

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

MONDAY, JANUARY 1, 2007

MORGAN AND BALSHAW DOWN IRISH

GLOUCESTER 15 LONDON IRISH 3

If it is possible to define Gloucester's crucial victory over London Irish in a sequence of events that summed up their determination, drive and durability then it may just have been in the final play of the match with the points already secured.

With their backs to the wall and up against a relentless stream of Irish attacks close to the line, Gloucester somehow got a pile of muddied and battered bodies underneath the ball to prevent a certain Irish try following a period of almost desperate defence.

"I think that moment alone summed us up today," said Mike Tindall, the centre who produced a wonderfully committed performance in Gloucester's midfield. "The game was over but it said an awful lot about our determination and willingness to fight it out."

Tindall was terrific in ploughing Gloucester forward with his unique brand of physicality and ball carrying expertise in terrible conditions that dragged the contest down to a slip and slide dust-up. The relentless rain prevented two of the most attractive teams in the country playing anything other than a returning kicking game.

"The conditions were impossible," said head coach Dean Ryan. "There was literally nothing else out there for either team and we had to work exceptionally hard for 80 minutes in conditions that took those few opportunities we did create away.

"There were perhaps five or six in the entire game and we took two of them – we had guys like Rory Lawson who did a great job under instructions and then Peter Richards to energise later on and I find it very disappointing there was not more appreciation of what we were trying to achieve.

“I don’t want people to lose sight of what we are trying to achieve in the long-term – those four points may just make the difference come the end of the season and I am delighted.”

The contest was one of attrition and durability – the Irish mixing it brilliantly in the line-out through Bob Casey and Nick Kennedy – and Gloucester dominating the scrummages.

Both teams also slugged each other to a standstill at the breakdown but although Irish held high field position for long periods, it was Gloucester who took their chances.

The first came in the fourth minute when conditions were probably at their best.

Ryan Lamb fielded Delon Armitage’s long clearance via a shoulder and ran back brilliantly through the heart of the Irish defence. When possession came left, Marco Bortolami and Peter Buxton kept the move going well to find Olly Morgan.

The full-back had Mark Foster outside him but chose to go himself, chipped past Topsy Ojo and had the pace to reach his kick and score.

Unsurprisingly, Lamb missed the touchline conversion – Gloucester were to miss their first four shots at goal – but they held their lead until 12 minutes before the break when Shane Geraghty kicked a penalty after Morgan had been penalised in a tackle.

Although Irish drove possession vigorously, Gloucester have some knowing and experienced heads in their pack and through the boundless energy of Buxton and the fierce tackling of Andy Hazell, kept themselves ticking over in the downpour.

Neither side were willing to experiment or change from their tried and trusted kicking methods in the second half as the contest basically boiled down to who would make the most of the limited chances or make the most mistakes.

But Gloucester made the game safe when their replacements combined to devastating effect 10 minutes from time.

Tindall made an authoritative line break and fed in Iain Balshaw with a reverse pass as Gloucester made ground from deep. When possession came back, Richards fed Hazell on a terrific charge that took play into the Irish 22 and it was given further momentum by a clattering charge from Jake Boer.

With the Irish defence in retreat, Richards dug out the ball and fed Balshaw who had tracked the move to score from short range.

At last there was some breathing space and when Willie Walker notched the conversion, Gloucester were 12-3 ahead and virtually home and hosed.

There was still time for Walker to land a further penalty to cement the win following another powerful scrum to start a hugely important month of action with four priceless points.

Gloucester Team

15. Olly Morgan 14. James Simpson-Daniel 13. Mike Tindall
12. Anthony Allen 11. Mark Foster 10. Ryan Lamb 9. Rory Lawson
1. Christian Califano 2. Mefin Davies 3. Carlos Nieto 4. Marco Bortolami
5. Alex Brown 6. Peter Buxton 7. Andy Hazell 8. James Forrester

16. Olivier Azam 17. Nick Wood 18. Adam Eustace 19. Jake Boer
20. Peter Richards 21. Willie Walker 22. Iain Balshaw

London Irish Team

15. Delon Armitage 14. Topsy Ojo 13. Nils Mordt 12. Seilala Mapusua
11. Justin Bishop 10. Shane Geraghty 9. Paul Hodgson 1. Neal Hatley
2. Danie Coetzee 3. Faan Rautenbach 4. Nick Kennedy 5. Bob Casey
6. Kieran Roche 7. Steffon Armitage 8. Phil Murphy

16. Michael Collins 17. David Paice 18. Tonga Lea'aetoa 19. James Hudson 20. Olivier Magne 21. Michael Horak 22. Barry Everitt

HT: 5 - 3

Attendance: 12,500

JC