

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 23, 2006

FORRESTER, HAZELL AND ADAMS DOWN SAINTS

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 28 NORTHAMPTON SAINTS 7

A SUPERLATIVE defensive performance – built on a cast-iron commitment and desperate determination – was the core to Gloucester's third Guinness Premiership victory of the season over Northampton.

In a contest that burnt slowly but powerfully throughout, Gloucester's sheer willingness to knock Northampton back and then back again powered them to the top of the table.

They scored three tries in the process – all of wonderfully contrasting excellence. James Forrester grabbed the first when he stepped on the after-burners in the first-half to score from long range, Andy Hazell was driven over from a withering second half line-out drive and Jack Adams got the third when he chased down his own chip and got to the ball before Ben Cohen in injury time.

It was a more than satisfying way to end the first bank of Premiership matches. Even with a considerable cast list missing through injury, Gloucester's bankers – the Hazells, the Forresters, the Buxtons, Kiels, Bortolamis and Allens were superb in subduing one of the most dangerous backlines in the Premiership.

Northampton are widely considered to be one of the most explosive attacking threats in the business but if you can deny them possession and territory – as Gloucester did here – they are a different side entirely, despite the glorious talents of Carlos Spencer in the number 10 position.

The first-half was a strange affair. It was punctuated with plenty of errors, of dodgy line-outs, wheeling scrums and accidental off-sides that deprived either side of much momentum.

Gloucester were ahead after 13 minutes when Ludovic Mercier, making his first appearance of the season, slotted a penalty but it took them an age to settle and it was the Saints who scored next.

They always mix at Kingsholm and it was no different here. Paul Tupai, the big number six, was always in the thick of it and they took the game to Gloucester up front. The Saints were rewarded with a 17th minute try that had Spencer's artistry all over it.

Northampton kept possession close at a line-out before Mark Robinson fed the former All Black. With Gloucester's defence rushing up, Spencer kicked in behind and David Quinlan controlled the bounce of the ball to score beneath the sticks.

The score shook Gloucester into life and they responded with a cracking try. The superb Buxton smashed up possession from a line-out in midfield and when play was recycled, Rory Lawson and Mercier found Forrester and he stepped brilliantly past the cover to score.

Before the end of the half Tupai was yellow carded for foul play and the efforts of both packs never ceased. The defensive qualities of the remarkable Hazell, Buxton and Bortolami was exceptional, while Nick Wood and the rest of his front row mates stood the test of time too.

Outside, Keil and Allen both hit everything in their path, Olly Morgan was safe under the high ball and gradually the screw was turned.

Mercier kicked penalties after 43 and 62 minutes to stretch Gloucester's lead to 16-7 before the moment that changed the match. Buxton took the catch at the line-out 25 metres out and Gloucester set in motion a drive that simply didn't stop. With the home support baying for blood, Bortolami controlled the drive and when it plunged over the line Hazell emerged with the score.

It broke the Saints. Northampton simply lost their way thereafter against a brick wall defence. They had plenty of possession but ran aground in a fog of confusion.

And when the game entered the final minute, Gloucester scored again. They broke from defence and Mercier launched a pass towards Adams, hugging the touchline. He had little option but to kick but then chased after his nudge as the Saints retreated.

As Cohen waited for the ball to run dead, Adams sneaked past him to dive home and complete another very satisfying and extremely important victory for Gloucester.

Gloucester Team

15. Olly Morgan 14. James Bailey 13. Rudi Keil 12. Anthony Allen 11. Mark Foster 10. Ludovic Mercier 9. Rory Lawson 1. Nick Wood 2. Olivier Azam 3. Christian Califano 4. Adam Eustace 5. Marco Bortolami 6. Peter Buxton 7. Andy Hazell 8. James Forrester

16. Mefin Davies 17. Jack Forster 18. Will James 19. Jake Boer 20. Peter Richards 21. Jack Adams 22. Brad Davies

Northampton Saints Team

15. Robbie Kydd 14. Sean Lamont 13. Bruce Reihana 12. David Quinlan 11. Ben Cohen 10. Carlos Spencer 9. Mark Robinson 1. Tom Smith 2. Steve Thompson 3. Pat Barnard 4. Matt Lord 5. Christian Short 6. Paul Tupai 7. Darren Fox 8. Daniel Browne

16. Dan Richmond 17. Chris Budgen 18. Damien Browne 19. Mark Easter 20. Sam Harding 21. Ian Vass 22. Luke Myring

HT: 10 - 7

Attendance: 11,159

Referee: Sean Davey