

# GLOUCESTER RUGBY

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 26, 2008

EDGELEY PARK – GUINNESS PREMIERSHIP

HODGSON LEADS SALE TO COMMANDING WIN

SALE SHARKS 23 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 9

Match Report by Alastair Downey

Charlie Hodgson produced a tactical kicking master class to stretch Sale Sharks' unbeaten run to four games and condemn Gloucester to their second Guinness Premiership defeat of the season.

In a contest low on opportunities and dominated by Hodgson's ability to kick deep and well to maintain high field position for long periods, the Sharks ground out a substantial victory that propelled them to the top of the table.

That Sale currently occupy that position should hardly come as a surprise given the fact they have a game perfectly constructed for the new ELV's.

They have used a similar style for several seasons: Hodgson's needle-sharp tactical awareness gets them on the front foot and that allied with the brutal physicality of Sebastian Chabal, the marvellous Kristian Ormsby and the pain in the rear end tactics of Stuart Turner allows them more than an even chance of contesting the one on one tackle.

Throw into the equation that protecting the ball at ruck time is almost impossible now under the new interpretations because it is always alive and it is easy to see how Sale dominate matches if Hodgson and the equally brilliant Luke McAlister can get them on the front foot.

Gloucester tried their hardest here. A couple of touches from Olly Barkley were of the highest quality and Ryan Lamb also had his moments but Gloucester were simply unable to get high enough up the field to be a consistent threat for long enough and spent the majority of the time on the back foot.

Their best chance came four minutes from the end when Gareth Cooper burst down the narrow side from a neat line-out routine but Sale's defence held firm.

The kicking game is a major issue. This time last season Gloucester were more than prepared to launch attacks from deep and play through a series of multi-phases by keeping the ball but that is increasingly difficult because the tackle area is such a hectic place to guarantee possession and means kicking options have to be first class and used more often.

Throw in the fact there was hardly a maul in the entire contest and it means players up and down the country are learning what is essentially an entirely new game. The physicality levels one on one are even greater and Sale dominated there too. It is no coincidence that Wasps, another side that likes to play with the ball, have struggled so far this season.

Brent Cockbain and Lionel Faure were never anything but totally full on and despite the scavenging techniques of Andy Hazell, big, whole-hearted efforts from Peter Buxton and Luke Narryway, Gloucester were well beaten.

They actually sat in the contest quite comfortably until mid-way through the third quarter – two Barkley penalties counting out two from McAlister – but the contest was one endless game of kick returns that means chances have to be taken when they are on offer.

Gloucester failed to take theirs when on offer. They had an eighth minute scrum deep in Sale territory but lost the ball and tons of acreage when the squeeze came on and it wasn't until the last few minutes they got close enough again to be a threat.

Despite some outstanding defence from Matthew Watkins, there were plenty of mistakes from both teams and despite Sale scored two tries[*sic*], it summed the contest up that both came from Gloucester mistakes and not from a set move.

The first went to Chabal when Gloucester lost control of their own line-out ball and replacement scrum-half Dwayne Peel fed the giant Frenchman, who pummelled his way to the sticks after 49 minutes. That made the score 13-6 and although Barkley cut the gap immediately with his third penalty there was not the suggestion they could dominate possession and territory for long enough to strike back.

When Hazell was pinged for off-side, Lee Thomas banged over a 67th minute penalty to take the hosts a converted score ahead and with 10 minutes to go scored the try that won the contest – although it came from another Gloucester mistake.

Yet another bout of aerial ping pong ended in the hands of McAlister on the half-way line. He showed enough pace on an outside breakaway from Barkley to eat up the ground and was then able to deliver the scoring pass to David Doherty, who slid home in the far corner for their second try.

Thomas again hammered over the conversion to make it 23-9 – and although Gloucester mounted a couple of late efforts through Watkins and Barkley, who both got near the sticks – and then Cooper – who got the closest of the lot – the Sharks held out.

It was the fourth time this season they had not conceded a try – a remarkable achievement in itself – and they were well worth their victory.