

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, MARCH 14, 2009

KINGSHOLM – GUINNESS PREMIERSHIP

MORGAN, BALSHAW, QERA SECURE VICTORY

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 24 LONDON WASPS 22

Match Report by Alastair Downey

It was hardly a thing of beauty – and given some of the smashed-up faces on show it was not a surprise – but Gloucester claimed another four vital Guinness Premiership points against Wasps at Kingsholm.

They scored three tries but won by only two points. It was one of those days when they could not raise the staccato pace of the contest and almost paid the price in the final knockings when Wasps' expert ability to win these tight, tense games got them to within a metre or two of the defining score.

If Gloucester had managed to re-create the energy and fervour with which they dismantled Bath a fortnight ago they may well have won by a street but they were bogged down for the first 50-odd minutes by Tom Rees and Serge Betson at collision time and an unwillingness to trust their defensive qualities.

As a result they gave away too many penalties but are defending well enough not to jump in and make mistakes – they will need to get tighter as the season draws to a close – but this defeat is probably enough to derail Wasps' hopes of a play-off place.

The contest came down to a straight shoot-out between Dave Walder's kicking accuracy and Gloucester's ability to concede penalties and the home side's superior set-piece work, particularly at scrum, where they unloaded a fusillade of assaults.

Throw in a seriously weighty carrying performance from Will James – one monstrous charge at Danny Cipriani had the great white hope of English rugby cart-wheeling half-way down Kingsholm Road – and Andy Hazell’s severe dislike for anything in black and Gloucester just about held sway.

Despite being shoved up their nether regions at the scrum, Rees and Betson kept Wasps competitive on the floor in the first-half and they took the lead with a try after 18 minutes. Hazell almost sniffed out possession when a Wasps scrum slipped round but replacement Dave Walder got Cipriani away down the short side and although Olly Barkley came to make the tackle, Lachlan Mitchell followed up to score.

It was a typical piece of Wasps opportunism – they have made that sort of score an art-form in recent seasons – and when Olivier Azam conceded a penalty for a shove off the ball, Walder stepped up to make it 10-3.

Gloucester had not really got going as an attacking threat, despite a couple of gems from Carlos Spencer, but they scored a belting try after half an hour. They held a solid scrum deep inside their own half, Barkley came in as first receiver and put Spencer on the outside as Wasps failed to drift. There was still plenty to do when Olly Morgan sped onto the ball but he glided outside his opposite number and down the touchline, rounding off the move in the corner.

Barkley failed to convert but five minutes later Gloucester scored again. This time, Rory Lawson and Spencer combined from a midfield scrum, the stand-off missed out his midfield and went straight to Iain Balshaw who slalomed outside the cover and in at the same corner as Morgan.

That tied the scores and hinted at what Gloucester could do when striking. What they had to do after the re-start was keep away from Rees and Co. by generating quicker ball. But what they didn’t do was stop giving away penalties and Walder made it 16-13 one minute into the second half.

Gloucester's discipline threatened to unstitch all the work Greg Somerville, Azam and Nick Wood were doing at scrum-time. Add in a seriously mixed kicking day for Olly Barkley and it is easy to appreciate how Wasps remained competitive for so long.

Walder and Barkley exchanged penalties before the turning point of the game with 30 minutes to go. Gloucester cranked up the possession from a series of scrums in the far left corner and when referee Sean Davey lost patience, dispatched Betsen to the sinbin.

It was absolutely crucial Gloucester came away from this phase of the contest with something to show for it and when Gareth Delve was replaced by Akapusi Qera, the Fijian announced his return to first team action with a try when he squeezed his way to the line from a scrum.

Barkley missed the conversion – he would finish with three from eight – and when Qera jumped out of the defensive line, Eoin Reddan scampered away to get Wasps on the front foot and Gloucester, somewhat predictably, gave away the penalty from which Walder made it 21-22.

This was not the time for Gloucester to lose all semblance of themselves and although they were making it far harder than it should have been, went in front when Barkley found his range with a 65th minute penalty.

Wasps were then lucky not to lose Betsen for good when he deliberately threw himself over a ruck but with the likes of Hazell, Somerville and James working overtime, Gloucester just about kept Wasps out.

By the end, it couldn't have been any closer because Rees, George Skivington, John Hart and Reddan all got up to the line without getting over as Gloucester, just, held out for another vital victory.