

# GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, JANUARY 31, 2009

KINGSHOLM –GUINNESS PREMIERSHIP

BALSHAW'S TRY EARNS REMARKABLE WIN

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 23 LONDON IRISH 21

Match Report by Alastair Downey

From somewhere deeply subterranean, probably from the back-end of nowhere, Gloucester mined a mountain of sheer courage and determination to claim a Guinness Premiership victory that looked as improbable as it was welcome at Kingsholm.

This came from the pit, the very soul. By the end it was as if Gloucester had rolled back the years to something approaching pre-historic such was their fervour and resolve, hustle and harrying.

In no way does it mean they have solved everything that is wrong in their game because for 55 minutes or so London Irish looked in spanking good order. Not only did they play with real conviction and invention but they are good at the messy bits too.

Irish moved like a side with real confidence and ambition – two things that have not been Gloucester's watch-words recently. Their midfield tackles like the proverbial ton of bricks – just ask James Simpson-Daniel who was re-arranged by Adam Thompstone in the opening throws – their defensive line-out routine was of the white-hot variety and they had people like Chris Hala'ufia in full war paint at number eight.

It was a belting contest, enriched by Irish's attacking quality and studded by Gloucester's sheer willingness not to cave in.

Considering what had come before it, there were some remarkable performances in the Gloucester side. Gareth Delve deserves some sort of

medal for simply completing his first match for nine months but to get through one of this intensity almost defied belief.

Nick Wood produced a destructive cameo in the tight phases and Olly Barkley had the sort of match Gloucester have been crying out for – controlled, thoughtful and excellent with the boot, while Ryan Lamb, deployed at scrum-half because of a serious ankle injury to Dave Lewis, was razor-sharp with his passing and nudged his pack continually forwards.

This may just take some getting over for Irish because they were good for so long. A sixth minute Peter Hewat penalty was added to with an 11th minute try. Iain Balshaw fumbled Hewat's kick to concede a scrum and from the second one, Rory Lawson couldn't gather Paul Hodgson's little chip and when Irish recycled ball from a ruck, they used Thompstone as first receiver and he burst through to score.

London Irish were simply better at this stage. They won the majority of the collisions, made the most of their possession and kept Gloucester pinned well inside their own half. By the start of the second quarter, they looked home and hosed.

Gloucester's inability to maintain the ball cost them dear and Irish scored again. This time it was a cracking score.

Thompstone was again involved with a strong carry in front of the sticks, Declan Danaher and Hodgson maintained the move to the left and Hewat's flat pass found Delon Armitage and he put Topsy Ojo in for the score.

That made it 15-0 and it was pretty harrowing stuff. Barkley did pull three points back with his first penalty but nothing was going particularly right. From Gloucester's best scrum of the half, Delve got himself on the front foot and when they went left, Seilala Mapusua ripped the ball free from Henry Trinder and kicked forward.

Apo Satala did well to get back and on his feet but Gloucester conceded a penalty for killing the ball and Hewat made it 18-3.

Grim would probably not cover it at this stage. Barkley did make it 18-6 and then right on the half-time whistle was on target again with three more points to give Gloucester a shaft of belief.

The second half was a gut churning experience. The sheer effort levels were magnificent and although Gloucester may not have scaled the heights in terms of performance, they were Herculean in all other aspects – the quality of their territorial kicking, the magnitude of their tackling and pressure, and at last found a willingness to play.

Willie Walker almost got away immediately as both sides crashed into each other. Gloucester piled on the pressure and got to within metres of the line before Irish swung into gear again. It looked for all the world as if Hewat would kick but he opted to break from behind his own sticks and then kick into acres of space.

Balshaw had to come across to deny Ojo but Anthony Allen was yellow carded for killing the ball and Hewat nudged Irish 21-9 ahead with half an hour to go.

It looked for all the world as if it would be Gloucester's fourth defeat in a row but they clung to Barkley's kicking accuracy. He made it 21-12 with a 58th minute penalty as Gloucester's improving scrum suddenly went into over-drive.

He then cut the gap to only six points with another three points following a high shot on Olivier Azam and all of a sudden Irish didn't look so composed, so sure. The noise was also becoming ferocious, fanatical and for the slightest home-town advance – a tackle, a solid kick, a scrum, a line-out – anything that may raise the spirits.

By this time Lamb was on because of Lewis's sickening injury and although he was bumped by Mapusua immediately, he was cool and

calm, able to find Barkley with some crisp passing and when his tackler was sinbinned for not moving away, Barkley cut the gap to 21-18.

It was a strange emotion now. Gloucester were so close and yet still so far away. The harder they tried the more desperate they became and the more penalties they conceded.

But with eight minutes to go, they got the score that turned the match. Delve somehow summoned enough effort to bundle himself forward at a scrum, Wood drove into the heart of the Irish defence and when possession came back, Allen picked out a sumptuous pass that missed out two defenders and Walker drew the last man to send Balshaw in for the 50th Premiership try of his career.

The atmosphere was raw and raucous and although Barkley could not slide in the conversion, Gloucester were in the lead for the first time. Belief now replaced hope – the likes of Alasdair Stokosch and Alex Brown maintained the work rate and although Barkley missed with a last minute penalty the salvage job was complete, and it had been some job.

JC