

GLOUCESTERSHIRE ECHO

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GLOUCESTER WOE

EUROPEAN DREAM QUASHED BY SARACENS

WILDCARD FINAL PROVES TO BE A TEST TOO FAR FOR THE FRAIL CHERRY AND WHITES

GLOUCESTER 16 SARACENS 24

It was a fittingly botched end to a downright befuddled season for Gloucester. They have been patched up from pillar to post and have struggled for form since the turn of the year, and it was always likely their final European escape route would prove beyond them.

Four victories in 15 games is a record that would even have the relegated Harlequins hiding behind their pastel-shaded shirts in embarrassment and with their most impressive artillery – the Phil Vickerys, Jake Boers and Andy Hazells, Marcel Garveys and Henry Pauls – sitting through their own private grief in the stands, the odds were heavily stacked against Gloucester.

Throw in the fact they do not possess the reliability of a first-rate goalkicker, something that has been a hindrance all season, and are a team so short on experience they have a virtual kindergarten feel, it is no great surprise they struggled and failed to make a return to the Heineken Cup.

“The team we put out was not good enough to live in the Heineken Cup – but that is what we have been dealing with for the last four or five months,” said coach Dean Ryan.

“The disappointment for me was that in the last couple of weeks we have been able to incorporate different styles to our game, but when we were under pressure we played from deep and couldn’t keep our hands on the ball.”

Saracens have become successful under the no-nonsense approach of Steve Diamond because he has eliminated risk from their game and turned the focus on establishing a monster set-piece.

And while Gloucester produced another high-quality number in the line-out, they were given no end of trouble at scrum time and turned the ball over 13 times to give an idea of their fallibility.

In the first half, they went against everything drummed into them by playing from deep when under pressure. Isolated forwards were lined up in the tackles, ball was coughed up in the contact area and they kicked away good ball when in Saracens' territory.

If it is possible to obtain a victory in the image of its chief creator, namely Ryan, then Gloucester needed to keep the ball far tighter and engage Saracens at close quarters.

They did it remarkably well in the second half, roared on by their battered skipper Adam Balding, the industrious qualities of Pete Buxton and Mefin Davies and the pilfering skills of Alex Brown.

The trouble was, they were already behind the eight-ball. A 6-0 lead had been instantly wiped out when Saracens scored their first try through skipper Hugh Vyvyan – the number eight swayed past tackles from 15 metres after Thomas Castaignede and Glen Jackson had done the damage with neat passes in midfield.

It was a warning of what was to come. Gloucester were static and could not get pace on the ball in dangerous areas to cause to a seriously big defence adequate problems.

And when James Bailey was pushed towards the far touchline and dropped the ball under the close scrutiny of Tevita Vaikona, Ben Johnston's brilliant soft-shoe shuffle through a thicket of bewildered defenders took him into clear open space and beneath the posts for the try.

It put Saracens 17-6 ahead and well in control. The try summed Gloucester's first half up because, despite all the furious effort, they were not controlled or disciplined enough when in command of the ball.

The second half was a different story in terms of Gloucester's effectiveness, but they could not swing the match.

Duncan McRae, who had a frustratingly in and out game, created their first try with a lovely angled cross-field kick into the waiting arms of Brad Davies, who did a brilliant job racing forward to take the catch and score.

It was the incentive Gloucester needed and with their tails up thanks to a forward effort that tore into the hearts of the Sarries defence, the Cherry and Whites scented a remarkable comeback.

And when Kyran Bracken's kick was fumbled by Vaikona, they launched an attack from 50 metres to create a brilliant try.

Balding's awareness and overhead pass sent James Forrester on his way through midfield and he fed Terry Fanolua – a second-half replacement for Seti Kiolo – and he kept the move alive by sending Mark Foster on a run to the line with an inside pass.

Gloucester got there quickly enough to recycle the ball and Andy Gomarsall's short-range pass sent Adam Eustace over the line – the try was awarded after consultation with the video referee.

The stakes had been raised considerably and the momentum was swinging back to Nigel Melville's troops. But try as they might, they could not pluck out an elusive third try.

There was always a chance Saracens, with an array of top-notch, top-of-the-ground performers, would seek out enough ball for one last raid and so it proved.

Richard Haughton's initial break did the damage down the left and when possession came back into midfield, Vaikona scented the weary legs of prop Gary Powell in midfield to race past him and in for the try.

Jackson's conversion sealed the deal and means Gloucester will not trade blows with Europe's elite next season. It was a typically infuriating end to an infuriatingly inconsistent season at Kingsholm.

GLOUCESTER: B. Davies; S. Kiole (T. Fanolua 40), J. Simpson-Daniel, J. Forrester, J. Bailey (M. Foster 65); D. McRae, A. Gomarsall; N. Wood (T. Sigley 72), M. Davies (O. Azam 75), G. Powell, A. Eustace, A. Brown, P. Buxton, L. Narraway, A. Balding (capt.).

SARACENS: T. Castaignede; B. Johnston (R. Haughton 58), K. Sorrell, D. Harris (M. Bartholomeusz 61), T. Vaikona; G. Jackson, M. Raulini (K. Bracken 56); N. Lloyd, R. Ibanez (M. Cairns 55), C. Visagie (K. Yates 55), S. Raiwalui (K. Chesney 49, S. Raiwalui 71), I. Fullerton, B. Skirving, R. Hall (T. Randell 56), H. Vyvyan (capt.).

STAR MAN: Adam Balding.

REFEREE: T. Spreadbury (RFU).

TWO MINUTES: Duncan McRae penalty.
Gloucester 3 Saracens 0

FIVE MINUTES: McRae penalty.
Gloucester 6, Saracens 0

SIX MINUTES: Hugh Vyvyan try, Glen Jackson conversion.
Gloucester 6, Saracens 7.

22 MINUTES: Jackson penalty.
Gloucester 6, Saracens 10.

31 MINUTES: Ben Johnston try, Jackson conversion.
Gloucester 6, Saracens 17.

53 MINUTES: Brad Davies try.
Gloucester 11, Saracens 17.

59 MINUTES: Adam Eustace try.
Gloucester 16, Saracens 17.

74 MINUTES: Tevita Vaikona try, Jackson conversion.
Gloucester 16, Saracens 24.

JC