

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, APRIL 5, 2008

SUPERB MUNSTER END GLOUCESTER'S HOPES

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 3 MUNSTER 16

In the immediate aftermath of Gloucester's Heineken Cup elimination at the hands of Munster, it was head coach Dean Ryan who applied the perspective.

Against a team built for the sheer demands of knockout rugby, schooled in the rigours of expert defence and marshalled by one of the best game managers in the world, Gloucester's all-court efforts based on their movement game hit the rocks – but it was not for the lack of effort.

Ryan was adamant Gloucester's approach and long-term potential will bear fruit in this competition sooner or later: "I am not going to deviate from what I believe is right – I am passionate in my belief this group of players will get better for that experience," he said.

"Munster are a team built for European rugby and have been schooled in it for years. We are slightly different, with a young core of players and a game based on movement and we did plenty of good things but couldn't quite break through.

"That was Test match-intensity rugby and we will be better for it. We know we need to become better at certain aspects of our game but I am convinced we are moving forward."

Gloucester were cut off at the knees by a team red raw in defensive effort and the art of supreme organisation. Munster have also added a midfield threat worthy of the name and when you combine the talismanic efforts of Donncha O'Callaghan, Paul O'Connell and the brilliant Alan Quinlan alongside Rua Tipoki and Lifeimi Mafi, their all-round qualities were obvious.

They are probably a better team now than the one that Gloucester defeated in 2002 but that is not to say Gloucester didn't give it a damn good go and anyone who failed to see that is either from Limerick or cannot see the obvious.

Their scrum operated close to maximum temperature for long periods, their line-out was effective too and they had enough possession and territory to cause mayhem in the right areas but they failed to make the killer incision. For the first 20 minutes Munster could hardly get their hands on the ball as wave after wave of home-town pressure swept against them.

But Munster's brilliance is in their ability to work so hard without the ball as they do with it and it is unlikely that anyone but a Wasps or a Leicester at the peak of their powers would have been good enough to get ahead and stay there.

What they did need to do was take the chances when they came – however they came – but Chris Paterson missed with two head on attempts to the sticks within the first 10 minutes and they proved crucial because Munster, without the ball and with no territory, somehow found themselves 3-0 ahead at the end of the first quarter thanks to a Ronan O'Gara penalty.

Amid the maelstrom of tackles, a millisecond of thinking time and an intensity level that at times defied belief, both teams slugged each other to a virtual standstill.

It was imperative that Gloucester took their next opportunity but they failed to do so. They caught Munster on the hop with a series of powerful scrummages but probably stayed in too long and when the brilliant Quinlan turned over ball at the contact area, Munster went left and created the first try.

Ian Dowling carried hard up the flank, forwards arrived in numbers and when Munster dragged the ball into midfield, O'Gara was able to stick Dowling in at the far corner with an overlap.

An 8-0 deficit was not a disaster but the score so close to half-time was a huge lift for the visitors. Even with the likes of Ryan Lamb and James Simpson-Daniel prodding and probing and Hazell and Peter Buxton leading the forward charge, Munster just did the messy, ugly things so well that they were able to soak up a vast amount of pressure.

They even added to their score when O’Gara kicked a 48th minute penalty after Gloucester were penalised for not rolling away at the tackle and even with plenty of time to go there was a chilling sense they would not let their position slip.

For that they can thank O’Connell and O’Callaghan – the two locks who led a monstrous effort around the fringes and a disruptive effort at tackle time that also denied momentum.

True, they may have got away with a few things at the side of rucks and mauls and off-side line but they were very good at it.

And from that pressure, they scored a second try and won the game. It came from distance when Doug Howlett exchanged passes with full-back Denis Hurley and he kicked in behind Gloucester’s defence for Howlett to win the race and score.

The try took Munster 16-0 ahead and although Lamb kicked a 66th minute penalty, Gloucester needed a try almost immediately to rescue the contest.

In fairness, they had a damn good go but neither Simpson-Daniel, the powerful Mike Tindall or Lesley Vainikolo could get away and Munster went ahead by shutting the game down.

It was hard on the likes of Luke Narryway, Alex Brown and the rest because, despite the result, Gloucester were manful but beaten by the better team and of that there can be no doubt.

Gloucester Team

15. Olly Morgan 14. Chris Paterson 13. James Simpson-Daniel
12. Anthony Allen 11. Lesley Vainikolo 10. Ryan Lamb 9. Rory Lawson
1. Nick Wood 2. Andy Titterrell 3. Carlos Nieto 4. Marco Bortolami
5. Alex Brown 6. Peter Buxton 7. Andy Hazell 8. Luke Narraway

16. Jeremy Paul 17. Alasdair Dickinson 18. Will James 19. Gareth Delve
20. Gareth Cooper 21. Willie Walker 22. Mike Tindall

Munster Team

15. Denis Hurley 14. Doug Howlett 13. Rua Tipoki 12. Lifeimi Mafi
11. Ian Dowling 10. Ronan O'Gara 9. Tomas O'Leary 1. Tony Buckley
2. Jerry Flannery 3. John Hayes 4. Donncha O'Callaghan 5. Paul
O'Connell 6. Alan Quinlan 7. David Wallace 8. Denis Leamy

16. Frank Sheahan 17. Federico Pucciariello 18. Mick O'Driscoll
19. Anthony Foley 20. Peter Stringer 21. Paul Warwick 22. Kieran
Lewis

HT: 0 - 8

Attendance: 16,500

JC