

GLoucester Rugby

SATURDAY, MARCH 11, 2006

GLoucester Denied Despite Fightback

NORTHAMPTON SAINTS 21 GLoucester Rugby 20

In a side stripped to its bones, Gloucester's young guns dragged Northampton all the way to secure a bonus point at Franklin's Gardens.

When James Simpson-Daniel was ruled out on the morning of the match with flu, head coach Dean Ryan called on his last remaining three-quarter – Marcel Garvey – to make the dash to Northampton. In total, Gloucester were without 16 players through injury, illness and international call-ups but had they enjoyed a fraction more luck in the final twists of the match, may have snatched victory.

Among the tyros who stood up was Jack Forster, the giant prop, who is forging a serious reputation in the Premiership. When he was introduced in the late stages, Gloucester's scrum found new life and tore the Saints apart in the final 10 minutes.

Luke Narraway, Jonathan Pendlebury and Rob Elloway all deserved more from their contributions but in the end, Northampton won because of their first-half dominance of the set-piece.

Without Simpson-Daniel, Ryan was forced to move Brad Davies into the number 12 position and shift Terry Fanolua to 13. Fanolua was always a threat and backed up by a ceaseless, energetic performance from Peter Richards, Gloucester caused enough problems to have snatched the contest they battled in throughout.

But in the first quarter, Northampton's scrum was all-powerful. Pat Barnard had a particularly effective start as Gloucester came under relentless pressure in the set-piece in the opening 20 minutes.

Northampton camped themselves close to the Gloucester line and after a scrum had been re-set for the sixth or seventh time, referee Dave Pearson awarded a penalty try with the Saints on top.

However, it took Gloucester only five minutes to score themselves and it was a beautiful score. A powerfully sustained attack involving Mark Foster and Peter Buxton sucked in plenty of defenders and when the brilliant Andy Hazell made a dart through two defenders, Fanolua made a brilliant pick up and he fed Richards who scored a lovely try.

The contest was locked at 7-7 at the break but nine minutes after the re-start, the Saints scored again. The point of attack was again the scrum and after a series of drives, number eight Mark Easter got the ball over the line to extend Northampton's lead to 14-7.

Ludovic Mercier, who had missed two shots at goal in the first-half, cut the gap to 14-10 with a penalty of his own soon after but when Buxton was dispatched to the cooler for interfering with the ball at a ruck, Northampton made the most of their extra man to snatch a third try and virtually seal the contest.

Both Mark Robinson and Carlos Spencer had been at the forefront of all Northampton's front foot work and when Robinson made a lovely little dart round the side of a ruck, his inside pass was collected by Sam Harding, who burst clear.

Realising he didn't have the pace to beat Jon Goodridge, he chipped and chased but it looked as though Goodridge had the ball covered until it slipped from his grasp and Jon Clarke ran through to score after pouncing on the bouncing ball.

At 21-10 ahead, the game appeared up but in the last quarter, Gloucester launched a savage counter-attack. Ryan used all his replacements to give his side fresh impetus and after Mercier had cut the gap to 21-13 with a penalty, Gloucester set about the Northampton forwards.

Forster produced a series of huge scrummages and with the Saints under series pressure close to their line, Pearson awarded another penalty try. Mercier's conversion left Gloucester down by a single point and despite yet another series of powerful, destructive scrummages, the Saints held on to claim victory.

HT: 7 - 7

Attendance: 13,443

Referee: Dave Pearson

JC