

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 16, 2008

VICARAGE ROAD – GUINNESS PREMIERSHIP

THREE-TRY GLOUCESTER EARN VITAL VICTORY

SARACENS 21 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 25

Match Report by Alastair Downey

By returning to the type of game that has served them so well in recent seasons, Gloucester earned a vital away victory over Saracens that may just be the kick-start they need.

It was certainly not always blemish-free or as clinical in key areas as they would like but this was by some distance Gloucester's best all-round performance of the season.

Here, they at last managed to get their phase game in operation and that immediately created a more threatening attacking game and in turn they settled into a more robust and extremely physical defensive performance as the contest wore on.

The pair go hand in hand because the more time they spent with the ball – and they dominated possession and territory for long periods in the opening 60 minutes – the more organised they looked and subsequently the more control they enjoyed. If you can get on the front foot at the tackle area, then possession is likely to stay with the attacking team and this was ferociously contested throughout between two teams who unloaded some seriously sizeable tackling.

There was a bit of needle too and although Cobus Visagie and company got to grips in the scrum, it was an area of the game that never truly satisfied either side because as a platform it lacked stability virtually throughout and made it hugely difficult for either team to get the dividend they would have hoped for, despite Saracens' continued battering.

Had Gloucester taken their chances in the first-half they could well have been out of sight by the break but they don't do things the easy way. Ryan Lamb struck his left upright twice in the opening stages but he mixed up some lovely passing that got the likes of the returning Anthony Allen muscling through the midfield and Mike Tindall clattering up the centre.

But when Lamb found his range, he knocked over two penalties to give Gloucester a 6-0 lead after 17 minutes, although Glen Jackson made it 6-3 when Gloucester were penalised for going off their feet at a ruck.

However, four minutes later the visitors made their all their possession and territory count with an opening try. A couple of clattering charges involving Will James and Tindall established the platform, Iain Balshaw and Olly Morgan came close to the left as Gloucester played through the phases and then scrum-half Dave Lewis and Lamb swung play back to the right. Apo Satala, who had a bruising, instinctive game, made ground and off-loaded for Allen to score in the corner.

To a background of boos, Lamb made a mockery of his earlier misses by nudging over his touchline conversion for a 13-3 lead.

Saracens had operated for a great length of time deep inside their own half but they conjured a lovely score three minutes before the break. Andy Farrell looked to kick to the openside before switching his high, hanging bomb to the right. Although Morgan got back to field the catch, Saracens streamed up in numbers, turned over the ball and Ben Skirving scored via two passes.

Gloucester started the second half by making life difficult for themselves. Morgan slipped and spilt a kick to concede a scrum and as Saracens ran infield, Gloucester conceded a penalty for a high tackle that Jackson kicked to cut the gap to 13-11.

There was the very real possibility that Gloucester's soft underbelly might be exposed in the second half but it wasn't to be. They were thunderous in the tackle and organised and committed in defence, while Alex Brown led a defensive line-out display that was vital in Gloucester's victory.

And then they went and scored a beautiful try after 49 minutes to ease their nerves. The hugely impressive Lewis, who was energised, resourceful and quick, fed Lamb from a disorganised scrum, Lamb found Tindall and the skipper sent Morgan hurtling past Kevin Sorrell on a lovely angled run to the line.

That made the score 18-11 and then after 62 minutes Gloucester scored again. Allen's punchy little break and then a powerful surge from Alasdair Strokosch got the whole thing moving. Morgan, more and more impressive as the game went on, fed Balshaw up the burst and Gloucester ate up vast chunks of ground into Saracens' 22. Lewis fed Lamb and the stand-off picked out Lesley Vainikolo with a lovely cross-field kick for the score.

At 25-11 ahead Gloucester really should have been home and hosed but Jackson kicked a penalty and then with 10 minutes to go scored a penalty try. Their scrum had operated pretty close to maximum temperature throughout and although Gloucester knocked back any number of surges out in the wide areas, Sarries pressed the life out of them and referee Sean Davey went under the sticks.

Saracens trailed by just four points and when they earned a line-out five metres out, Brown came to Gloucester's rescue with a brilliant steal and they held out late on to earn what, in the context of this season, is a priceless away victory.

JC