

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 2009

TWICKENHAM STOOP – GUINNESS PREMIERSHIP

WILLIAMS TRY FIRES QUINS

HARLEQUINS 14 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 9

Match Report by Alastair Downey

Anyone with an ounce of common sense or self-preservation would not have dared dip a toe in the boiling hot conversation between Dean Ryan and Dean Richards – two of the meaner and moodier number eights of their day – at The Stoop on Saturday.

The head coaches of Gloucester and Harlequins saw their two modern-day teams with modern day attitudes produce a compelling contest that was only settled by Tom Williams' out-stretched arm beneath the Gloucester sticks three minutes from time.

The two coaches are at the forefront of game's development in the Guinness Premiership with these two far-reaching sides but this was hardly a game in the image of either, however there will be plenty both can be satisfied with despite the headache for Dean from Kingsholm.

Ryan's plus points will surely be centred around the performance of his forward pack. They have unearthed the devil in themselves over the last month, are better balanced and are doing things with a simple formula but damaging effect.

Here, their scrummage, for the most part, was dynamic and robust. The defensive qualities of Andy Hazell and Alex Brown were exemplary and with the likes of Gareth Delve and Luke Narryway in the thick of it, Gloucester lost nothing in the physical stakes to Harlequins in any area – indeed some of their rearguard stuff in the second half bordered on the Herculean.

What they didn't manage to make the clearest sense of was their kicking game. They have options all over the field but, particularly in the second half, failed to clear the danger well enough and consistently enough to build any field position.

Ryan will also be sore that Quins' decisive try appeared to come from a knock-on that was not picked up but the home side did just enough for their sheer willingness not to settle for anything other than a victory.

It was a belting contest throughout and one that was uncertain until the very end because Gloucester almost smuggled a victory with a leggy, hitch-kicking break from Apo Satala but for once they lost control at a scrum and James Simpson-Daniel dropped the ball close to the whitewash.

He had an odd afternoon. Gloucester used him frequently from strike moves up the middle and on a different day he may have scored three times – when he failed to pick-up Olly Barkley's long clearance with nobody at home in the first-half it was not going to be his day. He had been carrying an injury all week and it showed.

Harlequins started like a bomb and Balshaw was forced to concede a close-range line-out from Mike Brown's booming clearance and then Delve was forced to bundle back Andy Gomarsall in the opening exchanges.

It would have been impossible to have missed Quins' intent. Nick Evans had his box of tricks open early, Will Skinner and Hazell indulged in their own private battle, while Tom Guest and Gary Botha carried hard.

Evans got the home fires burning when he scored after eight minutes. Brown fielded Rory Lawson's kick and immediately slalomed infield. Evans took over, got away from Marco Bortolami and Charlie Sharples before stepping Balshaw on his way to the sticks for a brilliant score.

When both teams kept the ball they looked threatening. Carlos Spencer was probing and when he kicked in behind, Harlequins were penalised for off-side and Barkley slotted the penalty to make it 7-3.

Then came Simpson-Daniel's chase and slide onto Barkley's clearance but slowly Gloucester were growing into the contest. Spencer was again involved, slipping passes off here and there as Delve, Narraway, Brown and Bortolami all carried hard and when Quins again slipped off-side, Barkley swung over three more points.

There may not have been many points but it was a riotous occasion. The tackling was big and brash the effort full-on. Spencer made a brilliant tackle on Skinner as the home pressure came on again but then Gloucester really should have scored.

Delve tidied up a line-out meant for Narraway but Gloucester turned over the ball close to the line when they might have done better had the ball gone through the hands.

However, Barkley did kick them 9-7 ahead with a 47th minute penalty and there was an assurance about Gloucester's forward effort and the potential for them to use width when it suited.

But Quins deserve a huge amount of credit for their mental resolve. Skinner ensured his side plugged on as Gloucester's exit strategy from deep deserted them. Brown, David Strettle and then Ugo Monye were all prepared to run back and without the ball for so long and against a side of Harlequins' threat, it was always likely they may get a chance.

The first chance came to replacement Chris Malone, who somehow missed a sitter from in front of the sticks and when he missed a longer effort with 10 minutes to go, it hinted at being Gloucester's day.

They then coughed up a great chance to settle the match when they conceded possession again from a line-out deep in Quins territory and it effectively meant they had to start all over again.

The score that eventually settled the contest had an element of fortune to it and although it left Ryan fuming, Quins were elated.

It looked as if there was a knock-on as Balshaw attempted to claim a high ball and when Rory Lawson was pulled back for kicking out on the full it was the invitation Quins needed. Gloucester did wonderfully well to defend through 10 phases – time after time attackers were knocked back and time and again Quins hit back.

As the defence became stretched Jordan Turner-Hall made a terrific carry and from the ruck, Williams darted in, checked his dummy and lunged in to score right on the line. It was decisive and although it broke Gloucester hearts they can have plenty to be satisfied with.

JC