

GLoucester Rugby

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 9, 2007

ULSTER STUNNED BY FIRST-HALF BLITZ

ULSTER 14 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 32

One of the most remarkable 22 minutes in Heineken Cup history set Gloucester on their way to a bonus point victory over Ulster after they wreaked havoc at Ravenhill.

It was remarkable stuff, even by the standards of this competition. When Gloucester were not devouring every last mistake offered up by Ulster in a crippling opening exchange for the hosts, they were going the length of the field from their own five metre scrum in a stunning opening assault.

To say Gloucester's battery of points has never been seen before would be stretching it very slightly but the calculated precision with which they established a 29-0 lead at a point a minute took some believing.

Ravenhill might not be the place it once was in the Heineken Cup although it is still a formidable fortress but the hosts cut their own throats with a raft of errors in the first quarter that had the likes of Ryan Lamb, Mike Tindall, Iain Balshaw and James Simpson-Daniel rubbing their hands with glee.

The potential was always there for Gloucester to produce such a devastating display of finishing and firepower but never in their wildest dreams did they expect it to arrive like this. Lamb said afterwards that Gloucester had been 'seething' for letting the game slip away against Wasps a week ago and here was some sort of redemption.

"We did a lot of really good things last week against Wasps but the way we lost it left the boys seething – tonight was a chance for us to answer those questions and in many ways we did so," Lamb said.

“It is a great start for us in the competition but nothing more than that. We have done what we came here to do and that was to win – I think everyone can be delighted with the way we played.”

A year ago, Lamb and Co. were being dealt the harshest of lessons against Leinster. Twelve months later and the development is there for all to see. Throw in another heavy duty, merciless carrying performance from Mike Tindall and a dash of brilliance from Simpson-Daniel and Balshaw and it easy to appreciate Gloucester’s all-court threat.

Away from Lamb, his forwards were excellent. Peter Buxton is developing into a totem of excellence in this current squad. Not only did he marshal Gloucester’s second half defensive effort but he carried ball too. Add in a withering scrummaging performance, the telescopic dominance of Alex Brown and another rapidly maturing contribution from Luke Narraway and Gloucester had enough all over the field.

Their first try came after eight minutes and indicated at their ability to run from deep. Balshaw sensed a gap and broke free, sending Narraway on a gallop up the centre. Lamb and Tindall combined as Gloucester swept forward before the stand-off sent Akapusi Qera clattering up the centre into the 22. When possession came back, Lamb kicked in behind Ulster’s defence and Lesley Vainikolo claimed the try.

Two minutes later came the play of the game. In theory, Gloucester should have been defending their own five metre scrum but when they have the ball, anything is possible.

Lamb and Tindall launched the first wave, catching Ulster unaware. Balshaw took over, injecting pace before he off-loaded to Simpson-Daniel on the outside. Space was at a premium but he managed to get his pass back inside to Balshaw and he sent Tindall to the line past Paddy Wallace.

In the blink of an eye, Gloucester had gone the length – as a statement of intent it was brutal.

Lamb failed to convert either score but at 10-0 Gloucester were buzzing. Ulster did have their moments – most coming from centre Andrew Trimble and when he took over from Roger Wilson and Neil Best bumped off Lamb, the home side sensed an opening before Best dropped the ball.

However, the momentum was with Gloucester. Narraway charged off a scrum, Qera took over and with Lamb, Tindall and Vainikolo all breaking the first line of defence, Lamb was able to pick his spot, dance back against Ulster's disorganised defence and dot down try number three.

Worse was to follow for Ulster after 23 minutes. Under pressure at a scrum, Wallace ran flat across Gloucester's defence but Lamb picked him off and raced forward. Realising he didn't have the gas to make the line, he was aware enough to find Simpson-Daniel who had enough pace to beat Tommy Bowe to the corner.

Lamb converted and Gloucester were 22-0 ahead with a bonus point in the bag. And still it had not finished. Balshaw was the next to score – Gloucester plundering from another Ulster turn-over. Isaac Boss got swept up from a scrum on halfway, Simpson-Daniel gathered possession and sent Balshaw in for try number five.

Ulster looked dead and buried now. They had not been able to get into the contest physically and had simply made too many mistakes. However, when Gloucester failed to clear their lines, prop Bryan Young carried back, Boss and Wallace combined and Trimble almost made the line with another great break.

The visitors arrived in numbers and Matt McCullough was driven over for the score. And then, right on the whistle, Ulster scored again. For the first time in the half they had been able to mount a concerted period of pressure and Wallace scored with a lovely angled break past Tindall.

That made the score 29-14 and Gloucester could have been forgiven for the odd anxious look. The second period failed to live up to the first in terms of opportunities and for long periods Gloucester were asked to defend.

But they did it manfully – brilliantly led by Buxton, prop Nick Wood, Narraway and Qera knocked back most things Ulster could throw at them despite being asked to tackle for long spells. They hardly ever got the freedom to attack with the verve of the first-half but Lamb made the game safe with 68th minute penalty.

With more conviction to play, Ulster had a real crack in the second half but Gloucester kept them out – as a start to the competition, it was almost perfect.

Ulster Team

15. Bryn Cunningham 14. Tommy Bowe 13. Andrew Trimble 12. Rob Dewey 11. Mark McCrea 10. Paddy Wallace 9. Isaac Boss 1. Justin Fitzpatrick 2. Rory Best 3. Bryan Young 4. Justin Harrison 5. Carlo Del Fava 6. Matt McCullough 7. Neil Best 8. Roger Wilson

16. Nigel Brady 17. Declan Fitzpatrick 18. Ryan Caldwell 19. Kieron Dawson 20. Kieran Campbell 21. David Humphreys 22. Mark Bartholomeusz

Gloucester Rugby Team

15. Iain Balshaw 14. James Simpson-Daniel 13. Mike Tindall 12. Anthony Allen 11. Lesley Vainikolo 10. Ryan Lamb 9. Rory Lawson 1. Nick Wood 2. Olivier Azam 3. Carlos Nieto 4. Peter Buxton 5. Alex Brown 6. Alasdair Strokosch 7. Akapusi Qera 8. Luke Narraway

16. Andy Titterrell 17. Christian Califano 18. Marco Bortolami 19. Gareth Delves 20. Mike Prendergast 21. Chris Paterson 22. Olly Morgan

HT: 14 - 29

Attendance: 13,000