

# **GLOUCESTER RUGBY**

**SATURDAY, APRIL 22, 2006**

GLOUCESTER STORM INTO CHALLENGE CUP FINAL

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 31 WORCESTER WARRIORS 23

In a contest that may well be remembered as a mini-classic of its time and type, Gloucester claimed a place in the European Challenge Cup final with a breathless recovery against Worcester at Kingsholm.

For the second time in a fortnight, Gloucester grabbed the honours in another full-on contest of thud and more thud, but this time Worcester were within an ace of masterminding a famous victory.

They held a 23-15 advantage deep into the third quarter – the excellence of Shane Drahm pulling the Warriors' strings behind a wonderfully effective set-piece operation – before Gloucester bounced off the ropes to score the decisive try seven minutes from time.

But when it came, it was a beauty. Ryan Lamb launched an up and under towards Nicolas Le Roux and Ludovic Mercier – on for Olly Morgan at full-back – sprinted forward and took a sensational catch as Le Roux waited for the bomb to drop.

It was perhaps the singularly most important moment of the match and when possession came back, Lamb kicked across field for Mark Foster to take the catch and score Gloucester's third and winning try. Lamb stepped up to knock over the touchline conversion and Dean Ryan's side had one foot in the final at the Twickenham Stoop.

It settled a remarkable contest that fluctuated throughout. Gloucester set the home fires burning with two early scores but failed to build on their advantage as Worcester ate into their lead and controlled both territory and possession for vast periods of the first half.

Both teams played some terrific, counter-attacking rugby at great pace and after Lamb and Drahm had swapped penalties in the opening eight minutes, Gloucester produced a wonderful opening score.

Morgan claimed an excellent catch and when possession came back, Richards nipped away with pace and purpose to the blindside to set Lamb away up the wing. He dragged the ball inside to Peter Buxton and although he had James Forrester inside him, Buxton recycled right to James Simpson-Daniel and he surged away to finish a brilliant flowing move.

Seven minutes later, Richards again made the most of turnover ball. Simpson-Daniel again came into support and following quick recycling, Anthony Allen danced his way over to extend Gloucester's score to 15-3.

However, Worcester gritted their teeth and responded. Their forwards were excellent throughout – they again dominated the scrum and won good line-out ball and with Drahm and Thomas Lombard in threatening form, the Warriors scored themselves.

It was Lombard's run that set up a series of scrummages close to the Gloucester line and when Matt Powell fed Drahm, the England A man picked a lovely angle to score beneath the sticks.

Worcester deserved everything they got because Gloucester had not built on their advantage. They used big men to hit possession up close to the rucks and mauls and used Drahm off the back of it. And it came as little surprise when Drahm put Craig Gillies through a gap and the second row gave the scoring pass to Sanderson to establish a 17-15 Worcester lead at the break with their second try.

Things looked grim for Gloucester because Worcester had more control and more possession. Drahm landed a drop-goal immediately after the break and then a penalty in the 52nd minute to hand the Warriors a 23-15 lead.

Gloucester needed something, anything, to get their momentum rolling again and it came courtesy of a Lamb penalty after 55 minutes and a second one 11 minutes later as Alex Brown, Mefin Davies and Patrice Collazo found a second wind from somewhere.

Suddenly, the hosts were within two points and the game had swung again. But it took Mercier's brilliant catch under pressure to create the try for Foster and Lamb sealed the victory with a last minute penalty to push Gloucester into their first final since 2003.

HT: 15-17

Attendance: 8,609

Referee: Christophe Berdos

Man of Match: Ryan Lamb

JC