

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 24, 2007

VAINIKOLO'S DOUBLE RESCUES VICTORY

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 27 HARLEQUINS 25

For the second week running Gloucester had to grit their teeth to get themselves out of an almighty jam to retain their lead at the top of the Guinness Premiership.

If last Friday against the Ospreys they showed enough collective savvy to dig out a cherished Heineken Cup victory, against Harlequins they unearthed a second half intensity level that overturned a sorry and potentially fatal first-half showing to rescue four more vital points.

For roughly half of this enthralling contest, Harlequins looked very much like the real deal. Even when restricted in their own half Gloucester could make very little sense of the brilliant David Strettle from deep and in Chris Robshaw had the outstanding forward of the match.

Gloucester were cut to ribbons in the first 30 minutes – unable to stop the flow of Strettle or contain a Quins pack that ran straight over the top of the home effort.

It took a mighty response to prevent a very nasty defeat but the fact Quins outscored Gloucester three tries to four tells its own story.

Although careless and defensively weak in the first-half, the one thing Gloucester's didn't do was panic.

They may have been the thick end of 15 points behind at one stage but never once did they think the contest was beyond them and in the second half the pressure told.

Quins will feel mighty sore they didn't even earn a penalty in the second half – a reverse for a stray Gloucester punch their only salvation – and pretty mystifying given their advantage in the early stages, but this was another cracking encounter rich in young English talent of which Strettle was the star.

Quins were already 3-0 ahead when they scored their first try after seven minutes. Strettle launched the first wave, slicing through Gloucester's defence before de Wet Barry and Robshaw arrived beneath the sticks to clear out the ball. Gomarsall's pass put Simon Keogh in at the corner.

Worse was to follow. Gloucester simply couldn't contain Strettle in broken field. It was his slashing break that caused havoc and stand-off Chris Malone – always somehow at his best against Gloucester – nudged a little kick in behind for Ugo Monye to score.

Gloucester's world looked bleak. Despite the occasional snippet of quality from Chris Paterson and some heavy carrying from Will James, they were lethargic and off the pace.

It took them until the start of the second quarter to threaten and when James Simpson-Daniel came off his wing into the line, Andy Hazell sustained the move and Anthony Allen weaved behind even further before picking out a long ball for Lesley Vainikolo to score his first try at Kingsholm.

But when Hazell was sinbinned for a tackle that was deemed dangerous on Monye, Quins took advantage and opened up a 20-7 lead. Malone took Gomarsall's high pass from a scrum but sold the simplest of dummies and wandered over unopposed.

Paterson did kick a penalty after to make it 10-20 but Harlequins scored their fourth try after 32 minutes. They maintained possession from a driven line-out and the impressive Nick Easter sent Keogh in at the short side for the second time. Although the prognosis was bleak, it was not terminal for Gloucester.

They started the second half with much more vigour and intensity – one thunderous driving maul clattered all of 30 metres as the home-town pack suddenly upped the pressure. Marco Bortolami, the ceaseless Hazell and Andy Titterrell all plugged away. Quins suddenly were not able to run straight over the top, Gloucester drove them back around the fringes and traded well at the break down.

It took them four minutes to get back into the game and it was a lovely try. Olly Morgan launched the assault after fielding brilliantly – he was immaculate and brave beneath the high ball all afternoon – and Patrice Collazo kicked on as the momentum changed. Paterson found Tindall in midfield and the England man sent Allen on a break before taking his return pass to score behind the sticks.

In an instant, the tempo of the game changed. Quins came under pressure at the tackle area and lost Gomarsall to the sinbin for what can only have been a team off-side offence because he was not the closest player to the incident that prevented quick Gloucester ball.

And then, prop Ceri Jones went too – dispatched for another offence at the tackle area – as the pressure mounted.

To be fair to Quins, they defended brilliantly when behind on numbers. Robshaw led the way – hurling himself at Gloucester forwards during a frenetic period of attacking that looked to be heading nowhere.

But from a ruck, Vainikolo linked with Narraway before stepping brilliantly off his right foot and speeding to the line for his second try. Paterson kicked the conversion and Gloucester were ahead 27-25.

They then spent the best part of 20 minutes preventing Quins a way back into the game. It was frantic at times and Quins kept the ball close enough to Gloucester's line for long enough periods to cause no end of havoc.

In the end though, Gloucester just about did enough – it was close – at times, too close.

Gloucester Team

15. Olly Morgan 14. James Simpson-Daniel 13. Mike Tindall
12. Anthony Allen 11. Lesley Vainikolo 10. Chris Paterson 9. Gareth
Cooper 1. Patrice Collazo 2. Andy Titterrell 3. Carlos Nieto 4. Will
James 5. Marco Bortolami 6. Peter Buxton 7. Andy Hazell 8. Gareth
Delve

16. Olivier Azam 17. Alasdair Dickinson 18. Luke Narraway
19. Alasdair Strokosch 20. Rory Lawson 21. Ryan Lamb 22. Iain
Balshaw

Harlequins Team

15. Mike Brown 14. Simon Keogh 13. David Strettle 12. de Wet Barry
11. Ugo Monye 10. Chris Malone 9. Andy Gomarsall 1. Ceri Jones
2. Tani Fuga 3. Mike Ross 4. Ollie Kohn 5. Nicolas Spanghero 6. Chris
Robshaw 7. Paul Volley 8. Nick Easter

16. Chris Brooker 17. Ricky Nebbett 18. James Percival 19. Will
Skinner 20. Steve So'oialo 21. Adrian Jarvis 22. Jordan Turner-Hall

HT: 13 - 25

Attendance: 13,506

JC