

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SUNDAY, JANUARY 8, 2006

FORWARD POWER SETS UP VICTORY

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 19 SARACENS 9

They were the masters of all the grim and grotty work, secure and powerful at the set-piece and skilful enough to control the contest in the crucial eight, nine and 10 positions to grab four very important points.

The victory was hugely significant given the context of the Premiership table and establishes some breathing space between the top four and the chasing pack.

In a game that was never a thing of beauty in filthy conditions against a major forward unit, Gloucester had any number of muddied and bloodied heroes in their ranks.

Skipper Phil Vickery is playing some mean and moody rugby just now and he galvanised his troops to outstanding effect. He laid the foundations in the scrums and carried possession in the trenches to become the cornerstone of the effort.

He also had a back row alongside him in full war paint. Jake Boer, Adam Balding and the outstanding Peter Buxton waged a powerful and unforgiving battle against Saracens' forward unit and their endeavour and work rate were rewarded with the victory.

Gloucester's only danger was that despite their dominance, there was always the possibility that Thomas Castaignede or Glen Jackson could instigate a length of the field try to blow the game open but it never came.

The other major worry was that Gloucester never truly got far enough ahead to ease the nerves, despite their superiority, and it took all of Ludovic Mercier's kicking prowess to nudge the visitors into a commanding position.

But Saracens hardly got a look in during the first half. They were asked to defend wave after wave of powerful, damaging rucks and mauls and made 66 tackles compared to Gloucester's 27 but at the break Dean Ryan's side only led 7-0.

Peter Richards, who worked his socks off at scrum-half, was in the vanguard of a catch and drive routine from Alex Brown at the line-out to bundle his way across the line in the final minute of the half.

They stretched it to 10-0 with a 43rd minute Mercier penalty before Glen Jackson finally got Saracens on the board with three points of his own minutes later.

But Gloucester stood strong. Brown and Adam Eustace covered vast tracks of ground to make tackles, Balding drove hard and straight and Boer carried the ball into a big defence.

Gloucester simply waited for Saracens to concede a stream of penalties for Mercier to do the damage. He added three more successful kicks to keep the hosts at arms length.

There were also impressive contributions from Mike Tindall, who always kept Sarries honest with his running line and defence and in the end they were forced to play from deep in order to salvage anything from the contest.

Fittingly, with Balding back on the field after a facial injury, Gloucester celebrated the four points deep in Saracens territory that are some of the most precious of the season.

HT: 0 - 7

Attendance: 6,493

Referee: Tony Spreadbury

JC