

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 13, 2008

RECREATION GROUND – GUINNESS PREMIERSHIP

GLOUCESTER EARN HISTORIC BATH VICTORY

BATH RUGBY 17 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 21

Match Report by Alastair Downey

The wait is over, the wait is history. Gloucester should awake tomorrow to the mother and father of all headaches – a hangover that has taken 17 years to experience.

The mere fact Gloucester beat Bath at the Rec – or the Wreck as their supporters lovingly call it – should not come as an outrageous surprise, despite their defeat to Leicester last Sunday. They came here still a good side but searching for some pragmatism and control to go with their quality.

When you consider the Teague's, the Gadd's, the Smith's and everyone in between had failed to win a league game here it is little wonder Cherry and White clad followers who had made the annual pilgrimage for years and years shed a little tear – or offered to buy Dean Ryan a drink – or something altogether more physical.

The sound coming from the clubhouse on Saturday night was entirely from the red half of this domestic dispute and it would be hard to argue that Gloucester were not full value for their victory because they played tremendously for the majority of the contest.

For 70-odd minutes of this absorbing contest, they stayed true to the structure that went AWOL against the Tigers. That is not to say their execution was always spot on but there was more structure and more composure to their effort. If Ryan and his fellow coaches drew a line in the sand last Sunday it was evident here.

They played the percentages far better, wore so much war paint up front that Bath got no change at an area many expected them to dominate and always looked to be a threat.

They denied the likes of Lee Mears and Matt Stevens a foundation to unleash their carrying and off-loading game up front and grew into the contest. From the moment Willie Walker reversed his kick-off to the blindside to force a line-out, there was a sense Gloucester may just have it about them to drag this the whole way.

For that they can thank the controlling expertise of Walker, a monumental tackling performance from Andy Hazell and a bludgeoning, monstrous effort from Olivier Azam. We have known for some time that he adds muscle and snarling physicality to the contact area but here he worked off the foundation of a functioning line-out and he prospered in all his glory.

Hazell, too, was terrific. He tackled and turned over, chased and menaced and alongside the outstanding Luke Narry and an equally full-on performance from Peter Buxton, Gloucester edged the back row battle.

Bath, for all their potency and obvious threat, were crushed because Butch James had such a wretched day with his boot. He missed four penalties, of which two were virtual certainties, and when his little kick was charged down by Walker, Gloucester established a lead that was ultimately too great.

Gloucester started well. Walker landed a drop-goal in the first minute after Narry and the ever-aggressive Mike Tindall had carried play to beneath the sticks and when possession came back, Walker nudged over the points.

Bath responded. James sent Eliota Fuimaono-Sapolu up the centre twice in the first 10 minutes with two simple passes and when they won a scrum against the head deep inside their own half, the home side were raising the temperature.

And they took the lead after 11 minutes with a beautifully crafted try. Bath won a line-out deep inside Gloucester territory, Peter Short was found at the tail and off-loaded brilliantly towards Michael Lipman and he had enough pace to get to the line.

It was a riotously, thunderous occasion. Both packs waged a savage war against each other but as the half wore on it was Gloucester who began to nudge away. They cut damaging attacks down each flank – James Simpson-Daniel was brilliantly tackled by Matt Banahan and Lesley Vainikolo crashed into Nick Abendanon – before Walker kicked a 25th minute penalty after Bath were penalised for hands in a ruck.

They took the lead two minutes before the break when Walker kicked Gloucester 9-5 ahead with his second penalty with Matthew Watkins heavily involved.

Although not always executed properly, Walker had kept Bath turning with his kicking game, Hazell knocked the living daylights out of anything close to him, Olly Morgan was as safe as houses and Gloucester ticked over very nicely.

Gloucester were energised and driven. The areas of the game that had faltered against Leicester operated with such conviction and control that Bath, for all the efforts of Lipman, Justin Harrison and Abendanon, Gloucester repelled them in a concerted early second half onslaught and then simply kicked possession deep and asked Bath to do the same.

Gloucester's defence was outstanding throughout and it didn't waver in the third quarter – despite a couple of horrid James misses with penalties after 46 and 60 minutes.

Having dodged and weaved, Gloucester scored the try that broke the game open. They won a scrum on the Bath 22, it slid to blindside and Narraway picked up, drew Stuart Hooper, dummied brilliantly and blasted his way to the line for the try. Walker missed the conversion but Gloucester led 14-5.

Four minutes later, they took an iron grip when Walker charged down James's cross-field kick, gathered possession and dived into score. That made it 21-5 and all the years of hurt seemed to be burning away in an instant.

It was almost too good to be true but Bath produced a tremendous last 10 minutes. First, Joe Maddock scored down the right after a period of heavy pressure and Shaun Berne's conversion made it 21-12. For the first time, Gloucester were swaying now and when Berne made a brilliant midfield break, Abendanon scored to reduce the deficit to 21-17.

But there was simply not enough time and when Peter Short knocked on a pass with Gloucester going backwards, it was enough to signal wild celebrations – not only at the Rec but anywhere you could find a Cherry and White shirt.

JC