

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 2009

KINGSHOLM – GUINNESS PREMIERSHIP

SECOND HALF RECOVERY DENTS SHARKS

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 24 SALE SHARKS 17

Match Report by Alastair Downey

He might have spent the thick end of the last five weeks nailed to the replacements bench at Franklin's Gardens but there was no sign the splinters had done any serious damage.

Carlos Spencer announced himself as a Gloucester player with a major hand in an absorbing contest against Sale Sharks that maintains their place at the peak of the Guinness Premiership.

It might not have been the sort of pyrotechnics and full bag of tricks he is capable of but in terms of thought processes and structure it was a significant debut. And while King Carlos will be lathered in plaudits, Gloucester are rediscovering themselves thanks in no short measure to a prop and a number eight.

Gareth Delve's performance was a vivid reminder of what Gloucester have been missing. He might not possess the genuine footballing instincts of a Luke Narry, but his work ethic is total, strength magnificent and he carried in heavy traffic here with a consistent menace that marked him out as one of the players of the match.

Combine that with a beautifully organised and thoroughly robust effort from Greg Somerville and Gloucester's forward unit suddenly has an added dimension. Nothing the pair did was over-complicated or fussy but it was earthy, honest and crucial.

Add in the usual combustible effort from Olivier Azam, Apo Satala's exotic game-breaking qualities and some beautifully balanced running from Iain Balshaw and Gloucester had more than enough in the tank.

They still have a habit of making life difficult for themselves but the Sharks didn't do a great deal that didn't come from a Gloucester mistake or a turn-over and had Luke McAlister been wearing red in the first-half and not blue, the home side would have been home and hosed – the All Black was strutting a very different stuff to his team-mates – when he wasn't off-loading in contact he was slicing up the middle in a breathtaking first 40 minutes.

Balshaw had already been called into action in the opening stages to clear up when McAlister had muscled his way through and kicked ahead before the Sharks scored their first try.

Charlie Hodgson's flat pass found you know who with a bit of room and McAlister sent Juan Fernandez-Lobbe away. Sale looked to have lost the ball forward but they chugged on and Lee Thomas went away to score.

It took Gloucester 30 minutes to string together any kind of pressure. Spencer started it by straightening an attack from a scrum, Azam and Delve drove towards the left with some power but Olly Barkley was caught in the headlights. Gloucester had to bide their time before winning a penalty.

Barkley slotted it to make it 10-3 and then six minutes later they scored a lovely try. Balshaw started it by running back against the grain of Sale's defence, Satala somehow hitch kicked out of a thicket of tackles and Somerville weighed in up the centre. When Gloucester came again, Spencer and Barkley created space for James Simpson-Daniel and Balshaw was on hand to give the scoring pass to Mark Foster.

Gloucester could have scored again almost immediately but Balshaw's kick and chase was checked by Thomas, who was dispatched to the cooler and the hosts set up camp for a late salvo on the Sale line.

They almost scored when Delve somehow kept driving towards the line but their pressure was to come to nothing when Sale plundered a smash and grab score right on the whistle. Barkley's pass was picked off by Chris Jones and although Charlie Sharples got back to make the midfield tackle, Jones got the ball off to Chris Bell and as Sale swept forward Hodgson took over and scored in the far left corner.

He got up to convert his own try and a bigger kick in the unmentionables was hard to imagine for Gloucester. A half-time deficit of 17-8 was hardly insurmountable but it was a tremendous boost for Sale.

That advantage lasted precisely 60 second half seconds. Gloucester played quickly from two phases and when Simpson-Daniel stepped delightfully back inside, his off-load found Satala and the flanker got away under the sticks.

Gloucester were now within two and although Lobbe, Sebastien Bruno and Luke Abraham were more than prepared to stand their ground and go toe to toe, Gloucester were slowly starting to turn the screw.

This time it was Spencer who set the pulses racing. He initially failed to gather Nick Macleod's long kick but re-gathered and broke brilliantly, eating up the ground before the Sharks conceded a penalty for killing the ball and Barkley sent Gloucester 18-17 ahead.

It would be wrong to say they never looked back from thereon but there was certainly only one side in it during the second half. The scrummage was far more effective than it seemed, Delve and Andy Hazell got through mountains of work and considering the back-line was significantly re-organised, they were not unduly threatened.

Barkley made it 21-17 after Brent Cockbain was sinbinned for his third offence in as many minutes but Gloucester couldn't get the third try that would have broken the game open further.

The game was not put to bed until Ryan Lamb dropped a goal with a minute to go but it completed another hugely significant afternoon's work for Gloucester.

JC