

THE CITIZEN

MONDAY, DECEMBER 6, 2004

GLOUCESTER FACING MASSIVE TEST IN CARDIFF

CHERRY AND WHITES HAVE TO IMPROVE BEFORE THEIR VISIT
TO WALES

GLOUCESTER 23 CARDIFF BLUES 19

There is no point beating about the bush, If Gloucester are anything less than significantly improved in both mind and body against Cardiff next weekend then their Heineken Cup dreams will be lying face down in the dust.

This was not a High Noon showdown but it was very nearly a death experience of unimaginable pain and embarrassment against a Blues without a brass farthing to call their own in terms of form, an injury list so long it defies all reasonable logic and two European Cup doses of how's-your-father against Ulster and Stade Francais that eliminated them from the competition before the meaningful stuff had even started.

And yet, with all the disruption and a hideous defeat against the Borders to their name, Cardiff reduced Gloucester to their component parts and came within an ace of snatching one of the most unlikely Heineken Cup results of all time.

They suffocated Gloucester's speedier bloodhounds up front, denied them any means of creativity and generally played the game how they wanted to – narrow, slowly and with plenty of commitment to capitalise on a stream of home-town mistakes.

By sucking Gloucester into a pitched battle of slugfest proportions, in conditions more suited to blind man's bluff, David Young's side hinted they may be more than capable of handing out another serious examination at the Arms Park in six days.

The most prominent protagonists – Martyn Williams and the brilliant Robert Sidoli – sweated buckets for the cause. Williams was a real thorn in Gloucester's side at the tackle area and Sidoli ensured the line-outs were one large public order issue.

Out of the side for much of the season, Sidoli played with real conviction and if he could build on this performance a red dragon recall is not out of the question because he was superb here.

Throw in the contribution of prop Tony Yapp, hooker Rhys Thomas and 20-year-old outside-half Lee Thomas, who had an absolute blinder after the first three minutes, and it is easy to understand Young's satisfaction at the effort of his charges.

"Maybe Gloucester underestimated us, I don't know, maybe they thought we would be pushovers, but we produced a huge challenge," he said. "I thought Sidoli was fantastic – nobody worked harder than Rob. He is the first on and last off the training field and I am delighted for him.

"These two games were not about qualification because the big thing was about performances. It was like Holby City last week, but the guys can be proud of their efforts. And at the end I thought we were unlucky not to win."

Perhaps, Gloucester were erratic and short on patience and ideas but they scored three good tries and will seriously hope this was an aberration in form.

They also navigated their way through a horrendous second period that ended with a scrum-half on the wing, reserve stand-off Brad Davies calling the shots at 10 and James Bailey in the firing line in place of Marcel Garvey.

Bodies lay scattered and battered all over the field and in the end Gloucester will be grateful of emerging with four points, despite the fact the first 10 minutes hinted at something far more damaging.

Nathan Mauger and the hard-hitting Adam Balding breathed life into a swift move and Henry Paul, of whom more later, sent Terry Fanolua kicking out of Thomas' tackle and in for a third-minute try.

But then it all ground to a halt. Considering they welcomed back the experienced trio of Andy Gomarsall, Andy Hazell and Paul, Gloucester failed to shift the pattern of the game and became more anxious when Paul missed three penalties that kept Cardiff within touching distance.

And when they became narrow, Cardiff plundered an equalising try of serious potency, the two Williams – Martyn and Rhys – exposed an outnumbered midfield and the hugely effective Tom Shanklin brushed away from Paul to score.

Cardiff continued to blast Gloucester out of their stride and even stole six points while down to 14 men, when number eight Kort Schubert was in the sin bin.

But their discipline was eventually to cost them and Gloucester rallied after the interval with a lovely try from Bailey – who slalomed round the cover following long passes from Paul and Mauger that exposed the Blues on the right.

It did not signal an immediate upturn in fortunes for the home side, who still trailed by a point two minutes into the final quarter.

However, when Shaun James was yellow-carded, Gloucester took their opportunity to secure the match.

Centre is one of the most difficult places to cover when a man down and it was a piece of Paul vision and Fanolua that cemented the points.

Paul chipped delicately over Cardiff's rushing defence and Fanolua, all aggression and pumping legs, gathered brilliantly to hold off the attentions of Rhys Williams to plunge over.

Cardiff thought there was a knock-on in the build-up to the try – an offence not seen by any official – and the score was awarded by the video referee.

It was enough to rescue four points that were disappearing into the Kingsholm mist.

Gloucester will have to be significantly better next weekend to keep alive their European qualification hopes.

GLOUCESTER: J. Goodridge (A. Page 59); M. Garvey (J. Bailey 19), N. Mauger, T. Fanolua, J. Simpson-Daniel (B. Davies 40); H. Paul, A. Gomarsall; C. Bezuidenhout, J. Parkes (R. Elloway 80), G. Powell, A. Eustace, P. Buxton (M. Cornwell 80), J. Boer (capt.), A. Hazell (J. Forrester 59), A. Balding.

CARDIFF: R. Williams: F. Tuilagi, S. James, T. Shanklin, C. Morgan; L. Thomas, D. Dewdney; J. Yapp (M. Jones 77), R. Thomas, G. Jenkins, D. Jones, R. Sidoli, N. Thomas (R. Sowden-Taylor 71), M. Williams (capt.), K. Schubert.

STAR MAN: Terry Fanolua

REFEREE: D. Courtney (Ire).

ATTENDANCE: 11,795

TIMELINE:

THREE MINUTES: Terry Fanolua try. Henry Paul conversion.
Gloucester 7, Cardiff 0

14 MINUTES: Lee Thomas penalty.
Gloucester 7, Cardiff 3

17 MINUTES: Tom Shanklin try. Thomas conversion.
Gloucester 7, Cardiff 10

23 MINUTES: Paul penalty.
Gloucester 10, Cardiff 10

35 MINUTES: Thomas penalty.
Gloucester 10, Cardiff 13

40 MINUTES: Thomas drop-goal.
Gloucester 10, Cardiff 16

46 MINUTES: James Bailey try.
Gloucester 15, Cardiff 16

51 MINUTES: Thomas penalty.
Gloucester 15, Cardiff 19

62 MINUTES: Paul penalty.
Gloucester 18, Cardiff 19

69 MINUTES: Fanolua try.
Gloucester 23, Cardiff 19

JC