

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, MAY 10, 2008

SIMPSON-DANIEL'S TRY SETTLES DERBY

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 8 BATH RUGBY 6

It was everything expected and a little bit more.

James Simpson-Daniel's first-half try was the cigarette paper separating Gloucester and Bath at Kingsholm in quite comfortably one of the most jaw-droppingly explosive Guinness Premiership matches of the season.

The fact we only got one serious score and despite only limited exposure of both teams' rich attacking games, this was a dose of tribalism that shook Kingsholm to the very core of its foundations.

The physicality levels were enormous, the commitment total and Gloucester produced the sort of relentless defensive performance that at times defied belief given the rate of knots that Bath burst from the blocks and the possession and territory they controlled in the first-half.

But Gloucester's victory means they finish the regular season top of the pile – an achievement that will mean a great deal in these parts in itself – and they now move into the play-offs in the sort of mind set that means anything could be possible.

They will face Leicester at Kingsholm next Sunday at 4.30pm for the right to go to Twickenham in the final and it is clear things are clicking at just the right time.

Bath have ripped up trees this season with their ability to play fast with an off-load game that is capable of making mincemeat of teams unprepared to knock the living daylights out of them at the tackle area and force them sideways as a result.

Central to their efforts are ball carrying forwards like Lee Mears, Matt Stevens and Michael Lipman and although they got plenty of momentum, Gloucester's scrambling defence and eye-watering ferocity held firm.

For that, Gloucester can thank a startling performance from Akapusi Qera – the Fijian flanker who has a touch of the magic dust about him. Not only did he tackle with the sort of power usually reserved for bigger men but his intelligence and off-load game were outstanding.

It was his pass that helped create the only try and he was still going at the very end. Alasdair Strokosch was also instrumental in denying Bath space to off-load and with Iain Balshaw and James Simpson-Daniel producing monumental displays, Gloucester had plenty to offer.

However, it was Bath who started the better. Olly Barkley looked in rude good health and it was his break in the seventh minute that almost opened the scoring and required a wonderful tackle from Mike Tindall.

Bath then launched a daring raid from a scrum deep in their own half – Barkley was once again involved as he fed Andrew Higgins through a gap and it took a brilliant one-on-one tackle from Balshaw to prevent Matt Banahan opening the scoring.

It emphasised Bath's early dominance and with Tindall now off the field with a turned ankle, Gloucester's task grew even harder. However, they did take the lead with a Ryan Lamb penalty after 17 minutes but the tide was all with Bath.

They almost scored themselves when Matt Stevens broke on an angled run using his bulk to get through Lamb and it took an incredible turn and tackle from Simpson-Daniel to haul the prop down metres short of the line.

Gloucester then struck a blow that must have been like a knife between the shoulder blades for Bath given their dominance, movement and invention.

Qera collected Rory Lawson's pass in some space and carried before delivering a wonderfully timed pass on to Anthony Allen and he found Willie Walker before Simpson-Daniel took over.

There was still plenty for the winger to do but he showed tremendous strength to survive two attempted tackles to score.

It sent Kingsholm into orbit, although Barkley landed a 36th minute penalty to cut the gap to 8-6 at the break.

If anything, the second half was even more intense, even more brutal. At times the play was so frantic and so open that one slip or one missed tackle would have been fatal to either team and in fairness it was a testament to both sides that they managed to keep up the intensity levels for so long.

By the middle stages it became a game of chess and Gloucester's defensive effort had been so withering, so unrelenting, that Bath just slightly began to run out of steam.

They still dominated the ball and Balshaw and Willie Walker had to be at their sturdiest to withstand the bombardment at the back and the forwards had to slog themselves to a standstill to keep them at bay. Chances were at a premium but Gloucester had sealed the game with 10 minutes to play.

Lesley Vainikolo found himself in a little bit of room and bumped his way infield before offloading to Luke Narryway but play was called back for a knock-on against Ryan Lamb at the start of the move.

Had the decision been decisive then we may not have heard the end of it but as it was, and despite the efforts of Steve Borthwick, Daniel Brown, Barkley and Butch James, Gloucester's collective will and determination held out and they could celebrate finishing top of the table with the prospect of more to come.

Gloucester Team

15. Iain Balshaw 14. James Simpson-Daniel 13. Mike Tindall
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. Alasdair Strokosch 7. Akapusi Qera 8. Gareth Delve

16. Olivier Azam 17. Alasdair Dickinson 18. Will James 19. Luke
Narraway 20. Gareth Cooper 21. Willie Walker 22. Mark Foster

Bath Rugby Team

15. Joe Maddock 14. Andrew Higgins 13. Tom Cheeseman 12. Olly
Barkley 11. Matthew Banahan 10. Butch James 9. Michael Claassens
1. David Flatman 2. Lee Mears 3. Matt Stevens 4. Steve Borthwick
5. Danny Grewcock 6. Jonny Fa'amatuainu 7. Michael Lipman 8. Daniel
Browne

16. Pieter Dixon 17. Duncan Bell 18. Peter Short 19. Chris Goodman
20. Nick Walshe 21. Shaun Berne 22. Alex Crockett

HT: 8 - 6

Attendance: 16,500

JC