

GLOUCESTERSHIRE ECHO

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COACH RYAN REMAINS UPBEAT ABOUT HEINEKEN BID – NOW IT'S TOUGH FOR GLOUCESTER

Gloucester face a huge test in their quest for a prized Heineken Cup quarter-final place.

Last night's 14-12 defeat in Ulster and Stade Francais' 35-16 win at home to Cardiff makes it very difficult for them to top pool six.

It now means Gloucester have got it all to do when they tackle French champions Stade Francais at Kingsholm tomorrow week.

The odds are stacked massively against Gloucester now winning their group and securing automatic quarter-final status.

For that to happen, they must beat Stade, score at least four tries, register at least three more than their opponents and also stop Stade from collecting a losing bonus point.

A best runners-up spot – there are two available – appears Gloucester's best hope, but even that scenario depends on them winning next week and other results on the final three days of group action working in their favour.

Gloucester coach Dean Ryan refuses to believe that their Heineken Cup dream is over for another season.

"We need five points next week, and I am sure that there will be some maths involved," he said.

"It happened to us in reverse against Munster two seasons ago, when they needed five points against us, so it can be done, and we have now got the opportunity next weekend."

Gloucester led 12-3 at half-time thanks to a Henry Paul penalty hat-trick and a Simon Amor drop goal in miserable conditions, but Ulster, roared on by an 11,500 crowd, hit back to steal the points through two late David Humphreys penalties after full-back Bryn Cunningham had scored the game's solitary try.

"It was a few silly mistakes that cost us in the end." said Ryan.

"It was a matter of being composed enough, and on a couple of occasions we weren't."

Gloucester rugby director Nigel Melville said: "Conditions played their part, but we did so much right in the game, but a couple of little mistakes cost us dear.

"We played the right game in those conditions, and it is so disappointing because we worked very hard.

"We gave away some cheap penalties, and they kicked the points."

Ulster have an outside chance of progressing, but that looks unlikely given they can only finish on a total of 17 points.

"Twelve-three down at half time, perhaps a couple of months ago, given our form at the time, I don't think we would have come back from that." said Ulster coach Mark McCall.

"But we stayed calm in the second half and picked up points at the right time.

"It was tiring and we had a lot of defending to do, but to win three games out of five in a group that also includes Stade Francais, Gloucester and Cardiff is not too bad."

POOL SIX

| | P | W | D | L | F | A | Pts. |
|----------------|---|---|---|---|-----|-----|------|
| Stade Francais | 5 | 4 | 0 | 1 | 152 | 90 | 19 |
| Gloucester | 5 | 3 | 0 | 2 | 144 | 101 | 14 |
| Ulster | 5 | 3 | 0 | 2 | 76 | 123 | 12 |
| Cardiff | 5 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 82 | 140 | 2 |

Last night's results,

Pool six: Ulster 14 Gloucester 12; Stade Francais 35 Cardiff 16;

Pool three: Glasgow 10 Toulouse 30.

Remaining pool six fixtures (Sunday, January 16): Gloucester v Stade Francais (3 pm); Cardiff v Ulster (3 pm).

JC