

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 20, 2008

KINGSHOLM – GUINNESS PREMIERSHIP

GLOUCESTER DOWN FIGHTING QUINS

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 24 HARLEQUINS 20

Match Report by Alastair Downey

There is plenty still to do of course, but Gloucester collected their second successive Guinness Premiership victory with a resilient second half fight-back against Harlequins at Kingsholm.

Gloucester are not functioning with anything like the alacrity we know they can but they did just enough here against Quins' cut and thrust counter-attacking game to take the spoils in another tight, tense afternoon in the Guinness Premiership.

They had to show all their wit and tenacity to overturn 10-0 and then 13-5 deficit after Quins had smashed and grabbed two opening scores in the first-half.

Gloucester were solid and workmanlike – it was Quins who provided the cut and thrust. Danny Care was excellent, Mike Brown loved a break from deep and David Strettle was a handful when given room to move into – but this was a priceless victory given the minefield start to their season.

It was not until the second half, when Gloucester denied Harlequins possession, that their obvious threat was nullified but there is more to the visitors these days. There is substance and obduracy to go with their threat.

Although the contact area was a mess and Quins looked to contest suspiciously off their feet at times, particularly in the first-half, Will Skinner was a menace, Chris Robshaw looks a tremendous athlete and the rest were far more than the sum of their parts.

Gloucester were not helped after losing Carlos Nieto with a pulled muscle in the first scrum but it was the visitors who supplied the movement away from the mass of bodies. They were streets ahead after 15 minutes with two tries that threatened to establish a serious advantage.

First, Brown scored down the left side following a period of heavy pressure that was instigated by Strettle's slashing break for their opening try. It hardly came as a surprise given Quins' attacking potency but then Gloucester cut their own throats when they conceded a second try two minutes later.

Willie Walker's high kick was taken by Brown and when he returned possession with another high punt, Olivier Azam misjudged the flight of the ball and Care picked up and made his way to the line for what was essentially a gift of a score, despite the fact he looked off-side.

Chris Malone missed the conversion but a 10-0 lead in this day and age is nothing but significant and it required every ounce of Will James' belligerence, Azam's coolness at line-out time and some heavy carrying by the likes of Mike Tindall and Olly Barkley to check Quins' progress.

Gloucester's route back into the contest came after 22 minutes. They controlled a line-out and then a scrum before Walker and Tindall combined and the skipper sent a long pass to Olly Morgan and the full-back beat two defenders to reach the line and score.

But there is nothing simple about Gloucester at present. Straight from the re-start, Morgan couldn't take the ball and Gloucester were penalised for hands in the ruck. Malone nudged over the penalty and Quins led 13-5.

There was no question Gloucester needed to drag themselves together. It required a new energy level at the tackle area and some thought and control outside.

Straight after the re-start, Walker found himself in space down the short side, Luke Narraway added his bulk, Tindall came in to support and James clattered up the middle as the home side raised the temperature.

Walker kicked a penalty after 43 minutes and then four minutes later landed a drop-goal to bring the hosts back to within two points at 11-13.

It was now the likes of Alasdair Strokosch, James and Narraway turned the screw. Quins also began to feel the heat at the breakdown and when Walker landed a 58th minute penalty after Skinner had been shown a yellow card, Gloucester were ahead for the first time.

Without a consistent supply of ball in dangerous areas, Quins' back three threat was significantly reduced and Gloucester, with their tails up for the first time in the game, scored the try that should have broken the contest open.

Rory Lawson took a quick tap penalty from a scrum and hardly and Quins defenders were looking[sic]. The scrum-half carried well before finding Narraway on the burst. The number eight took over and released possession just at the right time for Strokosch to burn clear to the whitewash for the score.

Walker converted and Gloucester were 21-13 ahead. Just when the majority inside Kingsholm thought they could breathe easily again, Gloucester produced yet another string of mistakes to hand Quins a third try.

Walker couldn't take a high ball, Lesley Vainikolo failed to scoop up possession and with Quins all over Gloucester on the line, Malone ghosted over to bring the scores to within a point again.

The contest was still to be won for Gloucester but they wasted little time in nudging further ahead. Barkley, on his debut, landed a left-footed penalty eight minutes from time to finally end Quins' resistance and hand Gloucester another priceless win.