

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 3, 2008

KINGSTON PARK – EDF ENERGY CUP

LEWIS AND SATALA SEE GLOUCESTER HOME

NEWCASTLE FALCONS 10 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 11

Match Report by Alastair Downey

Gloucester made enormously heavy weather of reaching the knockout stages of the EDF Energy Cup with the narrowest of victories over Newcastle.

Trailing to a team who defended almost ludicrously well and who scavenged and harassed to distraction, Gloucester needed Apo Satala's 77th minute try to prevent the mother and father of defeats at Kingston Park.

Despite an avalanche of possession and territory that bordered on the stratospheric, Gloucester simply couldn't find the attacking platform to put away a contest that descended into a series of blind alleys and a posse of Newcastle defenders.

In the attrition, Newcastle's largely unheralded forwards, the Jon Goldings, the Rob Vickers, the Mark Sorensens and Phil Dowsons of this world had a right old time of it in subduing Gloucester at the point of contact.

Throw in a largely disjointed movement game and it is easy to see where Gloucester's problems came from. Despite a largely dominant line-out and hard-working scrummage, some hard carrying from Alex Brown and Alasdair Strokosch, Gloucester had to work ferociously hard for the win.

Their problems surfaced in the first-half when they failed to match Newcastle's energetic pressure at the breakdown and consequently struggled for a platform. They should have scored in the sixth minute with the one real attacking move of note all afternoon.

Gloucester shifted off the top line-out ball into midfield where Ryan Lamb and Olly Barkley exchanged passes before Iain Balshaw broke the line on an angled break off his wing. He looked to get in behind the cover but his off-load failed to find a pair of Gloucester hands and the chance was lost.

Despite their problems, Gloucester are trying as hard as ever – possibly too hard – to make something happen and although Lamb mixed up his box of tricks and Mike Tindall carried hard there was nothing hugely fluid or game-breaking about them in the early stages.

It was not until scrum-half Dave Lewis and Satala added late dynamism that the contest changed but by then Gloucester trailed to Newcastle's only score.

Willie Walker was adjudged to have touched a ball into touch despite his protestations and the Falcons moved the ball up the right through Danny Williams and Steve Jones before switching the angle of their attack closer to the tackle area. Tom May made a clattering charge and with Gloucester in retreat, prop Golding bundled in to score.

That made it 7-0 and although Barkley reduced the gap to 7-3 after 21 minutes, Gloucester trailed right to the end.

Gloucester continued to dominate territory but found it increasingly frustrating to break a robust defence led by May and John Rudd. And it was Newcastle who could have stolen a second try when Tindall found himself in a foot-race with May and the Gloucester skipper just managed to deny the Newcastle centre what would have been a certain second try.

Barkley did land a second penalty to make it 7-6 but as Gloucester's urgency grew, so did their error count.

They got close to the line again immediately at the start of the second half when Walker delivered a long pass towards Lesley Vainikolo 40 metres out. He carried hard, beat the first two defenders and then sent Tindall towards the line. He was sure he had reached the corner but Newcastle scrambled brilliantly to make the tackle and deny him the score.

There were a couple of breaks from Barkley up the right, one from Walker and a couple of dashes from Balshaw but as time ebbed away Gloucester still trailed.

Things began to look serious when replacement Rory Clegg landed a 63rd minute penalty when Gloucester were penalised for off-side to take the score to 10-6.

Despite the four point advantage, Newcastle's sheer endeavour and work rate were something to behold and it was not until the last 15 minutes the tide began to change.

Lewis added momentum and pace at the tackle area to give Lamb a fraction more time and Satala bulk and size got him through the first couple of defenders. It was just what Gloucester needed and they maintained their composure long enough to rescue themselves with three minutes to go.

They controlled a scrum 20 metres or so out, Lewis nipped away from the base and exchanged passes with Lamb before Peter Buxton battered his way closer to the line. When Lewis arrived, he found Satala and the flanker bombed his way to the sticks for the score.

Barkley missed the conversion but Gloucester were 11-10 ahead and held out for the last two minutes to book their place in the knockout stages of the competition.