

GLOUCESTERSHIRE ECHO

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RISK-TAKING PAYS DIVIDENDS FOR GLOUCESTER WILKINSON'S FORM IS NOT ENOUGH TO STEER FALCONS INTO THE HEINEKEN CUP

GLOUCESTER 23 NEWCASTLE 16

Jonny Wilkinson will find himself ankle deep in New Zealand mud before very long, face-to-face with a big, hairy openside forward intent on re-arranging his innards on a tour of duty with the British Lions.

But judging by yesterday's evidence in the Wildcard semi-final against a Gloucester side intent on causing maximum pain, huge amounts of discomfort and no end of cruelty, Jonny golden whatsits is capable of strutting his stuff with maximum efficiency once again.

When the most famous name on the planet was not selecting the optimum blade of grass and hovering over his commode to kick with expert precision at goal, he was kicking with such ferocity that Gloucester's no nonsense bump and grind merchant on the blindside flank, Jake Boer, was lifted unceremoniously into the middle of this week, he was passing beautifully and even attempting the odd break for good measure.

He only missed one penalty – a monster kick of 50-plus metres that shaved the underside of the bar by an inch – but even Wilkinson can be forgiven that.

Newcastle have handled him brilliantly in the last few weeks, which is more than can be said of their effort yesterday.

Wilkinson does indeed look in fine fettle, but one man does not make a team and even he had no answer to Newcastle's crumbling scrummage and faltering line-out that disappeared in the second half. He can do many things, but without a regular supply of meaningful possession, even Wilkinson cannot turn a sow's ear into a silk purse.

Newcastle were taken to the cleaners in the second half once Gloucester's scrummage, brilliantly anchored by Gary Powell, and the line-out, marshalled by their field lieutenant Alex Brown, set to work with devastating effect to reduce the Falcons' set-piece to virtual ruins.

It was a day when they adapted what they had and set to work winning the game at the sharp end. Once on top up front, Duncan McRae controlled the game with some high class strategic kicking to keep his bover boys on the go-forward and Wilkinson deeply frustrated.

"A lot of hidden people deserve a huge amount of credit for that victory," said Dean Ryan, Gloucester's coach. "The obvious names – the Baldings and Boers – stood out, but people like Pete Buxton when he came on was outstanding.

"The work rate and physicality were crucial. We were very solid and as far as I am concerned it was a huge forward performance."

He is not wrong. Gloucester's forwards were always going to shoulder the burden considering they had a flanker in the centre and a stand-off at full-back.

James Forrester is not a bad man to have running free in broken field, but his selection still carried with it an element of risk.

But it was Forrester who got the first try, slipping on the after-burners and weaving his spell past four defenders following barrelling approach work from Balding and a neat pass from McRae after 30 minutes to score in the far left corner through attempted tackles by Tom May and Matt Burke.

Gloucester had dominated the opening exchanges but without the certainty of a goal-kicker in prime form, attacked so often from driven line-outs, Newcastle had no variation against which to defend.

Newcastle had been on the back foot since the start but swept ahead before the break with a lovely try.

Matthew Tait was fortunate not to be called back for a knock-on, but once May had wriggled free in centre field, Mark Mayerhofler combined with prop David Wilson who gave a lovely overhead pass to Burke and he used Tait as the decoy runner to shrug off Adam Eustace and score.

It swept Newcastle 13-7 ahead and there would have been some worrying glances around the home dressing room at the interval because they had thoroughly dominated. Gloucester needed a try immediately after the restart and they got it through their skipper.

After a sustained period of play the hard working Andy Gomarsall combined with Mefin Davies, Pete Buxton and Powell added their weight and support before Balding took Boer's inside pass and made it to the line for a belting little try.

Although they were still behind, the momentum was with Gloucester. Stirred by another remarkable effort from Balding and the rest of his forwards, they took Newcastle to the cleaners in the tight and simply out-muscled them in the loose.

The scrum had been a feeling out process for 30 minutes, but through Powell and Nick Wood, Gloucester gradually turned the screw to such an extent that Newcastle's set-piece crumbled.

But it took a second try from Forrester at the start of the final quarter to finally nudge Gloucester ahead. The forwards tied possession into a ruck close to the posts and allowed Gomarsall and Brad Davies to feed the makeshift centre for his score.

Newcastle were restricted to Wilkinson's long-range penalty attempt that slipped under the bar and with McRae adding two late three-pointers, Gloucester eased their way to Twickenham next Saturday.

They will need to be a good deal smarter than they were against Saracens a week ago, but the way Balding celebrated the final whistle, don't bet against the Cherry and Whites earning Heineken Cup rugby next season.

GLOUCESTER: B. Davies; S. Kiole (M. Foster 67), J. Simpson-Daniel, J. Forrester, J. Bailey; D. McRae, A. Gomarsall; N. Wood, M. Davies, G. Powell (T. Sigley 77), A. Eustace, A. Brown, J. Boer, L. Narraway (P. Buxton 43), A. Balding (capt.).

NEWCASTLE: M. Burke; T. May, J. Noon, M. Mayerhofler, M. Tait; J. Wilkinson, J. Grindal (H. Charlton 57); G. Alvarez Quinones (M. Ward 52), A. Long (M. Thompson 57), M. Ward (D. Wilson 31, A. Long 78), L. Gross (G. Parling 68), S. Grimes, C. Charvis (capt.), C. Harris (M. McCarthy 60), P. Dowson.

STAR MAN: Gary Powell.

REFEREE: T. Spreadbury.

ATTENDANCE: 6,206.

14 MINUTES: Jonny Wilkinson penalty.
Gloucester 0, Newcastle 3

30 MINUTES: James Forrester try, Duncan McRae conversion.
Gloucester 7, Newcastle 3

32 MINUTES: Wilkinson penalty.
Gloucester 7, Newcastle 6

38 MINUTES: Matt Burke try, Wilkinson conversion.
Gloucester 7, Newcastle 13

44 MINUTES: Adam Balding try.
Gloucester 12, Newcastle 13

49 MINUTES: Wilkinson penalty.
Gloucester 12, Newcastle 16

59 MINUTES: Forrester try.
Gloucester 17, Newcastle 16

73 MINUTES: McRae penalty.
Gloucester 20, Newcastle 16

78 MINUTES: McRae penalty.
Gloucester 23, Newcastle 16

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