

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 29, 2007

BONUS POINT WIN SENDS GLOUCESTER CLEAR AT TOP

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 27 BRISTOL RUGBY 0

Gloucester can play more dazzling rugby than this, of that there can be no doubt, but that would do their all-round mastery in this west country dust-up a severe disservice.

There is more than one dimension to Gloucester these days and in tricky under-foot conditions and a slicing, swirling breeze, Dean Ryan's side took another significant step forward in their development cycle.

They now have more than simply attacking verve and creativity.

Here, they defended superbly, were able to reorganise on a regular basis because of injuries and took four of the five opportunities in the game as an indicator of their ruthlessness and against forceful, gritty and determined opponents to manipulate the contest their way.

This time last season they would not have won as convincingly against the same opponents in the same conditions – and this was despite a serious off-day for Ryan Lamb with his goalkicking.

Bristol looked sharp and organised in the first-half. They off-loaded very well in the tackle and did plenty of good things with the ball in contact and with Andrew Blowers carrying possession well, Bristol threatened to be more than a handful.

However, they produced a stream of errors, particularly at the line-out that drastically reduced their chances and when Gloucester's forwards got to grips with the sticky conditions, there was no looking back.

Olivier Azam was the go-to man – when he wasn't knee deep in a ruck, he was carrying no end of ball in his usual belligerent style, he scrummaged his socks off and was a menace all afternoon. He was the talisman Gloucester needed and with the likes of Marco Bortolami, back in the hot-house and firing, Luke Narryway and Alex Brown all in the thick of the action, Gloucester had more than enough to subdue Blowers and Co.

Gloucester were only 3-0 ahead when they scored their first try after 16 minutes. Bristol initially defended exceptionally well down the short side to win a line-out but Scott Linklater's throw was picked off by Brown and Azam was off and through the thicket of defenders to pounce on the ball and score.

Bristol then dominated territorially for the next 10 minutes but were unable to make much of their good approach work tell. Sean Hohnock got through plenty of work and David Hill buzzed about with plenty of intent but Gloucester's work off the ball and defensive structure kept the visitors in check.

And what you cannot do with this Gloucester team is give them turn-over ball in dangerous areas. When Bristol coughed up possession in midfield, James Simpson-Daniel and Lesley Vainikolo shunted possession deep into Bristol territory and when Rory Lawson combined with Lamb, the stand-off kicked brilliantly cross-field for Leon Lloyd, who took a very good catch to score.

Lloyd was only on the field because of an injury to Mike Tindall and it was a sign of Gloucester's growing maturity that through the reorganisations that went on they didn't lose their shape or composure.

The second half was equally as full-on and with the likes of Azam and Brown in full war paint, Gloucester's pack nudged their way ahead. One tackle by Brown epitomised the commitment and intensity of the contest and Bristol simply floundered against tackle after tackle.

If truth be told, there was a bonus point there should Gloucester want it and when Simpson-Daniel unloaded a soft-shoe shuffle down the left, the home side were close to locating it.

Again the move involved Azam, tapping a quick penalty to himself before finding the hugely impressive Willie Walker, who had motored into the line from full-back. With numbers outside him, Walker sent out a long ball to Simpson-Daniel, who kept his balance superbly, drew the last man with a little dummy to Vainikolo and scored in the corner. Although Lamb missed the conversion, Gloucester were 20-0 ahead and home and hosed. It took them only another five minutes to grab their fourth try and it was a beauty.

Again Azam was its heart – thudding down the right with bodies hanging off him, Peter Buxton took over with another good surge, Lawson sped up to take his pass and was aware enough to stick Lloyd away with a brilliant off-load for his second try of the game and fifth of the season.

This time Lamb nudged over the penalty to take Gloucester 27-0 ahead and that was that. There was still time for Matt Salter to get sinbinned for a ridiculous lunge at Vainikolo at the side of a ruck and for Bortolami to be sent to the cooler for an offence at a line-out.

This was a victory built on team ethics from Gloucester, forged in the fires of Azam and clinically dispatched by the likes of Simpson-Daniel and Lloyd. There is no doubt Gloucester can play better than this but in the results business, this was a big one for Dean Ryan and his side.

Gloucester Team

15. Willie Walker 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. Christian Califano 4. Marco Bortolami
5. Alex Brown 6. Alasdair Strokosch 7. Akapusi Qera 8. Luke Narryaway

16. Jeremy Paul 17. Jack Forster 18. Will James 19. Peter Buxton
20. Mike Prendergast 21. Chris Paterson 22. Leon Lloyd

Bristol Rugby Team

15. Luke Arscott 14. Tom Arscott 13. Rob Higgitt 12. Sam Cox
11. David Lemi 10. David Hill 9. Brian O'Riordan 1. Alex Clarke
2. Scott Linklater 3. Darren Crompton 4. Roy Winters 5. Sean Hohneck
6. Matt Salter 7. Alfie To'oala Vaeluaga 8. Andrew Blowers

16. Mark Regan 17. Dave Hilton 18. Dave Attwood 19. Joe El Abd
20. Haydn Thomas 21. Ed Barnes 22. Anthony Elliott

HT: 15 - 0

Attendance: 16,500

JC