

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SUNDAY, 18 FEBRUARY, 2007

LATE TRY SHATTERS GLOUCESTER

SARACENS 24 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 22

Despite executing a near-perfect smash and grab Guinness Premiership raid against Saracens, Gloucester were left fuming at a controversial refereeing decision they claimed was fundamental to their defeat at Vicarage Road.

Head coach Dean Ryan could not hide his displeasure at the end of a pulsating finale that eventually saw Saracens steal the points through Kris Chesney's 80th minute try and Glen Jackson's conversion.

Ryan's anger was directed towards a decision with less than two minutes remaining on the official count-down clock that denied Gloucester advantage and handed Saracens an attacking line-out inside the visitors' 22.

Saracens had knocked on in a previous move but when Ludovic Mercier's kick went dead, referee Rob Debney ruled Gloucester's advantage over and handed Saracens possession from which they subsequently scored.

It was a controversial end to an enthralling if limited contest and is a serious blow to Gloucester's play-off hopes.

If Gloucester's defeat at Sale was hard to take at the turn of the year, this was even more painful because for the vast majority of the game, and particularly during the second half, they denied Saracens any meaningful field position, dominated the scrummage and drove vigorously to get within touching distance of a vital victory.

There is always something in the games between the two sides – there were mistakes, power and plenty of physicality – and this was no exception.

“We did everything we came to do,” Ryan said. “I would like to know, had the kick gone backwards would our advantage still have been over?”

“In my opinion the wrong team went into the tunnel as winners. It is very hard to take and that one decision had a direct impact on the outcome of the match.”

Quite how Ryan is able to reason to his players is anyone’s guess and it was particularly tough on the likes of Alex Brown, who produced a remarkable all-round performance, the continued dynamism of Peter Buxton, the foraging of Andy Hazell as well as the dead-eye kicking of Ludovic Mercier and the rest of the Gloucester effort.

Despite an excellent Saracens start, Gloucester were physical, defended superbly, were controlled and on course of a vital away victory.

Saracens took the lead when Dan Scarbrough drove into the line from a scrum, made good ground and found Tomas De Vedia, who gave a lovely over-the-head pass to Kameli Ratuvou, who beat the attentions of James Bailey to score in the corner.

But Jackson began his roller-coaster of an afternoon in indifferent fashion. He missed the conversion and two very kickable penalties before Gloucester dragged themselves back with a try after 12 minutes.

A Saracens line-out went over the top and Hazell reacted first, turning over possession on the floor. Gloucester shifted play left, Anthony Allen made a break before Rory Lawson and Mercier combined before the Frenchman’s reverse pass was taken by Brown who scored.

Although Mercier and Jackson then swapped penalties, Gloucester slowly built their lead into a slender two-point advantage at the break.

Despite some good carrying from Simon Raiwalui and a tempestuous effort from Kevin Yates in the scrum, Gloucester were slowly edging control.

Their 11-13 lead became 11-16 with a Mercier penalty after 47 minutes but their one real problem was that they could not build another score that would have broken the back of the game.

Saracens remained in touch through the boot of Jackson and although Gloucester battered forward through their forwards from a succession of line-out drives and rolling mauls, Saracens kept them out and forced them to live off penalties.

Mercier made it 19-14 after 56 minutes but almost immediately Jackson replied with three points of his own to keep Sarries in the hunt.

But with 11 minutes remaining, Mercier landed his fifth successful penalty to take Gloucester five points ahead – despite the fact they had lost Anthony Allen in the first quarter, James Forrester was playing despite felling unwell and Peter Richards was forced to pull out before the start because of illness.

With time edging down, Saracens threw caution to the wind and once they were allowed a second bite inside Gloucester's 22, Jackson, the excellent Kevin Sorrell and their forward pack maintained possession long enough to create the opening.

Gloucester had defended well but when Cencus Johnson found himself in room down the left, he picked out Chesney and the flanker stooped in to score.

The scores were tied but Jackson found his range to land the conversion and break Gloucester hearts.

Saracens Team

15. Dan Scarbrough 14. Tomas De Vedia 13. Kevin Sorrell 12. Andy Farrell 11. Kameli Ratuvou 10. Glen Jackson 9. Neil De Kock 1. Kevin Yates 2. Fabio Ongaro 3. Cencus Johnston 4. Iain Fullarton 5. Simon Raiwalui 6. Kris Chesney 7. Richard Hill 8. Ben Skirving

16. Matt Cairns 17. Tom Mercey 18. Tom Ryder 19. Paul Gustard 20. Alan Dickens 21. Adam Powell 22. Rodd Penney

Gloucester Rugby Team

15. Olly Morgan 14. James Bailey 13. Rudi Keil 12. Anthony Allen 11. Mark Foster 10. Ludovic Mercier 9. Rory Lawson 1. Christian Califano 2. Olivier Azam 3. Carlos Nieto 4. Will James 5. Alex Brown 6. Peter Buxton 7. Andy Hazell 8. James Forrester

16. Mefin Davies 17. Nick Wood 18. Marco Bortolami 19. Jake Boer 20. Haydn Thomas 21. Jack Adams 22. Jon Goodridge

HT: 11 - 13

Attendance: 8,452

JC