

GLOUCESTERSHIRE ECHO

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GLOUCESTER ARE AT HOME DESPITE DEFEAT

FAR FROM PRETTY BUT AT LEAST THE CHERRY AND WHITES
SHOWED SPIRIT

GLOUCESTER 13 SARACENS 14

Gloucester's season has not been a thing of beauty. Indeed, at times they have resembled a sow's ear in sliding to the fold of the Premiership table, but perversely they got exactly what they wanted on Saturday, a home Wildcard semi-final draw.

It was certainly not a limp end to the regular campaign, far from it with men like Adam Balding and Jake Boer reducing defenders to their component parts and pulverising attackers in a heartening display.

The spirit and determination shone through in spades and with the likes of Nick Wood, the wonderfully expressive Luke Narraway, and the richly gifted Olly Morgan showing up well, the signs of a rosy future are there for all to see.

And they would have won the match too had one of three straight forward penalty attempts found the target.

Gloucester have lost the art of winning, and need to rediscover it quickly ahead of Newcastle's visit next Sunday, because this was a match there for the taking.

Defeat should not come as a great surprise given the fact their last victory at Kingsholm was on February 19 against Bath but the manner of Saracens' first ever league success at Castle Grim left the normally mild-mannered Dean Ryan on the verge of apoplexy.

In a contest that never progressed much further than a ferociously contested tackle area that was littered with bodies referee David Rose refused to move or penalise, Saracens won thanks to two highly dubious tries.

Thomas Castaignede's inside pass to Raphael Ibanez had the distinct whiff of forward about it in the course of Ben Johnstone's opener inside the first quarter. And then, with nine minutes to go, Rose awarded a penalty try after Gloucester had hauled down a driving maul with James Forrester in the sinbin.

Considering it was the first offence and that any number of similar misdemeanours had occurred throughout the match all over the field, it was a big call and his decision to go under the sticks was ultimately decisive.

"I thought it was rubbish," said Ryan, getting right to the point. "To go under the posts first time is incredible, but there you go. I don't want that to detract from the huge spirit we showed. There were a lot of things we did very well and that is something we can build on."

Against one of the largest and most powerful packs currently munching their way through all comers – even Leicester's little nest of vipers – Gloucester's scrum and line-out stood up admirably against the challenge.

They were ultra competitive at the breakdown, led fiercely by Balding and Boer and manfully competitive on Ibanez's throw thanks to Adam Eustace and Alex Brown, while Wood and Co. had a real battle with Cobus Visagie's monster scrummaging unit.

But despite Gloucester's sheer desperation and plenty of possession, Saracens possessed the player of the match in Richard Hill.

The number of balls he tidied up must have been in double figures, the number of times he got himself into a position to cause maximum disruption was stratospheric and his tackle count was also vast.

On this evidence it is easy to see why Sir Clive Woodward wants him as part of his Lions party this summer, because he led a Sarries back row effort alongside Taine Randell and Hugh Vyvyan that was outstanding.

It was Hill who created the first try after 18 minutes when he fielded Duncan McRae's kick before launching an attack to the left deep inside his own 22. Not many flankers have the ability to throw an inch-perfect pass 20 metres but his delivery to Castaignède helped create a try for Johnstone after Ibanez had swept to the line.

Gloucester rallied but trailed 7-3 at the break. Their patched up squad was already feeling the pinch and with Jon Goodridge out of commission with a shoulder injury, James Forrester was deployed in the centre with Morgan switching to full-back.

Narraway was already on for Andy Hazell and minutes into the second period Alex Page replaced Terry Fanolua who suffered a recurrence of his back problem. It's almost impossible to mend and make do in the Premiership these days but after McRae eventually found the target with a 57th minute penalty, Gloucester conjured a lovely try.

As an immediate glimpse to the future it was enlightening. Forrester's leggy break in the centre was supported by Narraway, who picked a lovely angle to take a short pass and break the Saracens cover. He got close to the line and found James Bailey who gave the scoring pass to Morgan.

Kingsholm erupted in a wave of delight and the out-pouring of emotion from Forrester and his chums gave an indication of what it meant to all those in a Cherry and White shirt. McRae's excellent conversion from the touchline sent them 13-7 ahead with 15 minutes remaining and Gloucester were in a position to close the game out and earn a much-needed win.

They had sweated their unmentionables off to get ahead but when Forrester illegally halted a move close to the line to be yellow carded, Saracens kicked the penalty to the corner and drove a line-out.

When the maul was pulled down, possibly by Gary Powell in the mass of bodies, Rose had no hesitation in awarding the penalty try. Try as they might, Gloucester could not get in range to force a drop-goal or win a penalty and in the end petered out after a roaring effort.

GLOUCESTER: J. Goodridge (J. Forrester 30); O. Morgan, J. Simpson-Daniel, T. Fanolua (A. Page 49), J. Bailey; D. McRae, A. Gomarsall; N. Wood (T. Sigley 75), M. Davies (O. Azam 55), G. Powell, A. Eustace, A. Brown, J. Boer (P. Buxton 62), A. Hazell (L. Narraway 36), A. Balding (capt.).

SARACENS: T. Castaignede; B. Johnstone, K. Sorrell, D. Harris, T. Vaikona; N. Little (G. Jackson 61), K. Bracken (M. Rauluni 53); K. Yates (N. Lloyd 46), R. Ibanez (M. Cairns 46), C. Visagie, K. Chesney (I. Fullerton 57), S. Raiwalui (K. Chesney 68), T. Randell (B. Skirving 68), R. Hill, H. Vyvyan.

REFEREE: D. Rose (RFU)

ATTENDANCE: 13,000

STAR MAN: Adam Balding.

TWO MINUTES: Duncan McRae penalty.
Gloucester 3, Saracens 0.

18 MINUTES: Ben Johnstone try. Little conversion.
Gloucester 3, Saracens 7.

57 MINUTES: McRae penalty.
Gloucester 6, Saracens 7.

65 MINUTES: Olly Morgan try. McRae conversion.
Gloucester 13, Saracens 7.

71 MINUTES: Saracens penalty try. Glen Jackson conversion.
Gloucester 13, Saracens 14.

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