

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SUNDAY, 11 MARCH, 2007

BRILLIANT GLOUCESTER DENT LEICESTER'S HOPES

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 28 LEICESTER TIGERS 24

Blimey. This was a Guinness Premiership dust-up that mattered – and then some. Two of the countries leading heavyweights slammed together at Kingsholm to produce a wonderful match of contrasting styles, endless talking points, bucket loads of emotion and plenty of skill that leaves Gloucester second in the table following their second half fight-back.

This was a classic encounter between Leicester's all-mauling, general forward dominated mayhem and Gloucester's top of the ground manoeuvrability and it had a wonderfully partisan crowd enthralled.

It looked for vast periods of the contest that Leicester's ultra-physicality would carry the day – indeed they will be left wondering how they managed to score four tries and lose – but Gloucester somehow shifted the balance of the contest after the interval to claim the points.

Leicester were brilliant at the contact area. They somehow manage to disguise all manner of white-shirted bodies around the tackle and over the ball, they drove vigorously throughout and caused no end of bother up front.

Jordan Crane was tremendous and it took every ounce of effort from the likes of Alex Brown, whose workrate was second to none, Nick Wood, Olivier Azam and Jack Forster in the scrum and then Will James in the second half to halt the tide.

Throw in the expert efforts of Andy Hazell and Peter Buxton and Gloucester were able to plug enough holes where it mattered to stop the Tigers in full flow.

Gloucester then had the wherewithal to move the game around and it worked beautifully. In Peter Richards they had the player of the match. Not only did he offer a try but his all-round effort, potency at close quarters and willingness to break caused Leicester no end of heartache.

When conditions suit, he is a tremendous operator and combined with the growing maturity of Ryan Lamb, the delicious distributional skills of James Simpson-Daniel and Willie Walker's expert goal-kicking, Gloucester stole it.

This victory will mean a huge amount to the coaches too but it looked like Leicester, probably playing as well as they have for some weeks, would take some stopping, particularly when they raced into a 12-0 lead.

They scored first after 12 minutes when they drove powerfully infield from a well-taken line-out and when they extracted possession from the maul, Ian Humphreys kicked beautifully in behind Gloucester's flat defence for Alesana Tuilagi to score.

Leicester were certainly quicker and sharper in the opening exchanges. The potency of their driving play was coupled with a number of lovely breaks from Daryl Gibson and Dan Hipkiss and after 19 minutes they scored again.

Humphreys kicked down-field and Walker could not control the bouncing ball. A Gloucester line-out seemed to offer no immediate threat but when Ben Kay and Co. got through on Brown's knock-back, Leicester turned over possession and Tuilagi gave a scoring pass to Tom Vardell despite a brave tackle from Iain Balshaw in the opposite corner.

At 12-0 behind, Gloucester desperately needed something and Walker got them going with a 22nd minute penalty before Richards changed the course of the game with Gloucester's first try. Walker's kick looked to be heading straight out but Vesty kept the ball in play and when Vardell got in all sorts of bother under pressure from James Bailey, Gloucester made them pay.

Forster drove possession up again and when it came right, Richards made a lovely angled break to beat the cover and score in the corner.

A Walker penalty after 38 minutes took Gloucester to within a point but right on the interval, Leicester scored what could have been a decisive third try. Again they took advantage of Gloucester's flat defence when Tuilagi got on the end of Vesty's little grubber to grab his second try and send the Tigers in 19-11 ahead.

Gloucester needed a score at the start of the second half and they hit Leicester with the mother and father of starts. Re-invigorated, they began knocking the Tigers back at the contact area and when a line-out dissolved into a maul, Richards sensed his opportunity, shot down the blindside, threw a dummy and sent Hazell over for the score.

Walker then landed a 45th minute penalty to level the scores at 19-19 and when Richards was again involved in a quick tap penalty that sent Narraway away down the right, Leicester were in full retreat as Gloucester turned the tide. Walker's resulting penalty nudged them ahead for the first time and there was no looking back.

Despite Gloucester's ability at switching the angle and intensity of their attacks, Leicester's forward tactics were still a huge threat when they came within range and when they shunted another mammoth drive from a line-out infield, Humphreys picked out Geordan Murphy on the burst to score Leicester's fourth try and take them 24-22 ahead with 14 minutes remaining.

It would have been quite easy for Gloucester at this stage to have curled up but they raised themselves for another huge effort. They were rewarded with a penalty after 73 minutes. Walker curled in majestically to take the hosts 25-24 ahead and he was on target three minutes later with an even better effort to seal the points and end a wonderful game between two of the best teams in the country.

Gloucester Team

15. Willie Walker 14. James Bailey 13. James Simpson-Daniel
12. Anthony Allen 11. Iain Balshaw 10. Ryan Lamb 9. Peter Richards
1. Nick Wood 2. Olivier Azam 3. Jack Forster 4. Will James 5. Alex
Brown 6. Peter Buxton 7. Andy Hazell 8. Luke Narraway

16. Mefin Davies 17. Patrice Collazo 18. Adam Eustace 19. James
Forrester 20. Haydn Thomas 21. Rudi Keil 22. Jon Goodridge

Leicester Tigers Team

15. Sam Vesty 14. Tom Varndell 13. Dan Hipkiss 12. Daryl Gibson
11. Alesana Tuilagi 10. Ian Humphreys 9. Frank Murphy 1. Marcos Ivan
Ayerza 2. Gavin Hickie 3. Michael Holford 4. Leo Cullen 5. Ben Kay
6. Tom Croft 7. Shane Jennings 8. Jordan Crane

16. James Buckland 17. Alex Moreno 18. Brett Deacon 19. Luke
Abraham 20. Scott Bemand 21. Leon Lloyd 22. Geordan Murphy

HT: 11 - 19

Attendance: 12,000

JC