

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 23, 2007

BALSHAW AND AZAM SEAL VITAL VICTORY

NEWCASTLE FALCONS 13 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 20

It will be a rollickingly good Christmas down Gloucester way, that's for sure.

They maintained their lead at the summit of the Guinness Premiership with a narrow, tense but organisationally supreme performance against Newcastle that will have the regular inhabitants of Kingsholm smacking their lips in anticipation of the visit of Bristol next Saturday.

This might not have been the all-singing, all-dancing spectacle that many secretly hoped for given the number of outstanding talents on show but it was a right old ding-dong, that's for sure and Gloucester had enough about them to close out another vital win.

Gloucester's foundations were laid through their scrummage – an area where the entire eight set their stall out to create a platform from which they could build.

Nick Wood, up against the celebrated All Black Carl Hayman, continued his remarkable form with another outstanding individual performance that caught the eye and with the likes of Luke Narryway causing no end of grief at the breakdown, Alasdair Stokosch carrying hard and Mike Tindall and Anthony Allen retaining their composure in the middle of the field, Newcastle were simply strangled of ideas.

Whereas Gloucester are a threat when their back five carry ball and they can therefore play multi-phases from the front foot, Newcastle's threat is much more structured. The likes of Jonny Wilkinson, Toby Flood and Mathew Tait launch from rucks but they simply ran aground on Gloucester's organisational shape and structure.

This was a victory full of good things and head coach Dean Ryan was delighted. Gloucester looked a very good all-round team, in control of key areas and who are used to winning significant matches and were never really threatened despite Flood's excellence, Tait's extreme pace and Wilkinson's brilliant kicking game.

Neither Allen or Tindall jumped out of the line, the back three worked their socks off and despite a hair-raising last few moments when Tait and Flood had a real go, Gloucester were just about always in control.

They trailed to a sixth minute Wilkinson penalty when they scored their first try. Opportunities were limited in the first half but when this one came knocking, the visitors took it.

Gareth Delve, a mighty presence off the back of the scrum, got in behind Newcastle's first wave of defence, Gareth Cooper took over on a lovely break and Tindall, magnificent throughout, hammered forward close to the line.

When possession came back, Marco Bortolami found Allen in space and he gave an overhead pass to Iain Balshaw to score. It gave an indication of Gloucester's potential potency and had Tindall found Balshaw in the second half, Gloucester would have won with even greater comfort.

Gloucester were very much in control, despite the energy of Andy Long and the efforts of Ben Woods and Geoff Parling but when Olivier Azam was caught in a spot of naughties with Hayman on the floor, scrum-half Lee Dickson found Russell Winter down the short side and Parling reached the line to score a try that was needless from Gloucester's point of view. It was exactly what Newcastle needed because it did knock Gloucester onto the back foot for a time and it took a while for them to regain their composure.

But regain it they did with a second try nine minutes before the break. Ryan Lamb kicked a penalty to the touch, Delve held a towering catch at the tail of a line-out and much to the dismay of most at Kingston Park, hooker Azam was bundled over to score.

Lamb again converted to put Gloucester 14-10 ahead. The stand-off made that 17-10 three minutes into the second half when he landed a penalty after Newcastle were caught off-side.

Gloucester should have put the game to bed then. Narraway, an intelligent footballer who runs great lines from deep, was involved in a move that allowed Tindall to pick his way through midfield but he held the ball with Balshaw screaming for a pass outside him.

The full-back almost took a ball from Simpson-Daniel from deep but couldn't hold it but was solid in defensive work and a threat from deep.

Newcastle did have their moments – a Wilkinson pass to Tait was called back for forward and they enjoyed plenty of the ball – but they simply failed to get in behind Gloucester enough to cause any long-term damage when in possession, mainly because nobody jumped out of the defensive line and the forwards worked themselves to a standstill.

Wilkinson did kick a 70th minute penalty to make it 13-17 but almost immediately Lamb responded when Newcastle were adjudged in from the side and it made the game safe.

Gloucester closed the game out and when Andy Perry threw the ball into touch in a desperate late attempt at a try, Gloucester could celebrate a very early but very welcome Christmas present.

Falcons Team

15. Mathew Tait 14. Tom May 13. Jamie Noon 12. Toby Flood 11. John Rudd 10. Jonny Wilkinson 9. Lee Dickson 1. Jon Golding 2. Andy Long 3. Carl Hayman 4. Andy Perry 5. Mark Sorenson 6. Geoff Parling 7. Ben Woods 8. Russell Winter

16. Rob Vickers 17. David Wilson 18. Sean Tomes 19. Brent Wilson 20. James Grindal 21. Tim Visser 22. Ollie Phillips

Gloucester Rugby Team

15. Iain Balshaw 14. James Simpson-Daniel 13. Mike Tindall
12. Anthony Allen 11. Lesley Vainikolo 10. Ryan Lamb 9. Gareth
Cooper 1. Nick Wood 2. Olivier Azam 3. Carlos Nieto 4. Marco
Bortolami 5. Alex Brown 6. Alasdair Strokosch 7. Luke Narraway
8. Gareth Delve

16. Andy Titterrell 17. Patrice Collazo 18. Will James 19. Peter Buxton
20. Rory Lawson 21. Willie Walker 22. Leon Lloyd

HT: 10 - 14

Attendance: 9,612

JC