

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 7, 2008

KINGSHOLM – GUINNESS PREMIERSHIP

FLOOD PULLS PLUG ON GLOUCESTER

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 8 LEICESTER TIGERS 20

Match Report by Alastair Downey

Gloucester made the grimmest possible start to the new Guinness Premiership season – spluttering to a disjointed defeat to last year's beaten finalists Leicester.

There were difficulties for them all over the field. The set-scrum was an area attacked remorselessly by the Tigers, the contact area was every bit as cluttered and messy as the Midlanders would have hoped for in their wildest dreams and the line-out also spluttered and wheezed.

But it was the fact Gloucester ended up playing the game exactly how Leicester would have wanted them to in key areas that will frustrate them most. These things are nothing new to Gloucester – whenever they find themselves locked in a close contest they make familiar and deadly mistakes.

Despite the problems, they were still in this game with 10 minutes to go – and that includes the butchering of two certain scores that would have put them on course for victory.

The first came with seven minutes remaining when Luke Narraway found himself in open water and with options outside him before losing his footing aiming for the line himself and turning over the ball. The second when Carlos Nieto popped up with the ball and with sizeable acreage and men to his left but he decided to cut back into the Leicester defence and Gloucester conceded their umpteenth penalty.

Both opportunities would have been a severe kick in Leicester's unmentionables but instead Leicester gathered themselves and scored themselves before the end to grab what is a massive victory for them away from home.

Leicester are nothing if not abrasive and with Toby Flood in the outside half position they have a potential play-maker who could shape an extremely potent game for the likes of the brilliant Geordan Murphy and the monstrous Alesana Tuilagi if they continue to operate up front like this.

They chased dominance at the scrum from minute one, disrupted at the break-down, where Jordan Crane and Tom Croft excelled and simply made fewer mistakes when it really counted.

For Gloucester, much of their attacking flair was supplied by Olly Morgan at full-back and James Simpson-Daniel. Morgan in particular had a dashing match. His first contribution was a rolling tackle on Tuilagi that probably prevented a Leicester try inside the first 10 minutes. He was also brilliant under the high-ball – it was his catch from Lamb's high kick under the nose of Murphy that swept Gloucester, eventually, to their try the full-back himself scored and he was safe and secure in everything he did.

By this time, Leicester were already 6-0 ahead thanks to two Flood penalties, while Lamb missed with two very presentable chances of his own during the same period.

But Gloucester did find their way through when Morgan's catch and excellent off-load sent Andy Titterell screaming away to the sticks and it was only a brilliant double tackle from Tom Varndell and prop Marcos Ayerza, who got under the ball, that prevented a Gloucester score.

However, from the scrum, Narraway, Rory Lawson and Simpson-Daniel combined for Morgan to get past Tuilagi and Flood in the far corner. Lamb missed the conversion but Gloucester trailed only 6-5.

If anything, the momentum had begun to swing in Gloucester's favour. They grappled hard at the breakdown thanks to the likes of Peter Buxton, Alasdair Strokosch and Marco Bortolami and attempted to get the likes of Simpson-Daniel in the game more frequently so when Lamb swung over his first successful kick after 43 minutes to establish Gloucester's lead for the first time, there was every chance of a home victory.

But familiar failings would soon come back to haunt them. Although Olivier Azam added huge set-piece power, Leicester dominated the line-out – even on Gloucester's ball – and Croft grew as a menace as the game went on.

Gloucester had to scramble in defence to deny Leicester a score in the third quarter but there was a very real sense that it was Leicester who had the more continuity, more power and more conviction.

The turning point in the piece came with 19 minutes to go. Leicester controlled a line-out deep in their half and the energetic Crane made a big hole up the centre, Danny Hipkiss added his considerable strength as Leicester kept the ball superbly and Murphy made the telling break to take the scoring pass to go in under the sticks.

That put Leicester five points ahead at 13-8 before Gloucester launched a series of late rallies – instigated by Mike Tindall and replacement Matthew Watkins that were carried on up front. The fact Gloucester blew both chances rather summed up their overall performance.

Typically, it was Leicester who had the final say – Flood picking off Simpson-Daniel's pass in the final minute to add the gloss to a highly efficient performance with a try and conversion.