

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 20, 2008

MADEJSKI STADIUM – GUINNESS PREMIERSHIP

SUPERB IRISH CRUSH GLOUCESTER

LONDON IRISH 42 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 12

Match Report by Alastair Downey

It's no mean feat to pull a side limb from limb in the Guinness Premiership but on this evidence London Irish are no ordinary side. Gloucester got the mother and father of all hidings that was arguably one of their most disappointing for seasons – London Irish demolished them in almost every aspect of the contest, from the energy stakes, to their forward mastery at the breakdown and clinical finishing from turn-over ball.

Without over-stating its significance, this might well be London Irish's most impressive result for years and if they can maintain this level of all-round performance they will surely crack the code into the top four. Gloucester even failed to take a losing bonus point and that is something that doesn't happen very often.

Gloucester were hampered from the out-set. Olly Barkley was pulled out before the start because of illness and full-back Olly Morgan was replaced at half-time after throwing up but that is no excuse for their fallibilities here.

They lacked energy and direction, their line-speed and chase game were not up to it and they were shredded by a side with dynamism, control and threat.

For Irish, there were some outstanding performances – from the relentless scavenging of Steffon Armitage, the pocket battleship of an openside that exploited Gloucester's lack of an out and out seven at the breakdown, the driving power of Chris Hala'ufia at number eight, to a monumental scrummaging performance, Irish had it all in spades.

Throw in a back three that contains Delon Armitage, Topsy Ojo and Sailosi Tagicakibau and their long-range ability from deep and a masterful piece of control and kicking execution from Peter Hewat and London Irish's control was almost dominant.

Gloucester were 6-0 down after 15 minutes when they conceded two penalties at scrum time to set the tone of the contest but they will look with horror at how Irish managed to score at least three of their tries because they all came from moments out of their structure from turn-over ball.

The first came when Mark Foster aimed a high kick from his wing but the chase lacked substance and Delon Armitage pirouetted through two tackles and glided over half-way. And when the after-burners came on, Armitage simply had too much for pace for Ryan Lamb to make the corner.

Gloucester did get their first points on the board after 25 minutes when Irish were penalised for not releasing and Lamb swung over the penalty.

But the tide was almost all one-way. When Gloucester looked to relieve the pressure inside their own half, Gareth Cooper kicked high but again the chase lacked energy and bite and Ojo gathered cleanly, motored infield and when Mike Tindall jumped out of the defensive line, Irish swept through. Hala'ufia added his considerable weight as they powered to beneath the sticks and with Gloucester in disarray, scrum-half Paul Hodgson nipped round the cover and under the posts.

Hewat landed the conversion to make it 18-3 but Lamb was able to land two kicks of his own before the break to one from Hewat to leave it 21-9 at the break.

It was immediately after the break that Gloucester had their best spell. Olivier Azam instantly added impetus and power to the scrum and Walker made it 21-12 with a massive penalty that bounced on the bar and went over.

Given Irish's dominance, Gloucester were still in the contest at this stage. Walker missed a second shot at goal that would have got Gloucester to within six points and they at last managed to carrying the ball hard at the defensive line through Mike Tindall, Lesley Vainikolo, Alasdair Strokosch and Alex Brown.

A score here may have changed the nature of the contest but Irish held firm with some outstanding tackling from Armitage and Co. Irish didn't panic, weathered the storm and then swept further ahead with three more Hewat penalties to make it 30-12.

The contest was over now for sure – it was just a matter of how far London Irish could grow out their victory and in a crazy last five minutes, the home side scored twice more.

Again the third try came from a return kick. Jack Adams, a second-half replacement for Lamb, who went off injured, sliced his clearance kick into the monstrous hands of Hala'ufia on the half-way line and he wasted little time in delivering a pass to Tagicakibau. He ran back, got through Foster's tackle despite the fact he looked to be going nowhere, stayed on his feet, broke through the rest of Gloucester's flimsy cover and made his way to the line.

Hewat missed the conversion but still the damage was not over. In the last throws of the game, Gloucester could easily have just run the clock down but in attempting to play from deep, turned over the ball in a frantic search for a score and with possession loose, Declan Danahar scooped up and shot away for the bonus point try.

That may well have been in Irish's wildest dreams given their pitch-side celebrations and looks of utter if slightly confused delight afterwards. They were worth every penny in their victory and for Gloucester it was a horrendous, horrid experience.