

# GLOUCESTERSHIRE ECHO

MONDAY, JANUARY 17, 2005

PROP PHIL'S BRUTAL VERDICT IS HARSH BUT FAIR

FARCICAL FIRST HALF LEAVES GLOUCESTER REELING AFTER  
EURO DISMEMBERMENT

GLOUCESTER 0 STADE FRANCAIS 27

Phil Vickery is a tight forward with an uncompromising approach to his rugby and an even more forthright use of the vernacular.

The almost family-friendly version of his post-match assessment of Gloucester's Heineken Cup dismemberment at the hands of an extremely efficient and exceptionally durable Stade Francais went something like this : "We were p\*\*\* poor. Excuses cannot be offered – they ran out a long time ago – but we are out of Europe, are 10 points off a relegation fight in the Premiership and not doing very well at the moment.

"I feel for everybody associated with the club. There were 13,000 supporters in the ground and that was our worst performance of the season. We let everybody down."

His actual diatribe contained any number of additional effs, but the message was penetratingly clear and starkly delivered.

Gloucester may have begun the day with a ray of qualification hope, albeit requiring the sort of miracle produced on seminal days in Limerick, but they ended it shredded and embarrassed.

It was always asking a great deal of the game-shaping abilities of Duncan McRea, who has been out of action for 10 weeks, loosie James Forrester, installed to break the contest on the back of the scrum, and James Simpson-Daniel to provide enough potency to win the match but it was a gamble that never even threatened to work.

They never got close to scoring a point, never mind engineering a victory that would have seen them through to the quarter-finals.

By cutting their throats in a first half performance of cringing ineptitude, the tie was dead well before the break. It was an anti-climax of such unimaginable horror that Stade barely had to pull off their sponsored tracksuits and raise the merest gallop to obtain victory.

Nigel Melville, Gloucester's increasingly under pressure director of rugby, admitted that the first half was the worst he had seen as a coach – and he has been dabbling around with this game for some time now – to emphasise the self-induced fallibility of his side.

The last time Gloucester failed to score at Kingsholm was against Bath on February 13 1993 – but that was almost a pleasure compared with this.

Where they go from here is only too painful to contemplate but the Powergen Cup tie against Bristol could well be their get-out clause to drag the season around.

Gloucester surrendered the initiative immediately from the kick-off when Adam Eustace dropped the ball and from there, they disappeared in a fog of confusion entirely of their own making.

Against the wind, the home side played the majority of their rugby in their third of the field with little control but an increasing amount of desperation and it led to a catalogue of mistakes that had Stade laughing all the way to the quarter-finals.

When they weren't dropping passes, their line-out disintegrated and they kicked so often that Juan Martin Hernandez and David Skrela ran the ball back at them with purpose and penetration to cause no end of damage.

The Parisians were powerful up front, well-marshalled by the excellent Agustin Pichot and Skrela and served superbly by Mauro Bergamasco, an open-side flanker with gun-dog instincts around the tackle area but the eye for a supporting role that made the jaw drop.

But even their combined talents had little to do with Stade's first try – an absolute sucker after 14 minutes.

Hernandez, a long-time Gloucester target, chipped behind Andy Gomarsall and Jon Goodridge and Christophe Dominici ran through to score with considerable comfort.

Five minutes later, Gomarsall's break initially gained ground but when Alex Brown was caught in Stade's defensive headlights, his offload was nabbed by the brilliant Stephane Glas, who hurtled beneath the posts to give the French side a 17-0 lead after 20 minutes.

By stamping their authority on the game so early and without field position, Stade made mincemeat of what should have been an afternoon of hard labour at Castle Grim.

When Gloucester did knit together an attacking move of any note, Terry Fanolua's fumble allowed Glas to stretch his legs the length of the field and although Marcel Garvey got back to make a terrific tackle, Julien Arias offered support and the brilliant Bergamasco swooped to score on the blindside for Stade's third try at the start of the second quarter.

Stade only required another try to render the rest of the contest meaningless and it is difficult to imagine that Kingsholm has ever been in a greater sense of shock and disbelief.

The fact Gloucester prevented Stade scoring in the second half will be of meagre comfort and only the powerful running of Fanolua and Adam Balding kept the French honest after the interval.

"I don't think we choked," said Melville. "People were probably trying too hard to do things in some respects – and made fools of themselves doing it.

"We gave them three tries, just gave them away, and you cannot do that."

Gloucester's last victory was back in December against a vastly altered Leicester side in the Powergen Cup.

That competition now offers an escape route but Bristol may just fancy their chances of causing more heartache next Saturday, and who could possibly blame them.

GLOUCESTER: J. Goodridge; M. Garvey, T. Fanolua, H. Paul, J. Simpson-Daniel; D. McRae, A. Gomarsall; C. Bezuidenhout (T. Sigley 58), J. Parkes, P. Vickery, A. Eustace (P. Buxton 58), A. Brown, J. Boer (capt.), A. Hazell (A. Balding 44), J. Forrester.

STADE FRANCAIS : J. Martin-Hernandez (O. Sarramea 74); J. Arias, S. Glas, B. Liebenberg, C. Dominici; D. Skrela (R. Poulain 61), A. Pichot (J. Fillol 68); R. Roncero (S. Marconnet 52), M. Blin (B. Kayser 76), P. de Villiers (R. Roncero 74), D. Auradou (capt.) (M. James 54), O. Brouzet, P. Rabadan, M. Bergamasco, S. Sowerby (R. Martin 58).

REFEREE : N. Williams (Wales).

Attendance : 13,000

STAR MAN : ?

TWO MINUTES : David Skrela penalty.  
Gloucester 0, Stade Francais 3.

14 MINUTES : Christophe Dominici try, Skrela conversion.  
Gloucester 0, Stade 10.

19 MINUTES : Stephane Glas try. Skrela conversion.  
Gloucester 0, Stade 17.

24 MINUTES : Mauro Bergamasco try. Skrela conversion.  
Gloucester 0, Stade 24.

35 MINUTES : Skrela penalty.  
Gloucester 0, Stade 27.

JC