

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 19, 2008

MILLENIUM STADIUM – HEINEKEN CUP

CARDIFF GRAB BONUS POINT IN THRILLER

CARDIFF BLUES 37 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 24

Match Report by Alastair Downey

CARDIFF took a stranglehold of Heineken Cup pool six with their second successive bonus point victory that will now ask serious questions of Gloucester's qualification hopes.

It was a cracking contest and Gloucester could have come away with a victory – or at the very least two bonus points – but in the end left the Millennium Stadium with nothing to show for what was a performance full of forward endeavour and a willingness to play in threatening areas but short on that little bit extra.

But they will feel like this was a game they lost rather than Cardiff won, despite the Blues' brilliant second half defensive effort and a monumental performance from number eight Andy Powell. It was a day when nothing went right for them – from the injuries to three key players to a couple of highly contentious refereeing decisions that changed the face of the match.

They allowed this contest to get naggingly, infuriatingly, out of reach and could not quite haul it in despite dominating the second quarter and establishing a narrow lead and then applying the pressure in the second half.

Their game had good shape and purpose with Ryan Lamb at stand-off and a forward pack operating close to maximum temperature at scrum time.

The Blues made a ferocious start and when Olly Morgan's kick went dead, they first attacked the blindside before launching a swinging move to the right where Jamie Robinson's midfield pass was brilliantly picked up by Ben Blair and the full-back gave Leigh Halfpenny a clear run at Morgan and he scored with some ease.

An 11th minute Blair penalty took the Blues 10-0 ahead – a significant advantage at such an early stage and with the likes of Powell and Paul Tito stoking the home fires, Gloucester needed all their resilience to stem the tide.

Olly Barkley landed a penalty and then the visitors got up and running. Maama Molitka touched Lamb's raking kick to hand Gloucester a scrum close to the line. Mike Tindall almost scored on a crash, bang, wallop up the centre but when Lamb came again, Iain Balshaw got close before delivering the scoring pass to Morgan.

It was game on again. They launched themselves with serious intent – Lamb looked a handful, Olly Barkley probed away and at the knife edge, Alasdair Dickinson and Carlos Nieto were outstanding – their set-piece work was terrific and it established Gloucester a second try.

First, Deiniol Jones should have been carded when he came off his feet at a ruck beneath his own posts with Gloucester swarming forward and it was something of a mystery he remained on the field.

But from the next scrum, Nieto and Dickinson got to work, Gloucester shunted Cardiff off their own ball and Luke Narraway sent Balshaw in at the corner for a 17-13 Gloucester lead.

But the game changed again, decisively, in 90 crazy seconds before the break. First, Barkley looked to maintain the momentum of a move to the left but his attempted palm on failed to reach its target and Halfpenny stepped out of Simpson-Daniel's reactive tackle to streak away and score.

And from the re-start, the Blues scored again. Gloucester will be sure there was a knock-on in the build up but Blair stepped brilliantly through a thicket of defenders, Jamie Robinson powered forward at a rapid rate of knots and Gareth Thomas scored beneath the sticks

A three point deficit was suddenly a 10-point lead again. It was the type of softness that has characterised much of Gloucester's season but in Europe's elite competition it is fatal.

Other than that, there was precious little between the teams. It was a skittish, fully absorbing contest from start to finish. Without Lamb and then Morgan, Gloucester were forced into a near total restructure of their backline but they responded with a beautiful try at the start of the second half.

They kept the ball through 10 phases and when Molitka jumped out of the line, Tindall off-loaded brilliantly to Willie Walker and in a flash Lesley Vainikolo delivered a delightful pass for Balshaw to score his second and bring Gloucester to within three again.

The game could have gone either way then. Gloucester had breathed life into their challenge but they lacked the structure and subtleness in attack to break down a brilliantly discipline defence.

Cardiff were also a danger in attack from turnover ball but there was a huge slice of fortune for their fourth try – despite the vision in the build-up. Thomas chased a neat little kick but clearly knocked on just ahead of the 22 metre line. However, Gloucester were not awarded a scrum there but on their own line for a second offence.

Just when they needed a solid 60 seconds, Cardiff squeezed brilliantly to turn over the ball and from the next play, Powell picked and went and Nicky Robinson burrowed in to score and more importantly grab a try bonus point.

It went from bad to worse for Gloucester. Despite the fact it was only the second penalty against them in the half, Olivier Azam was yellow carded at a ruck despite the fact he was attempting to play the ball on his feet and Blair banged over the penalty.

It took Cardiff 37-24 ahead and although Simpson-Daniel almost grabbed a try bonus point for Gloucester late on, the Blues were full value for their victory and a lead in the pool that may well be decisive.

JC