

GLOUCESTERSHIRE ECHO

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DISMAL GLOUCESTER WELL BEATEN AT THE STOOP HARLEQUINS CRUSH THE SHAMBOLIC CHERRY AND WHITES TO BOOST HOPES

HARLEQUINS 38 GLOUCESTER 9

SHAMBOLIC. Without uttering a diatribe of expletives, that is probably the most appropriate way to describe Gloucester's offering at Harlequins.

Had you invited the uninitiated to the Stoop at 2pm on Saturday, there is no doubt who they would have picked out as the team embroiled in a relegation dogfight.

The Cherry and Whites unpicked their good work of the past two weekends by rolling over meekly against a Quins side who capped their recent upturn in form with a bonus point win to give them a fighting chance of dodging the drop.

Even without Phil Vickery, Mefin Davies, Andy Hazell and James Forrester due to international commitments, Gloucester's pack must still have been shell-shocked at the way they were outplayed in the set pieces, particularly after Quins hooker Ace Tiatia was given his marching orders for giving Terry Sigley a whack on the half-hour.

The line-outs were worse than a lottery with hooker James Parkes not enjoying the most productive of afternoons. And when Gloucester were driven back over their own line at the death for replacement James Hayter to score – the hooker who was dry-retching before the game after aggravating a chronic groin problem – it set the seal on a performance that was woefully bereft of any abrasiveness.

James Simpson-Daniel must have wished he held off his comeback from injury on an afternoon when none of the usual suspects enhanced their claims for a return to red rose colours.

Harlequins struck ahead with a penalty by fly-half Jeremy Staunton after Gloucester were penalised for going over the top when their defence was caught napping by a chip from flanker Nick Easter.

Full-back Tom Williams then almost ran on to Staunton's massive kick but full-back Jon Goodridge scrambled the ball into touch.

And it was Staunton who was the key to Quins' first try as his fine place kick meant Gloucester had a line-out metres from their own line.

It was superbly stolen by lock Simon Maling and when Staunton reclaimed possession, his burst committed a raft of defenders with the ball then spread to Williams, who dived over. Staunton missed the conversion.

The Cherry and Whites stemmed the tide on 12 minutes with a penalty by centre Henry Paul from 30 metres out.

A fragmented rolling maul from a line-out kept the pressure on and when Quins were penalised for coming in from the side and Paul slotted another penalty.

But another excellent kick through by Staunton lifted the hosts again and although James Simpson-Daniel had won the race against Ugo Monye, the ball trickled into touch.

This time, Parkes found Cornwell in the line-out and when the visitors counter-attacked, Quins looked a little shaky but they survived a demonstration of Simpson-Daniel's silky skills – an all too rare occurrence.

They won a penalty to clear the danger and were handed a further boost when Gloucester number eight Adam Balding was sinbinned for preventing a quick tap penalty being taken.

When Williams spilled the ball from a skewed up and under by Gomarsall though, Gloucester sniffed a chance but winger Seti Kiole knocked on and a poorly executed chip by McRae snuffed out another opportunity.

Then came the flashpoint as Tiatia was sent off after lashing out at Sigley and Easter was sacrificed to be replaced by Hayter.

Paul slotted the penalty from just inside the halfway but Quins rallied with a Staunton penalty re-establishing the lead and another successful kick stretching the advantage to 14-9 at half-time.

After the interval, Gloucester were quickly faced with a charging Mike Worsley after a well-executed line-out move and although the rearguard held for a time, the pressure told when a penalty was conceded and Staunton obliged.

Gloucester then rang the changes. While Sigley had made way for Nick Wood at half-time, on 47 minutes, Adam Eustace replaced Cornwell and centre Nathan Mauger took the field with McRae going off injured, Paul moving over to fly-half.

The Cherry and Whites' line-out continued to malfunction though and with that avenue of possession cut off, the ball proved hard to come by.

