

GLoucester Rugby

SATURDAY, 3 MARCH, 2007

SINBAD'S TRY EARNS CRUCIAL VICTORY

NORTHAMPTON SAINTS 5 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 7

If ever there was a victory worth its weight in gold, delivered in atrocious conditions through sheer bloody mindedness and hard work, it was probably the one Gloucester ground out at Northampton.

It was a remarkable match between two very tough teams – not least for the fact that for the best part of 70 minutes only five points had been swapped between them, there were virtually no penalties throughout and Gloucester's second half dominance bordered on the total with nothing to show for it until the last eight minutes.

But James Simpson-Daniel's finish following from a brilliant outside break from Anthony Allen and an equally good touchline conversion from Willie Walker salvaged a victory that would have undoubtedly been greater had it not been for the conditions.

For a team who have lost three times in the last minute this season, this was a crucial four points for Dean Ryan's side. There were the obvious mistakes, plenty of turnovers and numerous missed opportunities but Gloucester stuck at it to drag themselves back home with the win.

Considering the potency Northampton have available in their backline – and it really is special in places – it is staggering to think they are fighting for their Premiership lives. Their pack are awkward and abrasive too in and around the contact areas but Gloucester took them apart in the scrum and traded blow after blow in the line-out.

Gloucester's scrummaging power, particularly in the first-half, was stratospheric. Carlos Nieto had a wonderful match in the tight, Olivier Azam was big and physical and Nick Wood was no less impressive in his contribution.

Their captain Marco Bortolami also deserves credit for the way he held his nerve in the second half when a number of opportunities slithered to nothing on the back of some outstanding Saints defence because he maintained his conviction to kick for the corners to keep the pressure.

And there were also glimpses that Ryan Lamb is approaching his best. His tactical kicking always asked questions, he looked for a half-break whenever possible and although the odd pass went to ground, was a considerable threat going forward.

In the end, the majority of Gloucester's good things paid dividends but it was the sort of contest that through no fault of their own, Gloucester could have lost.

Northampton were off and running early. The confidence gained from their victory at Leicester came shining through as early as the fifth minute when they kicked a penalty to touch and from the second line-out, hooker Dylan Hartley was last up with the try.

But the number of mistakes from both teams took the tempo out of the game. Northampton looked initially to kick towards Karl Pryce but he was safe under the ball and was also able to make a couple of meaty dents going forward before he was withdrawn at half-time because of injury.

For the Saints Soane Tonga'uhai impressed in the loose despite his dodgy scrummaging and the always combative Paul Tupai got through a mountain of work – but there was always a Gloucester defender – an Andy Hazell or Alex Brown or Mike Tindall to defuse Northampton's attacks.

Having weathered the storm – quite literally – the second half was all Gloucester and they could have scored immediately when Lamb's delicate cross-field kick gathered pace off the surface and just beat James Bailey into touch.

However, they should have scored after 52 minutes when Iain Balshaw, who had one of his mixed afternoons, made a lovely angled break but lost the ball in contact with Bailey outside him.

Gloucester plugged away. Tindall barged and battered, Allen snaked and probed, Lamb prompted and Bortolami kept the whole thing on course through the courage of his convictions.

With the scrum and line-out also operating well, the pressure had to tell and although time was running out, it finally did.

Walker had been introduced for Lamb in the closing stages and when the stand-off spread play to the far side after 72 minutes, Allen made a wonderfully elusive break and for the first time in the match there was a Gloucester player in support.

There was still a bit for Simpson-Daniel to do but the winger pinned back his ears and dived in at the far corner to send the Gloucester supporters around the ground into delirium.

The task was left to Walker to slot a very difficult conversion but the stand-off's kick was good and Gloucester held a two point lead. There was still enough in the tank for Nieto to make a crucial impression at a late scrum and then Gloucester simply wound down the clock through a series of pick and goes.

It was a vital victory and although not a classic contest, will live long in the memory of every Gloucester supporter who was there to see it.

Saints Team

15. Carlos Spencer 14. Bruce Reihana 13. Seamus Mallon 12. Robbie Kydd 11. Ben Cohen 10. Stephen Myler 9. Mark Robinson 1. Tom Smith 2. Dylan Hartley 3. Soane Tonga'uhia 4. David Gerard 5. Damien Browne 6. Paul Tupai 7. Darren Fox 8. Mark Hopley

16. Matias Cortese 17. Chris Budgen 18. Matt Lord 19. Christian Labit 20. Ben Lewitt 21. Johnny Howard 22. Matthieu Bourret

Gloucester Rugby Team

15. Iain Balshaw 14. Karl Pryce 13. Mike Tindall 12. Anthony Allen
11. James Simpson-Daniel 10. Ryan Lamb 9. Peter Richards 1. Nick
Wood 2. Olivier Azam 3. Carlos Nieto 4. Marco Bortolami 5. Alex
Brown 6. Peter Buxton 7. Andy Hazell 8. Luke Narraway

16. Mefin Davies 17. Christian Califano 18. Will James 19. Adam
Eustace 20. Rory Lawson 21. Willie Walker 22. James Bailey

HT: 5-0

Attendance: 13,529

JC