

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 30, 2008

KINGSHOLM – GUINNESS PREMIERSHIP

BALSHAW HAT-TRICK FIRES GLOUCESTER

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 39 NEWCASTLE FALCONS 23

Match Report by Alastair Downey

For the first time in a good while, Gloucester attempted to strike a balance between their all-court attacking instincts and a penetrating kicking game to register their first bonus point victory of the season at Kingsholm.

Not everything they did turned to gold under the new ELV's but here they at least had a go, kept the ball better and at least didn't come off the field wondering what might have been.

Under the new laws they have searched for the right consistency of knowing when to attack and where and also when to kick. They have not done either well enough until combining the instinctive attacking flair of Iain Balshaw and James Simpson-Daniel, some outstanding off-loading from Olly Morgan and Matthew Watkins and a structured kicking game from Olly Barkley.

Balshaw claimed a hat-trick and much of what Simpson-Daniel did was pure quality but they also dragged the maximum from the likes of Marco Bortolami, Nick Wood and Alasdair Strokosch.

They are still too easy to score against which will be a concern because Newcastle were left in this contest far longer than they should have been. Gloucester will get no such luxury when the Heineken Cup thuds into view shortly. Their cutting edge was undermined by a softness that could be exposed in Europe but three wins from the opening five games in the Guinness Premiership is a fair return.

Gloucester had to come from behind though – Jonny Wilkinson – who was later to leave the ground on crutches, landed a first minute penalty but the home side were more aggressive than they had been against Sale, and more direct.

Barkley landed a 13th minute penalty to level the scores and with Morgan in blistering form, not only under the high ball but also linking in attack, Gloucester gathered themselves. They scored their first try after 19 minutes when Barkley used his midfield as decoy runners and sent Simpson-Daniel hurrying through a gap before Morgan sent Balshaw to the line.

It was incisive, quick and inventive and although not everything Gloucester tried came off they at least gave it a rip from deep but also kicked every bit as much as they did at Edgeley Park, just slightly more accurately.

However, Newcastle were still a threat despite the loss of Wilkinson. His replacement Rory Clegg sent Jamie Noon thundering up the centre and had he delivered a better pass Tim Visser would have scored in the far corner but Gloucester back to cover well[*sic*].

But there is still an element of cheapness about the majority of tries Gloucester have conceded so far this season and that was not going to change in the second half. Before that though, Gloucester scored again when Gareth Cooper and Barkley both stressed the Newcastle defence, Strokosch carried hard and Balshaw finished off to the right to establish a 13-6 Gloucester lead.

Barkley landed a 40th minute penalty to take Gloucester 16-6 ahead at the break but they lapsed after the break to allow Newcastle a foot-hold in the contest.

First, scrappy kicking allowed Newcastle a line-out 20 metres out and they controlled it sufficiently to allow hooker Matt Thompson to be bundled over in the corner for their first try that cut the gap to five.

And although Barkley nudged over a 48th minute penalty, Newcastle scored again when Tom May, always hard to put down and aggressive as ever in midfield, gathered his own chip, stood up Willie Walker and had enough gas to reach the corner.

That made the score 19-16 after 51 minutes – an almost ludicrous scenario given Gloucester's territorial dominance and potential threat. But their frailties had kept Newcastle in the contest for too long and it was not until the final quarter they stretched away.

Barkley landed a 63rd minute penalty and then four minutes later Balshaw grabbed his hat-trick – a try made brilliantly by Simpson-Daniel.

He fielded a pass over his shoulder from Lawson, cut across the face of Newcastle's defence and delivered the killer ball close to the line.

Balshaw almost gathered a fourth when Gloucester turned over possession in midfield but they did not have to wait long for try number four.

This time, Simpson-Daniel finished in the corner and then immediately added a second. A scrum wheeled to the right deep in Gloucester territory but Lawson opted to run, slashing inside Newcastle's cover and up to half-way before sending Simpson-Daniel to the whitewash for try number five.

That created a 39-16 lead – a far more accurate reflection of events – but again they leaked a try late in the day when Newcastle skipper and number eight Phil Dowson got home from close range when he really should have been put on the floor.

But Gloucester had done enough to claim the victory and give themselves plenty to build on in the coming weeks.