

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

MONDAY, DECEMBER 26, 2005

GLOUCESTER RUN WASPS SO CLOSE

LONDON WASPS 32 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 25

Had they not found themselves on the back end of a quite wretched opening quarter that left them a staggering 22-3 down, Dean Ryan's side would have done something that has so far proved beyond them – and beaten Wasps away.

In a second half performance that was smothered in positive attitude, dripping with endeavour and thoroughly courageous in terms of the level of commitment in defence, Gloucester salvaged a bonus point and came within an ace of claiming an outright win.

For their recovery, Gloucester can thank a terrific effort by their forwards and some break-neck invention out wide that took Wasps to the edge.

They had Wasps on toast in the scrum virtually throughout but apart from one penalty try, got nothing for their superiority. They went toe-to-toe with the home side at the breakdown, where Andy Hazell was outstanding, and defended with a power and expertise that was remarkable during a second half onslaught that lasted more than 12 phases.

It would be impossible to single out individuals for praise during the second half but Gloucester were left ruing a nightmare opening 20 minutes.

Wasps were on the march immediately and Gloucester lost Peter Richards to the sinbin in what appeared to be an innocuous off-side and from a period of concerted pressure, flanker John Hart, who had an excellent game, was bundled over from a line-out to start the Wasps juggernaut rolling.

Alex King converted and Wasps led 7-0. Ludovic Mercier cut the gap with a penalty before Wasps went in again. They maintained possession from a line-out close to half-way and when Eoin Reddan and King combined, Paul Sackey wrong footed Olly Morgan to breeze in for the score.

King missed the conversion but was on target with a penalty after 14 minutes to make it 15-3. Five minutes later, Wasps were in again for try number three to virtually seal the contest. Stuart Abbott and Josh Lewsey were in the vanguard of a flowing move and Simon Shaw took Lewsey's inside ball to score with some comfort from short range.

Gloucester were dumbstruck. They had not retained any possession to speak of but as soon as they did, scored themselves. Morgan, Adam Balding and Phil Vickery were all heavily involved in a powerful attack and when possession came back, Mercier straightened his angle of attack and went beneath the sticks.

For a period, the contest settled down. But when James Forrester tried to breathe life into Gloucester with a quickly taken line-out, Abbott accepted the wayward throw and with Gloucester in retreat, King and Hart combined to send Lewsey home in the far corner for the bonus point score.

Mercier's late penalty cut the gap to 29-13 but Gloucester were virtually out of the contest by the break.

But they battled for all the world, hunted, tackled and pressed as if their lives depended on it. A little break by James Simpson-Daniel and a couple of heavy-duty carries by Mike Tindall breathed life into the visitors and when Tim Payne was yellow carded for an offence at a line-out, Gloucester cranked up the power in the tight.

They had been on top in the scrum throughout but when Wasps fell apart against an eight-man shove after 58 minutes, referee Roy Maybank awarded a penalty try.

Almost immediately Wasps replied with a penalty by Mark van Gisbergen to make the score 32-20 but still Gloucester refused to lie down.

With time kicking down, Mercier, Jake Boer and Morgan kept possession alive for James Bailey to dive home in the far right corner and cut the gap to only seven points.

Sensing one of the most remarkable recoveries in the Premiership and swept along by Peter Richards' willingness to stretch the game at every opportunity, Vickery's leadership skills and a bucket load of attitude, Gloucester went in search of the equalising try.

And they almost got it too but for some last-ditch Wasps defence from Sackey and Ayoola Erinle to seal the win for Wasps in a remarkable contest.

HT: 29 - 13

Attendance: 10,000

Referee: Roy Maybank

JC