

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

FRIDAY, JANUARY 12, 2007

AGEN HOLD OFF GLOUCESTER'S FIGHTBACK

SU AGEN 26 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 18

Just at the moment, Gloucester are learning lessons the exceptionally hard way – and not always through faults of their own making.

Against Sale last weekend they played a brand of attacking rugby that was at times too much for the Guinness Premiership champions to cope with and yet came away with almost nothing, zilch, zero.

And in the Heineken Cup the margins have been even smaller for them this term. Their interest in qualifying for the knockout stages ran aground against the mysterious men from Agen – the free-spirited, robustly committed, super-physical Frenchman on a raucous evening of European rugby.

However, their plight was down to two defeats at the start of the pool stages and despite two very good victories over Edinburgh, Gloucester have walked a tight-rope to the knockout stages ever since.

Here, they were within clawing distance of setting up a remarkable last-game showdown against Leinster – dragging themselves back heroically from 14-0 down to lead with 12 minutes remaining before the hosts upped the tempo again.

It would be almost impossible to appreciate the thudding force of the contest but the faces told the story. Through the likes of Marco Bortolami, Gloucester's captain, Peter Buxton the flanker and the tireless running and carrying of Adam Balding and Alex Brown, the Kingsholm club had men who went the distance and then some.

Mike Tindall, James Simpson-Daniel and Iain Balshaw were no less impressive in staging the sort of recovery that promised a victory following a harrowing 20 minutes cast by the immense shadow of Fijian Rupeni Caucaunibuca.

Gloucester were caught in the hurricane created by the hosts and in particular their remarkable winger. Agen play a power game based around off-loads in the contact area and when they run hot, they are a handful.

When scrum-half Nicolas Morlaes and Jerome Miquel shifted play down the short side after nine minutes there seemed little danger but Caucau bundled over Simpson-Daniel, made a mess of Olly Morgan and sent Pepito Elhorga into score.

Caucau looks like he should be playing darts rather than rugby but he was an inspiration and everything he touched was laced with star-dust. And with the likes of flanker Fabrice Culine and number eight Thomas Soucaze getting through plenty of work, Gloucester hardly had time to breathe.

Agen's second try was no less impressive and again involve Caucaunibuca. He fielded a high kick from Ryan Lamb and bulldozed his way forward, sending Manu Ahotaeiloa up the touchline and the centre was aware enough to put Mignardi in for the sort of score that can break teams.

At 14-0 down, Gloucester could have gone under. But with the likes of Carlos Nieto ruling the choppy waters of the set scrummage, Balding charging forward and Balshaw and Tindall on the prowl, Gloucester held on and began to match Agen's physicality.

What they needed was a score and they got it after 31 minutes. Balding straightened an attack from a ruck and when Morlaes tripped over, Rory Lawson shot off down the short side, drew his man and sent Balshaw into score.

Gloucester tried ferociously hard to stress the Agen defence but Ahotaeiloa marshalled it brilliantly – although they were harshly done by before their score when Wilhelm Stoltz pulled down three driving line-outs that prevented what looked like ending in certain scores.

Matters were to get worse before the break too when Tindall was somehow sinbinned for what was virtually Gloucester's first offence at the tackle area in the first-half.

Both teams then lost another player to the cooler – Nieto's dominance in the scrum finally got too much for Laurent Cabarry and both were dismissed for exchanging blows.

But Gloucester had done more than hold on, they had weathered the storm and when Ryan Lamb kicked a 54th minute penalty they trailed 14-8. And then with 19 minutes to go they went ahead with a sensational score.

Lawson fed Tindall on a five-metre scrum inside their 22 and the England man found Balshaw on a clattering charge. He had Simpson-Daniel outside him and Gloucester's human hyphen danced his way brilliantly past the cover, shrugged away from Dave Vainqueur's tackle and fed Peter Richards with the scoring pass from 30 metres.

Now they were ahead it was a case of going for the kill but in the last 15 minutes they fell a desperate foul of the referee who penalised them relentlessly for technical infringements and Miquel landed four penalties to take Agen 26-18 ahead.

There was still time and a converted try would seal the victory and although Tindall somehow ploughed his way through a barrage of tacklers to get within smelling distance of the line from a set scrum, Agen held out. And when possession came Jake Boer kept the ball close with options outside of him.

It was another tale of what might have been. Gloucester were close, just not close enough.

“The dressing room is a pretty hurting place right now,” said head coach Dean Ryan. “We got ourselves into a winning position but our inexperience showed slightly and we gave away a couple of cheap penalties.

“This is a learning curve for us in a difficult environment but I am very proud of the players – they gave it everything they had. We will grow from this experience and become a much better side.”

SU Agen Team

15. Pepito Elhorga 14. David Vainqueur 13. Manu Aho Ta'e'iloa
12. Arnaud Mignardi 11. Rupeni Caucaunibuca 10. Jerome Miquel
9. Nicolas Morlaes 1. Laurent Cabarry 2. Ace Tiatia 3. Alessio Galasso
4. Willem Stoltz 5. Sorin Socol 6. Matthieu Lievremont 7. Fabrice
Culine 8. Thomas Soucaze

16. Djalil Narjissi 17. Cezar Popescu 18. Eusebio Guinazu 19. Colin
Yukes 20. Billy Fulton 21. Rambo Morrison Tavana-Fa'aletino
23. Conrad Stoltz

Gloucester Rugby Team

15. Olly Morgan 14. James Simpson-Daniel 13. Mike Tindall
12. Anthony Allen 11. Iain Balshaw 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. Adam Balding

16. Olivier Azam 17. Patrice Collazo 18. Will James 19. Jake Boer
20. Peter Richards 21. Willie Walker 22. Mark Foster

HT: 14 - 5

Attendance: 8,000