

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

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ANGUILERA – HEINEKEN CUP

GLOUCESTER SLIDE OUT OF EUROPE

BIARRITZ OLYMPIQUE PAYS BASQUE 24 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 10

Match Report by Alastair Downey

It was hardly a surprise but Gloucester gurgled down the Heineken Cup plughole with defeat in Biarritz on Friday night.

A victory and probably a bonus point may not have been enough to maintain their hopes this season but they suffered their third pool defeat in the competition in terrible conditions against a motivated and driven side in France.

There was no lack of effort or endeavour but they are lacking direction and dynamism and turned over plenty of ball in the second period as they searched for a way back into the contest. If this was Biarritz's most improved performance of the season, they picked a timely occasion to produce it, and it sums Gloucester's current plight up.

Invigorated by a prodding and probing performance from Dimitri Yachvili, some outstanding positional play from Damien Traille and a rigorous effort from Imanol Harinordoquy, Biarritz got Gloucester in a second half choke hold and literally wrestled the life from them – despite all the efforts of Luke Narraway, Alex Brown, Will James and Carlos Nieto.

Gloucester needed a thoroughly convincing start but they didn't get it. Olly Barkley's kick off was fielded by Traille and he sent them packing deep into their own half. The home side built on their field position and Yachvili started the move that led to the first try.

His little chip sent Andre Masi bumping up the centre before Takidzwa Ngwenya went for the line but was halted by a brilliant sliding tackle from Iain Balshaw. However, Gloucester lost the resulting line-out and Harinordoquy pounced to score through a mass of bodies.

It was a confidence shredding moment. Masi almost added a second before being called back for a forward pass but the hosts did score again after 15 minutes. Apo Satala lost the ball in the contact and from the scrum, Yachvili kicked in behind Gloucester's defence, gathered his own chip to slide over and score.

That made it 17-0 and Gloucester were already climbing a mountain. However, they responded with a lovely score after 18 minutes. They looked to have lost their way from a scrum but Willie Walker pushed them to the left, Matthew Watkins straightened the attack brilliantly and Barkley sent James Simpson-Daniel skipping to the line.

And when Barkley knocked over a penalty after Harinordoquy detached from a scrum, Gloucester were only seven points behind and looking capable of springing the sort of recovery from which dreams are made.

During this spell, came potentially the game's defining moment. Narraway used all his awareness to step and then break the blindside cover and sent off before finding Balshaw in support. The winger had a long way to go but aimed a chip over Traille, with no-one at home.

Traille stuck out a leg and Balshaw ended with his face in the dirt. Penalty try? Possibly. Biarritz only lost Traille to the sinbin but remained intact on the scoreboard and in such conditions that was all that mattered.

The Heineken Cup is not the sort of competition to give a sucker an even break and it was the sort of night that was underpinned by knock-ons, Biarritz's positional sense and Yachvili's all-round mastery of all things wet and slippery.

Gloucester needed a good start after the break and in some respects they got one. The energetic Watkins, Simpson-Daniel, Alasdair Strokosch and Narraway all carried well deep inside the Biarritz half but when the hosts stole two line-outs and kicked through a turnover, Gloucester found themselves deep inside their own half again.

They controlled a scrum to the left but Walker took a fraction too long to unload his clearance and Julien Peyrelongue charged down, followed up and scored.

That made it 24-10 and suddenly there was the very real prospect that two further home-town scores and a host of positive results would see the French side through to the knockout stages.

There was never really that possibility but they simply denied Gloucester any breathing space into the game. They huffed and they puffed, indeed Brown, Narraway and Co. worked themselves tirelessly for the cause but any attempt to build field position was swept up by Traille, Yachvili and Peyrelongue, while Masi tackled his socks off.

That said, Gloucester's forwards busted a gut to generate enough possession to give themselves a chance but they couldn't hold high field position for long enough to get the likes of Simpson-Daniel into the game.

Even when Anthony Allen came off the bench, he dropped four successive passes as the elements closed in and Gloucester's night got worse when both the impressive Brown and the sizeable James hobbled off with only minutes left on the clock.

Biarritz closed down the contest but for Gloucester their woes began and ended at Kingsholm last week and that will be even harder to take.