

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, MARCH 17, 2007

**BONUS POINT WIN KEEPS PRESSURE ON
GLOUCESTER RUGBY 34 NEC HARLEQUINS 25**

It is always hard to pull to pieces a bonus point victory that maintains Gloucester's relentless push towards the play-offs, but this was not a performance delivered with total conviction or without its problems.

Harlequins could have been buried alive under an early avalanche of errors, Gloucester power and points but as the contest wore on they were never more than a score away from turning the whole shooting match on its head and that will displease the Kingsholm-ites intensely.

Gloucester didn't have the snap or killer instinct with which they put Leicester away last weekend and again a visiting team to Kingsholm scored four tries. In fact, Quins deserve a huge amount of credit for maintaining their efforts the way they did in the latter stages.

For the hosts, there was another sparkling performance of energy and force of tackle from Andy Hazell. He makes his hits in a different physical stratosphere to many and once again he was disruptive, committed and always available in attack.

There was another solid, controlled display from Nick Wood and Jack Forster and although glimpses of some brilliant finishing by James Forrester and James Bailey, Gloucester never looked the full package on a disjointed afternoon.

They got off to the perfect start, though. James Simpson-Daniel turned Quins around with a neat kick and from the line-out Tani Fuga's throw disappeared over his jumpers for Wood to take the catch and make the line for the try.

A charge from Mark Foster off his wing managed to keep the pressure on and with Quins turning over plenty of ball at the tackle area, struggling at the line-out and suffering in the scrummage, Gloucester were well on top. And when Olivier Azam straightened an attack that was going nowhere, Willie Walker and Hazell combined down the right and the flanker sent Bailey on a dashing, darting run through a host of Quins defenders to score brilliantly and take Gloucester 17-0 ahead.

But that is when the momentum began to die. Quins had made a bright start in the opening exchanges and they came again – looking to run round Gloucester through the likes Stuart Abbott, Simon Keogh and Tom Williams and they were on the board with a 31st minute penalty from Adrian Jarvis.

And when Anthony Allen ran into a big midfield tackle that turned the ball over, Gloucester never recovered control of possession and when Peter Richards looked to off-load under pressure, Andre Vos swept up the ball and gave Keogh the scoring pass from 20 metres.

It was exactly what Gloucester didn't need and they were required to re-discover their spark and regain the initiative. They did manage a third try before the break and it was a beauty.

Although Walker missed a penalty, Mike Brown attempted to carry possession out of defence and Jarvis kicked high towards Ryan Lamb. Under pressure, the stand-off held a brilliant catch, dummied his way through a thicket of defenders and fed Forrester on a break who stepped away from the cover brilliantly to score.

Walker's conversion made it 24-8 but Quins struck back immediately after the re-start when Andrew Mehrtens, on for the injured Jarvis, picked out a brilliant little pass to Tom Williams and the visitors had cut the gap to 24-13.

For long periods of the second half, when Mehrtens started to stress Gloucester's defence around the fringes, Quins played pretty well

everything considered and through Chris Hala'ufia, the big number eight, Gloucester were under pressure.

But when Walker made it 27-13 with a 46 minute penalty, Gloucester scored another long range try of considerable brilliance. Bailey held the kick-off and fed Richards, who went on a trademark break up the touchline before Alex Brown, Peter Buxton and Mefin Davies added weight to the attack. With Quins in retreat, Lamb kicked across field and Foster took the catch to score.

That seemed to be that. Gloucester were 34-13 to the good and looked set for a convincing victory but then it all went wrong.

Quins mounted a good deal of pressure in the final quarter, kept the ball close to their forwards and scored a third try after 74 minutes when Fuga scored from close range following well-delivered ruck ball.

Even the score failed to provide the spark Gloucester needed for a rally late on and from the last play of the game, Steve So'oialo, who had been lively from scrum-half, took a quick tap penalty and created a fourth try for Brown and provided Kingsholm with a pretty hollow finish.

Gloucester Team

15. Willie Walker 14. James Bailey 13. James Simpson-Daniel
12. Anthony Allen 11. Mark Foster 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. James Forrester

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

NEC Harlequins Team

15. Mike Brown 14. Tom Williams 13. Hal Luscombe 12. Stuart Abbott
11. Simon Keogh 10. Adrian Jarvis 9. Andy Gomarsall 1. Ceri Jones
2. Tani Fuga 3. Ricky Nebbett 4. Ollie Kohn 5. Jim Evans 6. Andre Vos
7. Paul Volley 8. Chris Hala'ufia

16. James Hayter 17. Mark Lambert 18. Nicolas Spanghero 19. Tom
Guest 20. Steve So'oialo 21. Andrew Mehrrens 22. Tosh Masson

HT: 24 - 8

Attendance: 10,391

JC