When they did have possession, they lacked invention up against Quins' drift defence and too frequently found themselves turned over.

Their blushes were saved by a fumble forward after Mauger had knocked on a Staunton up and under but the reprieve was short-lived as Quins came under no pressure in their line-out and claimed it comfortably.

The ball was shipped wide and when Fanolua committed himself to the tackle on Worsley, the prop's offload to winger Simon Keogh was perfectly timed and he cruised over. Staunton converted.

From the restart, Gloucester went the closest they had come to a score with flanker Peter Buxton held up just short before Gomarsall took a quick tap penalty and Parkes was halted metres out.

But then came a cruel blow as Gloucester were punished for some telegraphed passing in the back line with Keogh intercepting and the winger had the gas to sprint from his own 22 over the line. Staunton converted for a 31-9 lead.

Gloucester responded by dominating possession but the passing was suspect and when lock Alex Brown spilled the ball after a fine tackle by centre Mel Deane, it typified the visitors' afternoon.

Simpson-Daniel almost squeezed over at the corner as Gloucester looked to inject some width but the turnover that followed seemed inevitable.

Quins scented the bonus point when Keogh intercepted a Parkes pass but was wrapped up and then Goodridge was brought down as he looked to run the ball out of defence but he laid the ball back.

The danger was far from over though and when Gloucester were penalised for holding on, Quins' seven-man pack drove their visitors back from the line-out with Hayter shepherded over the line – it was the final humiliation in a match packed with them.

Staunton completed his near-faultless display by kicking the conversion to send the Quins fans home confident they can now escape the drop. Gloucester's baffled away support, however, will be left to contemplate whether their team's top three ambitions have now gone up in smoke. One thing's for sure, Nigel Melville and Dean Ryan are sure to be breathing fire.

HARLEQUINS: T. Williams (H. Barratt 67); S. Keogh, G. Duffy, M. Deane (A. Reay 79), U. Monye; J. Staunton, S. So'oialo; M. Worsley (J. Dawson 80), A. Tiatia, C. Jones, J. Evans (R. Winters 74), S. Maling (S. Miall 69), N. Easter (J. Hayter 35), A. Vos (capt.) (L. Sheriff 80), T. Diprose.

GLOUCESTER: J. Goodridge; S. Kiole, T. Fanolua, H. Paul, J. Simpson-Daniel; D. McRae (N. Mauger 47), A. Gomarsall (A. Page 79); C. Bezuidenhout, J. Parkes, T. Sigley (N. Wood 40), A. Brown, M. Cornwell (A. Eustace 47), P. Buxton, J. Boer (c.), A. Balding.

REFEREE : A. Rowden (RFU, Kent)

STAR MAN : There were no individual displays good enough to merit a Star Man being awarded.

THREE MINUTES: Jeremy Staunton penalty.
Harlequins 3, Gloucester 0.

NINE MINUTES: Tom Williams try, Staunton misses conversion.
Harlequins 8, Gloucester 0.

12 MINUTES: Henry Paul penalty.
Harlequins 8, Gloucester 3.

18 MINUTES: Paul penalty.
Harlequins 8, Gloucester 6.

26 MINUTES: Gloucester number eight Adam Balding is sinbinned.

31 MINUTES: Harlequins hooker Ace Tiatia is red-carded.

33 MINUTES: Paul penalty.
Harlequins 8, Gloucester 9.

37 MINUTES: Staunton Penalty.
Harlequins 11, Gloucester 9.

40 MINUTES: Staunton penalty.
Harlequins 14, Gloucester 9.

46 MINUTES: Staunton penalty.
Harlequins 17, Gloucester 9.

60 MINUTES: Simon Keogh try. Staunton converts.
Harlequins 24, Gloucester 9.

63 MINUTES: Keogh try. Staunton converts.
Harlequins 31, Gloucester 9.

80 MINUTES (plus three): James Hayter try. Staunton converts.
Harlequins 38, Gloucester 9.

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