

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

FRIDAY, APRIL 13, 2007

GLOUCESTER SUFFER NEWCASTLE AGONY

NEWCASTLE FALCONS 19 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 12

In a generally low quality, high error-rate contest, Toby Flood's all-round excellence navigated Newcastle to a deserved success over Gloucester.

When the only try of the game comes from a first-half charge down you immediately get the idea this was an encounter high on endeavour and purpose but low on execution and control because although both teams traded possession and territory frequently the overall threat, particularly from Gloucester, was minimal.

It was not until the last 10 minutes that the visitors found enough urgency in themselves to threaten Newcastle's defensive line but the alarming thing for them was their lack of composure and cutting edge when in dangerous areas.

Gloucester looked like they needed to score from every move and it simply created a host of errors. Their defeat was compounded by a suspected fractured leg to Mike Tindall, while both Iain Balshaw and James Bailey limped off in the second half.

And for the second match in succession against the Falcons, Gloucester struggled at the contact area. Newcastle are very much like a Celtic League side in that they swamp this area with numbers and it simply creates a free-for-all they failed to deal with.

Newcastle's ability here more than made up for a disintegrating scrummage – an area Gloucester thoroughly dominated through the front row work of Nick Wood, Olivier Azam and Carlos Nieto – and a wonky line-out but in the likes of Ben Woods, Geoff Parling and Phil Dowson the Falcons got all over the ball and created no end of problems.

It at least allowed Flood and Co. the chance to strut their stuff. Flood in particular looks a diamond talent. He is a genuine threat with ball in hand, kicked astutely tactically in the second half and also landed two extremely good kicks at goal.

Without Tindall, Balshaw and James Simpson-Daniel, Gloucester will be concerned by their lack of penetration behind the scrum and here they looked flustered and not in control.

The telling moment came after 17 minutes with Gloucester 6-3 ahead thanks to two Ryan Lamb penalties. The forwards, through Marco Bortolami, Wood, Jake Boer, Peter Buxton and Co. had driven hard into the Newcastle half but when play came back, Jonny Wilkinson came through and charged down Lamb's attempted drop-goal.

Golden Balls scooped up possession and made ground up the centre but realising he didn't have the pace to go all the way, off-loaded to Flood who cut and weaved his way forward, past Balshaw and up to the line. Although Boer got back to make a great tackle the England man had enough strength to stretch over the line.

Newcastle's 10-6 lead became 13-6 when Wilkinson landed a 34th minute penalty after Bortolami was adjudged to have pulled down Andy Perry at a line-out and although Gloucester's scrum dominance allowed Lamb to shave three points off the lead, Newcastle led at the break.

Newcastle's intent was obvious immediately after the re-start when Jamie Noon ran back Rory Lawson's kick, Wilkinson made a midfield break and John Rudd got close to the line before a combination of Boer and Bailey smuggled the ball into touch.

Although they lost Wilkinson after 55 minutes, Flood kept them ticking over. Gloucester had plenty of willing carriers but the structure to get in behind Newcastle's defence was not firing and their frustration grew.

Flood landed an excellent 60th minute penalty for a high tackle to make the score 16-9 and although they were only a converted score ahead, there was not a sense Gloucester would break them down.

Flood made it 19-9 with a 67 minute penalty as the hosts responded from a period of Gloucester pressure and they really should have put the game beyond Gloucester when May hit a lovely angle from Flood's pass, burst clear and towards the line only to be denied a try by Pete Richards' excellent cover tackle.

It was now that Gloucester increased their urgency. Anthony Allen got away a couple of times as did Lamb through midfield they lacked the off-load support to score the try that would have got them within range for a spectacular smash and grab but Newcastle held on, and closed out the win.

The losing bonus point was enough to guarantee Gloucester's place in the top four of the Premiership but this was not a performance to relive for the men from Kingsholm.

Falcons Team

15. Matt Burke 14. John Rudd 13. Mathew Tait 12. Jamie Noon
11. Toby Flood 10. Jonny Wilkinson 9. Lee Dickson 1. Cieron McDonald
2. Matt Thompson 3. Micky Ward 4. Andy Perry 5. Andy Buist
6. Geoff Parling 7. Ben Woods 8. Phil Dowson

16. David Wilson 17. Andy Long 18. Jason Oakes 19. Brent Wilson
20. Loki Crichton 21. James Grindal 22. Tom May

Gloucester Rugby Team

15. Iain Balshaw 14. James Bailey 13. Mike Tindall 12. Anthony Allen
11. Mark Foster 10. Ryan Lamb 9. Rory Lawson 1. Nick Wood
2. Olivier Azam 3. Carlos Nieto 4. Will James 5. Marco Bortolami
6. Peter Buxton 7. Jake Boer 8. James Forrester

16. Mefin Davies 17. Jack Forster 18. Alex Brown 19. Luke Narraway
20. Peter Richards 21. Willie Walker 22. Rudi Keil

HT: 13-9

Attendance: 7,016

JC