

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, APRIL 8, 2006

GLOUCESTER PUSH LEADERS ALL THE WAY

SALE SHARKS 18 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 15

I am delighted with the way these younger guys have come in and performed. Dean Ryan, Head Coach.

Against the side who narrowly missed out on a place in the Heineken Cup semi-finals last weekend, Gloucester's clutch of gifted youngsters almost produced Gloucester's result of the season following a wonderfully mature and dedicated performance.

Defensively, they were magnificent – the presence and power of Andy Hazell led the effort against the bigger Sale forwards – but everywhere you looked somebody in Gloucester colours was willing to make a tackle or put their bodies in the road to deny Sale any go forward.

Not many teams prevent Sale scoring at home and had Gloucester been able to force a try in the first-half when the wind was at their backs, they would surely have won.

In end, the experience of Charlie Hodgson drove Sale forward. He created so much field position in the second half that it was no surprise he was able to chip away with a series of penalties before Jason Robinson won the game with 74th minute drop-goal.

But this was a Gloucester performance about the future. Lamb, on his Premiership debut, was calm and unflustered – prepared to mix his natural running game with a number of solid positional kicks and a dead-eye accuracy at goal that ensured each of his five penalties were nailed.

Olly Morgan was excellent at full-back and the set-piece held up well under pressure.

"I think you saw a team further on in their development win the game," said head coach Dean Ryan. "That is where Sale are compared to us and I have no problems with that.

"But I am delighted with the way these younger guys have come in and performed. I don't want to wait 12 or 15 months before finding out whether they are good enough – they are selected on merit right now.

"If that means we suffer a bit of pain in the short-term then I am prepared to take it because I trust fully where this team can go and what it can achieve."

Lamb gave Gloucester a 3-0 lead early on when Sale were penalised for pulling down at a line-out but then the hosts dominated for fully 15 minutes.

Gloucester lost Gary Powell to the sinbin but defended wonderfully. Hazell, Mike Tindall, Anthony Allen, Jonathan Pendlebury and Alex Brown all made searing tackles to repel wave after wave of Sale pressure.

Tindall, who was yellow carded in the second half for lying on the ball, ran hard all afternoon and required treatment for a very nasty smash to the face.

After Hodgson had equalised with a penalty after Pete Richards was penalised for knocking on, Lamb took Gloucester 9-3 ahead with penalties after 28 and 34 minutes.

They also threatened a try late in the half when James Simpson-Daniel was involved heavily in a sustained attack and although Lamb, Richards and Allen all had darts, Gloucester were forced to settle for Lamb's fourth penalty to lead 12-3 at the break.

The question was whether it would be enough, particularly after Sale moved their heavy guns off the bench to add weight to the obvious wind advantage. Gloucester were working overtime up front and slugged themselves to a standstill in close quarters.

And it was the visitors who scored first when Lamb notched his fifth penalty five minutes into the half.

However, Hodgson knew how Sale would win the game. They needed the ball in front of their forwards and with the likes of Jason White and Chris Jones getting down and dirty in the conditions, Sale denied Gloucester any possession and territory for long periods of suffocating rugby.

Ludovic Mercier was introduced for Lamb with the hope his extra kicking range would clear Gloucester's lines but Hodgson kept bashing away. Despite the fact Gloucester defended superbly, particularly in midfield, the penalties came and the England man drew his side level with successful kicks after 47, 53, 59 and 68 minutes.

Gloucester struggled to get out of their own half and with time ticking down, Robinson marked his 500th professional career appearance with the drop-goal that won the game.

Mercier did have the chance to level the scores in the final minute with a penalty attempt, but the wind dragged his kick and Sale celebrated one of their toughest victories of the season.

HT: 3 - 12

Attendance: 10,140

Referee: Dave Pearson

JC