with utter disregard in the loose.

What they needed was an early score to settle the nerves but despite the crash-bang routine of Terry Fanolua and a couple of surges from Marcel Garvey, Gloucester were forced to settle for only two Simon Amor penalties before the break.

It could have been better had Amor crept another of his three penalties over, but they were all on the edge of his range and in normal circumstances, with Henry Paul and Duncan McRae available, he is third choice kicker.

Saracens offered precisely nothing, zero, zilch in response of noteworthy attacking threat. Quite what they were trying to do was something of a mystery despite solid defence from Kevin Sorrell and they too were restricted to only a couple of Robbie Kydd penalties that tied the game up at half-time.

Rod Kafer, the head coach, will thank his lucky stars his side were not beaten by a virtual reserve string, but the decisive moment came immediately after the restart when they got a score ahead.

Ironically, Gloucester had spoiled a Saracens line-out but could not seal off possession and when it came back, Mark Bartholomeusz kicked deep beyond Garvey on the right.

Tevita Vaikona gathered and beat Garvey's tackle and managed to get the ball away in the offload. Despite the fact Nathan Mauger covered back to bring down Ben Johnston, he got his scoring pass away to Kydd who slid home in the corner.

The first try was always likely to be decisive and although they huffed and puffed, Gloucester lacked the precision and cutting edge to respond, despite mauling close to the line from a series of line-outs.

"After two horrible weeks, it was a lot better," said Kafer, obviously relieved. "We probably created one clear chance and converted it and yes, the defence was better too which was very important.

"To be really successful in the competition you have to be consistent. We are not that yet but hopefully we can build on this. We hope last week [against Harlequins] was a one-off issue."

Saracens travel to Leicester next week so the chances of them finding that consistency immediately is remote.

Gloucester will hope to have remedied a number of injuries by the time Sale come to Kingsholm on Friday. Although they know they should have won, a point was the minimum they deserved and is at least some reward for Balding, Eustace and Co.

They will be desperate to return to winning ways before the Heineken Cup looms into view in a fortnight, but this mini-international period is a savage drain on the clubs.

If Gloucester can win against the Sharks, they will look on the points gained in November with considerable pleasure, particularly after an afternoon that threatened much but delivered only a point, despite the effort.

SARACENS: R. Kydd; R. Haughton, B. Johnston, K. Sorrell, T. Vaikona; M. Bartholomeusz, M. Williams; K. Yates (N. Lloyd 73), R. Ibanez (M. Cairns 47), C. Visagie, K. Chesney (S. Raiwalui 55), I. Fullerton, T. Randell, A. Sanderson (B. Skirving 62), H. Vyvyan (capt.).

GLOUCESTER: J. Goodridge; M. Garvey, N. Mauger, T. Fanolua (capt.), J. Bailey (S. Kiole 61); S. Amor, A. Page; C. Bezuidenhout, C. Fortey, G. Powell, A. Eustace, M. Cornwell, J. Forrester, P. Buxton, A. Balding.

REFEREE: G. Ashton-Jones.

ATTENDANCE: 6,860

STAR MAN: Adam Balding.

TIMELINE:

SIX MINUTES: Simon Amor penalty miss.

12 MINUTES: Amor penalty.
Saracens 0, Gloucester 3

26 MINUTES: Robbie Kydd penalty.
Saracens 3, Gloucester 3

29 MINUTES: Amor missed penalty.

32 MINUTES: Amor missed penalty.

40 MINUTES: Amor penalty.
Saracens 3, Gloucester 6

40 MINUTES (plus 2): Kydd penalty.
Saracens 6, Gloucester 6

41 MINUTES: Kydd try.
Saracens 11, Gloucester 6

61 MINUTES: Amor penalty.
Saracens 11, Gloucester 9

63 MINUTES: Kydd penalty.
Saracens 14, Gloucester 9

JC