

GLOUCESTERSHIRE ECHO

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STREETWISE TIGERS USE THEIR HEADS TO WIN

GLOUCESTER PAY HEAVY PRICE FOR FAILURE TO FINISH OFF
THEIR MANY CHANCES

GLOUCESTER 13 LEICESTER 28

Some things in rugby's orbit never seem to change. Harlequins are under achieving as the game's great under-achievers, Lawrence Dallaglio could talk his way out of trouble with a referee in three different languages, Gloucester are fair to middling and Leicester maintain their vice-like grip around the rest of the Zurich Premiership. Martin Johnson rarely, if ever, looks happy. But even beneath his dark and furrowed brow, the Tigers chief bovver boy must have been as pleased as punch at Kingsholm yesterday.

Leicester have made it their business over the years to win matches on minimal amounts of possession and a paucity of threatening field positions, relying almost solely on their ability to be as tough in the top three inches as they are in the bottom six feet to turn a sow's ear into a silk purse.

They were rapidly disappearing up their own nether regions after 10 minutes last night – as many points down and on the end of a Gloucester blitzkrieg that had already created two outstanding tries – before smuggling a critical victory that enhances their claims at the top of the table.

When they were not reducing the line-out to a large public order issue, making mincemeat of the home scrum, or scoring tries from virtually nothing, Leicester slowed the game to the pace they wanted, took on more liquid refreshment at every opportunity that would surely have defied the legendary drinking powers of George Best, stopped the game every other minute for a breather or treatment and even used a physiotherapist as a decoy runner.

Clever blokes these Tigers. In short, Johnson, Julian White, Neil Back and Co. played the game on their terms and it worked like an absolute dream. While they cherish their disruptive skills, powers of concentration and physical prowess, this was a victory dogged from the very depths.

White was terrific and gave Christo Bezuidenhout a monster hurry-up in the scrum, Ben Kay worked his socks off and the loose forward contingent tackled ferociously.

Away from the pack, Andy Goode prodded and probed and Ollie Smith produced a performance that smacked of real class and galvanised a Tigers performance that looked to be going nowhere.

Make no mistake, Gloucester could have won this match and had they possessed more finishing quality when it really counted, they would have done so because in the second half, only what appeared a magnetic field kept them from crossing the line.

But they failed to build on a start that shook Leicester to their foundations, roared on as they were by a level of home-town support licking their lips at the prospect of victory.

Gloucester's first try owed a good deal to Adam Balding's line break and Andy Hazell's foraging after Mefin Davies had found Andy Gomarsall with an over-the-top line-out routine.

Henry Paul, out of position at stand-off but tremendous in his workrate and endeavour, then rolled a delicate kick behind Leicester's defence for Nathan Mauger to score after three minutes.

Leicester barely had time to put down their water bottles before Terry Fanolua burst round the outside of the defence, fed Davies on the touchline and he somehow got the ball inside to Adam Eustace on the run to score eight minutes later.

Gloucester were fierce and confrontational, the energetic Eustace leading the charge, but a moment of brilliance by Smith clawed the Tigers back into the match.

Jon Goodridge won a good catch from a Goode punt but Leicester turned over possession from the ruck. Good sent Smith on a break that took him to the touchline but he somehow got his flicked pass into the hands of Geordan Murphy and he put Leon Lloyd in for the score.

Goode tied things up with a penalty before a line-out drive haemorrhaged Gloucester's forward momentum. Back got a pass away to Goode and in a dash of hands and feet, Lloyd's overhead flick sent Smith bursting away from Goodridge for Leicester's second try.

Good then dictated matters with the boot, earning acres of position and also churning over points – two penalties and a drop-goal as the screw turned.

And when he slid a kick into the base of the right post immediately after the interval, Daryl Gibson was sharp enough to react and touch down to take the game away from the hosts. All this without Martin Corry, the England number eight who dislocated his elbow 22 minutes into this supremely physical match.

He will certainly miss the Red Rose's trip to Cardiff on February 5 but it did nothing to deny Leicester momentum and they defended expertly in the final quarter to see the game out despite a host of glorious Gloucester chances. There's a chance Leicester may just throw everything at the Heineken Cup, but don't bet on it.

For Gloucester, a second home defeat of the season is a severe setback, rubbing out the value of an away victory already gained.

The bright spot was the return to action of Phil Vickery and Gloucester are certainly going to require his experience and expertise in the coming weeks.

GLOUCESTER: J. Goodridge; M. Garvey (J. Bailey 69), N. Mauger, T. Fanolua, S. Kiole; H. Paul, A. Gomarsall; C. Bezuidenhout (T. Sigley 66), M. Davies, P. Vickery, A. Eustace (P. Buxton 66), A. Brown, A. Hazell, J. Boer (capt.), A. Balding (J. Forrester 52).

LEICESTER: G. Murphy (S. Vesty 52); O. Smith, L. Lloyd, D. Gibson, T. Varndell; A. Goode (M. Cornwell 82), H. Ellis; D. Morris, G. Chuter (J. Buckland 30), J. White, M. Johnson (capt.), B. Kay, L. Moody, N. Back, M. Corry (W. Johnson 22).

STAR MAN: Henry Paul

REFEREE: D. Pearson (RFU)

ATTENDANCE: 13,000

TIMELINE:

THREE MINUTES: Nathan Mauger try.
Gloucester 5, Leicester 0

12 MINUTES: Adam Eustace try.
Gloucester 10, Leicester 0

15 MINUTES: Leon Lloyd try, Andy Goode conversion.
Gloucester 10, Leicester 7

19 MINUTES: Goode penalty.
Gloucester 10, Leicester 10

34 MINUTES: Goode penalty.
Gloucester 10, Leicester 13

39 MINUTES: Ollie Smith try.
Gloucester 10, Leicester 18

40 (plus 4) MINUTES: Good penalty.
Gloucester 10, Leicester 21

45 MINUTES: Henry Paul penalty.
Gloucester 13, Leicester 21

51 MINUTES: Daryl Gibson try, Goode conversion.
Gloucester 13, Leicester 28

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