

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, MARCH 1, 2008

GLOUCESTER ROCKED BY QUINS DEFEAT

HARLEQUINS 30 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 25

The chase is well and truly on. Gloucester suffered another Guinness Premiership defeat – sucked into a fractured and broken field game that suited Harlequins' expert ability to keep it fast and loose down to the ground, a cracking clash at the Stoop.

There was a worrying collective inability to think clearly enough for long enough to get out of trouble and now the rest of the Premiership will fancy a bite at the current leaders.

The even more frustrating thing for Gloucester was the fact they didn't have to do a great deal right to become a threat. When they maintained possession through structured phases they created plenty of danger – their back five always carried a degree of potency through James Simpson-Daniel and Lesley Vainikolo and their bonus point should have been the very least they earned.

But the error count and poor game management were simply too great. They forced off-loads when they were not required, chased a game in the first-half that played straight into Quins' hands and then wobbled at the set-piece late on.

Harlequins wanted it fast and loose – the likes of the brilliant Mike Brown, Ugo Monye and Danny Care broke the game up superbly and Gloucester got embroiled in a game of extended sevens that suited the hosts down to the ground.

Gloucester were 3-0 behind after 14 minutes thanks to Adrian Jarvis' penalty before they broke out with the first try. Willie Walker charged down Jarvis' kick and Jack Adams scooped up the loose ball and went the thick end of 80 metres to the posts.

However, there was not an air of permanency about the advantage. Quins were in bullish mood and from the re-start, Monye got up brilliantly under little or no pressure to take the kick and broke virtually to the line. With Gloucester in defence, prop Ceri Jones was driven over for the try.

The points kept coming and it was here Gloucester could have taken a grip on the game. When Vainikolo thundered back a poor kick from Brown with a menacing run down the left, Iain Balshaw hared up on the inside and took Peter Buxton's pass to score and create 12-10 Gloucester lead.

That became 15-10 with a Walker penalty after 31 minutes and at last, with a structure beginning to form, Gloucester looked a touch apart. They scored again five minutes later with a brilliant try. Quins couldn't handle Gloucester's ability to shift the ball and when Simpson-Daniel came in off his wing to cause mayhem, he picked Anthony Allen with a scoring pass.

It was quick, clinical and effective and took Gloucester 20-10 ahead. It was now they needed their game management to come into play. They were in control and could and should have closed the game down – tightening the whole process up by playing through phases rather than off-loads and from deep.

But it just didn't happen. They failed to find touch from a clearance kick, Quins maintained possession through Care and Jarvis and from a ruck, Brown shot through a gap to score by the sticks and bring Quins back to within three points.

Jarvis levelled the scores 14 minutes after the break with a penalty after Gloucester were penalised for off-side and as the pressure came on, so did the slide in the set-piece – particularly the line-out – because both Carlos Nieto and Nick Wood had provided a solid scrum platform.

Despite Gloucester's issues, Quins were wonderfully well served by the likes of Nick Easter and Chris Robshaw around the contact area and when the game spread out, Care was always a threat – whether with ball in hand or finding his runners – and Quins simply grew and grew.

It was a cracking contest and despite all of Harlequins' good things, Gloucester scored again to grab a bonus point with 22 minutes remaining. Again it came from structure when Alasdair Strokosch hit up hard from a line-out, Rory Lawson and Walker combined and Simpson-Daniel shot through a midfield gap and to the line.

Walker missed the conversion – and a possible 12 in total – but Gloucester were 25-20 ahead and all the signs were there for a grandstand finish.

That became a certainty when Jarvis banged over a 69th minute penalty after a high tackle from Mark Foster and with the pressure on, Quins took control to snatch the victory.

It all started when Strokosch forced an off-load deep in Quins territory and from there they simply ate up the yards, cranking up the pressure close to the tackle area from a series of close-range drives and when Care and replacement Chris Malone combined, replacement George Robson got outside Simpson-Daniel to score to the left of the posts.

Gloucester were now five points behind with four minutes remaining and although they gave it a real go, failed to generate quick enough ball that would have released Simpson-Daniel or Vainikolo and Quins shut out a game that Gloucester will rue for a long time to come.

Quins Team

15. Mike Brown 14. Tom Williams 13. Hal Luscombe 12. Tosh Masson 11. Ugo Monye 10. Adrian Jarvis 9. Danny Care 1. Ceri Jones 2. Tani Fuga 3. Mike Ross 4. James Percival 5. Nicolas Spanghero 6. Chris Robshaw 7. Will Skinner 8. Nick Easter

16. Chris Brooker 17. John Brooks 18. George Robson 19. Chris Hala'ufia 20. Andy Gomarsall 21. Chris Malone 22. de Wet Barry

Gloucester Rugby Team

15. Iain Balshaw 14. James Simpson-Daniel 13. Jack Adams 12. Anthony Allen 11. Lesley Vainikolo 10. Willie Walker 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 Narryaway

16. Andy Titterrell 17. Alasdair Dickinson 18. Marco Bortolami
19. Gareth Delve 20. Gareth Cooper 21. Chris Paterson 22. Mark Foster

HT: 17 - 20

Attendance: 12,638

JC