

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

MONDAY, JANUARY 12, 2009

KINGSTON PARK – GUINNESS PREMIERSHIP

MAY'S PENALTY BLOWS GLOUCESTER AWAY

NEWCASTLE FALCONS 10 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 7

Match Report by Alastair Downey

Any plans Gloucester may have had of establishing themselves at the head of the Guinness Premiership were de-railed at Kingston Park on Sunday.

Against hugely spirited and thoroughly committed opponents and in conditions that reduced the shape of the contest to a lottery, Newcastle won with Tom May's late penalty to scenes of utter jubilation at the final whistle.

Newcastle players mobbed skipper Phil Dowson at the end in recognition of their achievement and given the gulf in league positions it was considerable.

Apart from their equalising try three minutes into the second half, Gloucester never really threatened and in the end became easy to defend against as both sets of forwards slugged themselves to a standstill.

Newcastle's spirit was excellent, exemplified by Dowson, Ed Williamson and scrum-half Micky Young, who was sparky and dragged the contest away from the relentless forward grunt with a game-changing effort in the second half.

But the contest was nothing but a lottery. Passing from nine to 10 from any more than six yards was virtually impossible – indeed Rory Lawson's first pass to Willie Walker was blown over his head to indicate the difficulties ahead.

Gloucester's cause was not helped by injuries to Mike Tindall, who suffered a dead leg and more seriously to Olly Morgan, who fractured a finger and is likely to require surgery.

The set-piece was ferociously even, particularly the scrummage that went hell for leather throughout but Newcastle's enthusiasm was superb – their relish for the contest admirable – and they held a 7-0 half-time lead thanks to a 27th minute try.

Young sent Jamie Noon hurtling up the middle from a scrum and when Newcastle recycled, Danny Williams burst away from Mark Foster and beat Morgan for the score that separated the teams at the interval.

The conditions meant line-outs were as rare as hen's teeth and meaningful rugby almost impossible, although Gloucester did engineer a couple of chances at the end of the half. They controlled a scrum inside the 22 but Walker dropped the pass and Newcastle cleared on the stroke of half-time.

However, Gloucester rallied immediately after the break with a try that levelled the scores. With Nick Wood and Olivier Azam between the shafts, Gloucester made a right mess of a Newcastle scrum, Lawson nipped round and picked up the ball in the turn-over.

Gloucester came again, Azam slamming his body into the tackle and from the breakdown, Lawson snaked in to score. Olly Barkley added a difficult conversion in the swirling wind and Gloucester had 37 minutes to press on for victory

It is to Newcastle's great credit they didn't allow Gloucester to assert themselves on the game any further. There was some characteristic charging from Luke Narraway and a couple of heavy-duty efforts from Apo Satala but the contest was sandwiched in between the two 22's as time ebbed away.

Throw in some serious tackling from Noon and his centre partner Tane Tu'ipulotu and it is easy to understand Newcastle's desire for the scrap.

The contest changed mid-way through the third quarter when Young took a quick free-kick from the umpteenth scrum that had disintegrated and took off into Gloucester territory.

Dowson and Tom May were also involved in the game's most defining passage of play. They got themselves to within a gnat's crotch of the line without being able to get over but when Azam was picked out for not releasing a tackled player, May held his nerve to send his penalty between the sticks and 10-7 lead.

He had been Newcastle's third kicker – Rory Clegg had missed two shots in the first half and Steve Jones one in the second – but this three point advantage was as wide as the Grand Canyon given the conditions and the difficulty in sustaining any passage of play.

Gloucester gave it a real go in the latter stages and won themselves a penalty within kicking range with seven minutes to go. However, they opted for a scrum in a bold attempt to win the game but that required them playing some football and although they tried, conceded a penalty that let off the pressure valve.

Azam was yellow carded for his troubles – Gloucester's frustrations encapsulated in those frantic few minutes – and Newcastle wound down the clock to seal a famous victory that means a lot to both ends of the table.

Please note Gloucester face Saracens in the Guinness A League at Kingsholm tonight, 7.30. The game is included in the season ticket package.

JC