

# **GLOUCESTER RUGBY**

**SATURDAY, OCTOBER 25, 2008**

**KINGSHOLM – EDF ENERGY CUP**

**BALSHAW SETS UP GLOUCESTER'S VICTORY**

**GLOUCESTER RUGBY 25 NEWPORT GWENT DRAGONS 20**

**Match Report by Alastair Downey**

Gloucester gave themselves every chance of qualifying for the serious stages of the EDF Energy Cup with a four-try victory over the Dragons at Kingsholm.

But those bare facts tell only a fraction of what was a knife-edge encounter that was truly in the balance until the final knockings, that was vital for Gloucester given the fact defeat was virtually unthinkable and the fact the contest was almost lawless in key areas of officialdom.

The Dragons will certainly have left Kingsholm wondering how on earth they didn't win. Victories for Paul Tuner's gutsy and thoroughly committed side at Castle Grim are as rare as hens' teeth these days and they will probably never get a better chance.

Indeed, the head coach admitted as much afterwards and felt his side had lost it every bit as much as Gloucester had won it. He had a point and may have given an insight into how Gloucester felt following their defeat at the Millennium Stadium last Sunday.

Gloucester are down on confidence at the moment, of that there is no question. For the second week running a team scored from a strike move off a set piece on the outside and even their inside defence is lacking trust and solidity.

They are trying as hard as ever but much of their best work is laboured and one paced. It was not until the game broke up that Iain Balshaw delivered the type of broken field performances that still marks him down as one of the best in the business to drag Gloucester forward.

He thrust himself into the contest to change the direction of the game just when the Dragons started to lose their way and they never regained it. There was also a nifty contribution from the replacement Jacks – Adams and Forster – and some full-on efforts from Pete Buxton, Marco Bortolami and Alasdair Strokosch but this was not a thing of beauty.

When Newport denied Gloucester possession and territory at the start of the second half there was the very real prospect they could claim victory. Danny Lydiate and Adam Jones were stand-out operators for them up front and they pressurised Gloucester into a hasty off-load game that simply wasn't there – particularly from the forwards.

And when stand-off Shaun Connor looked to get flat balls outside Gloucester's midfield towards Richard Fussell there were some uncomfortable moments for the home side.

However, they did take a 17th minute lead with a lovely little try from a scrum. Strokosch combined with Rory Lawson, Olly Barkley came in as first receiver in midfield and his inside pass sent Lesley Vainikolo thumping under the sticks.

But it took just three minutes for the Dragons to score themselves. Lawson dropped a high kick and from the set-piece, Connor delivered a flat pass towards Rhodri Gomer Davies and as the move gained momentum Fussell scored on the outside to make it 7-5.

The nervousness in the home ranks were growing. The off-side line at rucks was muddied at best, bodies littered the tackle area and there was generally no momentum. But it was Newport who reacted better and when Gloucester got themselves in a mess behind their own line, the half-backs combined from a scrum and number eight Grant Webb burrowed in to score.

That took the Dragons ahead and it needed a nifty little line-out one-two for Gloucester to haul themselves level before the break. Scott Lawson exchanged passes with Buxton and replacement scrum-half Dave Lewis sent Lawson away to the corner.

The second half was a slow burner but one that seemed to be ebbing away from Gloucester once Connor had kicked a 45th minute penalty after Adam Eustace had been penalised for not rolling away at the tackle.

Connor then controlled the game with some lovely positional kicking, while the likes of Adam Jones, Adam Black and the rest churned up plenty of yards up front. In fact, it took all of Gloucester's awareness to stay in the contest because another try may have been fatal.

It was Balshaw who got Gloucester into the contest with a searing break from a return kick that almost produced a virtuoso try. He sliced up the cover before Barkley arrived and put Vainikolo in at the corner for his second try that took the home side 17-15 ahead.

Gloucester were now on the front foot and scored again to nab a bonus point two minutes later. Balshaw started the move with another gear-changing break that got Gloucester inside the 22. Barkley, Mark Foster and Tindall all added support before Balshaw rounded off the move by scoring in the corner.

The score took Gloucester 22-15 ahead and when Barkley nudged over a penalty nine minutes from time, Newport's thoughts of a famous and wholly unexpected victory were all over. They still managed another score themselves from replacement Jason Tovey with the final play of the game but Gloucester, just, reached the line first.

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