

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 27, 2007

SINBAD'S BRACE EARNS A DRAW

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 18 NEWCASTLE FALCONS 18

Two tries from James Simpson-Daniel preserved Gloucester's interest in the EDF Energy Cup – but that should not overshadow another disjointed and error-strewn performance.

For vast periods of this enthralling contest Gloucester could not think themselves out of an alarming malaise – despite controlling territory and creating a number of excellent chances in the opening quarter.

Their recent difficulties in the line-out again surfaced in the first-half and it also spread to the scrum. Combine that with a number of new faces jostling for space in the squad and the general disjointed nature of Gloucester's performance and it becomes clear how they struggled.

Newcastle were exceptionally more than the sum of their parts and had Tom May not somehow knocked on after chasing his own chip to the line at the fag-end of the contest, the Falcons would have been home and hosed.

They drove the ball well, protected the ball better in contact and in Toby Flood had the sort of player capable of mixing up his box of tricks to maximum threat.

Newcastle were off and running as early as the second minute. Hall Charlton fed Flood and he picked out a long pass towards Ollie Phillips who scored with far too much comfort down the left.

It was the sort of general sloppiness that characterised Gloucester's performance.

There were some excellent contributions from Iain Balshaw – a constant line-breaking threat from full-back, some nifty footwork from Anthony Allen and some flashes of pace and power from Akapusi Qera and Will James but as a unit Gloucester struggled.

Gloucester coughed up a great chance after five minutes when Flood shelled Paterson's high kick and Qera thundered through to the left before Gloucester lost the ball in contact. From the scrum, John Rudd knocked on and Allen almost reached the line before the Falcons came in and shut him out.

It took the home side 18 minutes to get their first points on the board – Paterson landing a penalty after the Falcons had dived on the ball – but it was the visitors who controlled the ball far better at the contact area and in the brilliant Mark Sorenson, had the forward of the match.

There were some excellent contributions too from Brent Wilson and Joe McDonnell as Newcastle more than held their own in the tight phases and drove the ball with real purpose at times.

When they scored again, two minutes before the break, it was impossible to say they didn't deserve it. Flood started the danger when he chipped and went after his own ball but Gloucester simply couldn't clear their lines. When James Bailey was tracked down by Rudd, the Falcons kicked the penalty to touch and hooker Matt Thompson completed the job by being driven over.

That made the score 12-3 to Newcastle and gave them every chance of earning a surprise victory.

They held the lead until the last quarter and when Paterson was replaced by Willie Walker following a heavy tackle by Rudd, the replacement stand-off kicked a 60th minute penalty to cut the gap to six points.

But that looked futile when Flood banged over penalties after 63 and 64 minutes as Gloucester struggled for a way into the contest again.

At 18-6 behind, the home side looked done and dusted, however each substitution had created more energy and it was now they came to the fore.

Andy Titterrell, Luke Narraway and Gareth Cooper suddenly got Gloucester moving and playing with some energy and pace. Titterrell and Narraway both carried straight and hard, while Cooper's distributional skills were exceptional.

Suddenly, Gloucester were on the front foot and it was the Newcastle forwards who were shoved out of the way. With 11 minutes remaining, the hosts got the try that kicked open the door.

Marco Bortolami tapped down from a line-out, Cooper and Walker combined and Simpson-Daniel cut a lovely angled break to sprint to the line.

The tide was now turning – Gloucester suddenly found some energy from somewhere and began looking dangerous. Balshaw, Simpson-Daniel and Bailey all combined with terrifying speed down the right in a tremendous counter-attack that came to nothing but by then the home crowd also scented a recovery.

That recovery should have counted for nothing when May was left in yards of space to chase his own kick – only to fumble the ball at the crucial moment – and with that last reprieve, Gloucester salvaged the game.

Adam Balding, James and Balshaw sustained the move at first as Newcastle tackled themselves to a standstill but when Cooper and Walker again combined, Simpson-Daniel leapt in to score the equalising try.

Walker had the conversion to win it but that was stretching the bounds too far – Newcastle were worth at the very least a draw, and quite possibly, much more.

Gloucester Team

15. Iain Balshaw 14. Karl Pryce 13. James Simpson-Daniel 12. Anthony Allen 11. Mark Foster 10. Chris Paterson 9. Rory Lawson 1. Alasdair Dickinson 2. Jeremy Paul 3. Christian Califano 4. Will James 5. Marco Bortolami 6. Alasdair Strokosch 7. Akapusi Qera 8. Adam Balding

16. Andy Titterrell 17. Jack Forster 18. Jonathan Pendlebury 19. Luke Narraway 20. Gareth Cooper 21. Willie Walker 22. James Bailey

Newcastle Falcons Team

15. Tom May 14. Ollie Phillips 13. Tim Visser 12. Steve Jones 11. John Rudd 10. Toby Flood 9. Hall Charlton 1. Joe McDonnell 2. Matt Thompson 3. David Wilson 4. Andy Perry 5. Mark Sorenson 6. Geoff Parling 7. Brent Wilson 8. Russell Winter

16. Andy Long 17. Micky Ward 18. Jason Oakes 19. Ed Williamson 20. James Grindal 21. Alex Tait 22. Adam Dehaty

HT: 3 - 12

Attendance: 10,358

JC