

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2009

KINGSHOLM – GUINNESS PREMIERSHIP

GLOUCESTER WIN WEST COUNTRY EPIC

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 36 BATH RUGBY 27

Match Report by Alastair Downey

Sometimes, something so special happens that it consigns almost everything that has gone before it to the mediocre category and it would not be stretching the point to say videos may already be in production to commemorate this quite wondrous bout of Gloucester-Bath mayhem.

This was a west country derby of such an extraordinary vintage that it was every bit as good as last year's epic – and that almost defies belief considering the rare quality on show on that occasion.

Gloucester won this by the odd try in seven, there were cards of both colour; there was courage by the bucket-load, there was speed, oodles of spite, tons of physicality and all this on an international weekend.

But it would be stretching the point to suggest any of those spread out around Europe on Six Nations duty could have added anything to the spectacle.

There has probably not been anything like this on Gloucester's little acre for years, no, make that decades between these two. This was special – not because the rugby was always electric but because there was always something ready to crackle, always happening.

It was utterly none stop between two teams who could not have dredged any more from the depths.

The fact Gloucester won and won with a bonus point will be cherished in this shire because it was their third Guinness Premiership win in four games – all against fellow play-off contenders – and the first time in league history Gloucester have completed the double over Bath.

For all the names you could mention for praise there would be five more missing out, it was one of those games. For Gloucester, Rory Lawson was tremendous, brave to the point of lunacy in defensive miss-matches against the likes of Matt Banahan, Carlos Spencer kept Gloucester's shape and conviction in their movement game ticking over and Charlie Sharples was jaw-dropping in his composure and willingness to chase.

Throw in a quite terrific forward effort – shout out a name in red and each one was so hard working and committed it defied belief – and Bath's hugely impressive movement game, a good scrum and a burning physicality was eventually nullified.

Eliota Fuimaono-Sapolu was a heat-seeking south sea missile, James Scaysbrook was excellent and Rob Hawkins will scratch his head at how he got on the team bus with nothing to show for his effort.

Bath were the first out of the traps, preying on Lawson's one genuine error of the day in the opening minute to get Fuimaono-Sapolu and Alex Crocket going forward and when Banahan came tearing through from a scrum, Gloucester conceded a penalty that led to the first try.

They rolled the line-out round the fringes twice and Hawkins was at the bottom to claim the try. Gloucester proceeded to dominate the next stage of the contest and Bath were happy to concede penalty after penalty to deny them momentum.

Gloucester actually got over the line twice in this period – first when Apo Satala nicked the ball from a Bath scrum and then when Gareth Delve peeled off in the opposite corner but was pulled back for crossing.

Referee Wayne Barnes then eventually lost patience and dispatched Crockett to the sinbin and Spencer nudged over the penalty but no sooner than that, Bath were 10-3 ahead when Andy Hazell was penalised for not releasing the ball and Butch James nudged over the three points.

But the tide was turning and with 11 minutes remaining of a ding dong first-half, Gloucester scored. Spencer took Lawson's pass from a scrum and threaded a lovely kick in behind Bath's defence and James Simpson-Daniel just managed to get the ball down before it crossed the dead ball line.

Three minutes later, Gloucester scored again. Bath turned over ball on halfway, Spencer, cunning and full of threat, fixed the Bath defence and Simpson-Daniel cut a lovely angle and got his pass away to Sharples, who wriggled free of two men to send Kingsholm into orbit.

A minute later and the party was in full swing. Fuimaono-Sapolu looked ambitiously to open-field with his pass but Simpson-Daniel – struggling with a hip injury – stole in and went beneath the sticks. Spencer converted and Gloucester were 20-10 ahead.

Despite the speed with which Gloucester had done their damage, Bath were still supremely physical and carried a threat of their own. When Andrew Higgins, Duncan Bell and Fuimaono-Sapolu all sustained an excellent Bath assault with rather too much comfort, Hawkins scored from close range.

With Olly Barkley on for Simpson-Daniel, he took Gloucester 23-17 ahead on the stroke of half-time and when Spencer reacted quickest to a Bath turnover eight minutes into the second half, Iain Balshaw chased his kick before colliding with the considerable frame of Banahan and as the ball bounced over the line, Lawson dived in to score Gloucester's fourth try.

But the 10 point lead was hardly decisive given what had gone before and despite all the tackling of Satala, Greg Somerville, Delve and Andy Hazell, Bath had their moments – and none more so than in the 58th minute.

They were slick and smart when in behind Gloucester's first line of defence and when they won a free-kick from a scrum, they went quickly to the right and Higgins scored as Gloucester protested to the referee.

There was still more to come in an absorbing game. Barkley made it 33-27 and then Nick Wood was dispatched to the cooler for a high tackle as defences became stretched, minds frayed and nerves jangled.

However, the decisive moment came with 16 minutes to go. Balshaw reacted quickest to sense an opportunity to go from deep, Spencer found Barkley and his long kick stayed infield. Sharples set off, hacked the ball on before Crockett caught him late and the Bath skipper was shown a red card for foul play.

Barkley kicked the penalty and Gloucester were more than a converted try ahead and although Bath poured every ounce they had left into the contest, James's kicking reliability deserted him and Gloucester could cherish a remarkable victory.

JC