

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, JANUARY 3, 2009

KINGSHOLM – GUINNESS PREMIERSHIP

MORGAN'S TRY SETTLES CONTEST

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 22 SARACENS 16

Match Report by Alastair Downey

If, and it may remain a big 'if' for a while yet, Gloucester can win games like this then the outlook should remain more than rosy for the Guinness Premiership title chasers.

Their ability to play some rugby is nothing new, in fact they have played far too much of it at times and it has cost them dear, but what they have failed to make any sense of are the messy, monstrously physical, neck and neck score-lines whenever they have cropped up at home and abroad.

This victory over an intelligent, well put together and wholly determined Saracens side was from the very mould they will be asked to re-create in Europe in a couple of weeks' time.

The contact area was swamped with bodies that required shifting. Saracens' midfield defence was of the serious rush variety and remained excellent throughout and they generally made it as difficult as possible for the side with the ball – and that was Gloucester for the majority of the second half.

Given the nature of the pitch, that survived a late inspection from the referee, it was a hellish contest – studded with physicality and brawn but also the occasional touch of quality and injection of pace, but the real satisfaction Gloucester will take from this is that they saw themselves home from a position of 16-16 and a position that could have gone either way.

For that they can thank a very decent scrum and a forward effort throughout that dripped with war paint, effort and physicality. Olivier Azam's touch paper was well and truly alight from the word go – he carried ball from standing starts, always made an attempt to make ground and scrummaged his socks off.

There were others too, not far behind. Luke Narraway continues to impress with his footballing ability and growing leadership qualities, while the likes of Alasdair Strokosch, Adam Eustace, Alex Brown and Nick Wood ploughed into the tackle area.

Gloucester needed plenty there because Saracens were clever and robust. Wikus Van Heerden loomed large, Fabio Ongaro was menacing, Chris Jack and Michael Owen relentless.

Mix in another performance from Neil De Kock and the footballing awareness of Glen Jackson and Saracens were every inch the team that had beaten London Irish last week.

But Gloucester looked good when they generated quick ball. A couple of times in the opening exchanges Apo Satala bundled his way up the centre, while Mike Tindall got outside his man down the right but couldn't find either Olly Morgan or Matthew Watkins in support.

Saracens then twigged that if they flooded the floor with bodies, momentum would disappear from the contest and they were right. Olly Barkley and Jackson swapped penalties before Gloucester scored their one and only try.

Olly Morgan started and finished the move and it was a beauty. The full-back drove forward and then Tindall powered outside his defender, found Lesley Vainikolo in support and the winger off-loaded under pressure for Morgan to round under the sticks down the left.

Tindall had another monstrous match. Organisationally he was supreme and he carried with a power and purpose that was key. Barkley converted Morgan's try to leave Gloucester 10-3 ahead but when they lost Vainikolo to an Achilles injury, they failed to regain their composure and Sarries responded.

Jackson had already kicked a penalty to make it 10-6 and when he got the ball again on half-way, the majority in the stadium reckoned with another three points. Jackson had other ideas though – kicking across field for Richard Haughton and he went behind the posts for the score.

Jackson's conversion made it 13-10 and although Barkley responded, Gloucester made a mess of the re-start, failed to clear their lines and were penalised for killing the ball. Jackson knocked over the penalty to leave the visitors 16-13 ahead at the break.

Gloucester used the break to re-target their kicking game – Ryan Lamb opting for distance rather than the touchline – and it asked more questions of Saracens' chasing game. They were still full-on at the tackle area – an aspect of the game that became more confused by the minute – but Gloucester's grinding down process was well under way.

Barkley levelled the scores again and with Tindall, Barkley and some lovely handling and catching from Lamb, Gloucester gradually got on top.

They also maintained their effort at the scrum and when Kameli Ratuvaou made a mess of Lamb's high kick, Barkley nudged over the penalty to give Gloucester a 19-16 lead. That score came with 17 minutes remaining and then with 12 to go, Barkley stepped up to make it 22-16.

Noah Cato was penalised for obstructing Satala and when replacement Andy Saull found himself in the sinbin for a technical offence at the breakdown, Saracens were suffering.

They did try a couple of efforts from long-distance – a quickly taken 22 drop-out was right out of the Eddie Jones book – and they went again right at the death up to half-way but coughed up the ball to cement another vital victory for Gloucester.