

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 11, 2008

KINGSHOLM – HEINEKEN CUP

GLOUCESTER TRIUMPH IN HEINEKEN CUP OPENER

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 22 BIARRITZ OLYMPIQUE PAYS 10

Match Report by Alastair Downey

Gloucester produced a robust and solid opening salvo in this season's Heineken Cup to take the sting out of Biarritz at Kingsholm to claim a priceless opening victory.

It was arguably one of their best European performances for a while – it might not have been smothered with the glamour and glitz usually associated with these fixtures – but it was pretty pragmatic, very reliable and delivered without much fuss.

The margin of victory could have been greater certainly, but this was a success with clear foundations that are fundamental to their growing assuredness this season. Their set-piece was excellent, their physicality levels high and the balance between their kicking and running game good.

They might have missed a couple of golden chances to build their victory but it was a satisfying result that was never in question – despite the fortuity of their try when the referee missed a knock-on in the build up to James Simpson-Daniel's score.

But there was enough in the energy levels and accuracy of Olivier Azam, a thunderous defensive effort from Pete Buxton and an equally heavy-duty carrying performance from Mike Tindall to give Gloucester the impetus they needed.

Throw in a controlled line-out display and excellent defensive effort and it is easy to appreciate Gloucester's satisfaction. There were also some neat touches from Ryan Lamb, who looked far more assured, and Olly Barkley, who provides the midfield with a direction and left-footed kicking option that is vital.

And with Simpson-Daniel quite comfortably the most potent attacking force on the field alongside Iain Balshaw and Olly Morgan, Gloucester slowly built their lead.

Biarritz will be sore with some of the officiating at the contact area, where Magnus Lund was excellent in the opening exchanges, but they simply failed to react quickly enough and paid a heavy price with the penalty count.

They are a huge physical unit and looked to get Samiu Vahafolau and Jacques Cronje into the game early but some of Gloucester's defensive work was excellent. They went 3-0 ahead with a third minute Olly Barkley penalty and he made no mistake with a second attempt five minutes later after an offence on the floor.

Biarritz did respond when they turned over one of the rare Gloucester line-outs that didn't function and Julien Peyrelongue dropped a goal.

But it was Gloucester who looked the more threatening. There were a couple of sparky breaks from Morgan, Simpson-Daniel and Balshaw but nothing came of them as the contest thudded between a series of jarring physical confrontations and long range kicking.

Gloucester did lose Morgan to the sinbin when he was yellow carded for tackling Damien Traille in the air but they actually grew their lead a man down when Barkley snapped over his third penalty.

The visitors were becoming increasingly aggrieved at the tackle area and lost skipper Jerome Thion to the sinbin for another offence at the breakdown. He had just returned to the field when Gloucester scored their decisive try.

Biarritz were asked to defend a line-out close to their own sticks but Benoit August's throw missed his man and although Luke Narray appeared to have certainly knocked the ball on, Gloucester recycled through Gareth Cooper and Lamb and Tindall provided the long scoring pass to Simpson-Daniel, who dived in at the corner.

Barkley nudged over the conversion for a 16-3 half-time lead. However, Biarritz responded immediately after the re-start with a try of their own.

They controlled a line-out inside Gloucester territory, Fabien Cibray fed Peyrelongue and he sent Romain Cabannes through Barkley's attempted tackle and he was able to off-load to Jean-Baptiste Gobelet who scored beneath the posts.

That yanked the contest right back into the melting pot. Gloucester did respond with a couple of shattering carries from Tindall and some classy running from Simpson-Daniel but this was a night for the likes of Azam, Alex Brown and the rest.

Although only six points ahead, there was never a thought Gloucester were in danger. They could even afford a couple of missed Barkley penalties but he landed one after the 56th minute to take Gloucester 19-10 ahead they got close enough to the line again to claim a second try that never came[sic].

Barkley hobbled off with a dead leg close to the end but there was still enough time for Lamb to land a 77th minute penalty to cap a convincing performance.

The victory was vital and sets up Gloucester for their visit to Cardiff next Sunday – it was a solid start to the competition and something they can be more than pleased with.