

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, AUGUST 22, 2009

FRIENDLY

GLOUCESTER BATTLE TO CONNACHT 'FRIENDLY' WIN

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 29 CONNACHT RUGBY 19

Match Report by Duncan Wood

Connacht provided a tough preseason opponent at Kingsholm on Saturday afternoon remaining in the game until the last few minutes before Gloucester clinched a 29-19 win.

To be fair, Gloucester did make life slightly difficult for themselves. Connacht scored three tries and three could be traced back to Gloucester errors.

However, Gloucester overcame these setbacks, notably a 12-0 deficit at one point, and pieced together enough good rugby to emerge deserved winners.

It's always difficult to draw too many conclusions from this sort of game. Gloucester turned down several kicks at goal in a bid to score tries and this gave Connacht license to give away penalties.

Gloucester also probably played considerably more with ball in hand than they perhaps will in the Guinness Premiership opener against Bath. But there were enough promising signs today to leave the Kingsholm faithful happy that things are progressing well under Bryan Redpath.

Resplendent in their new Cherry and White hoops Gloucester showed ambition from the off, moving ball left and left with confidence and in an attempt to stretch the Connacht defence.

Carlos Spencer and Tom Voyce both made threatening half breaks but couldn't find the key final pass and the visitors held out.

However, Connacht stunned the home crowd on 6 minutes as centre Niva Ta'auso picked off a Nicky Robinson pass in his own 22 with the visitors' defence looking stretched. Ta'auso didn't have the legs as Mike Tindall tracked him down but offloaded for wing Fionn Carr to score and fly half Ian Keatley to convert.

Gloucester hit back and there were some nice touches from Carlos Spencer as he dipped into his box of tricks in an attempt to prise an opening before a more traditional catch and drive looked set for success until indiscipline gave Connacht a vital penalty and a chance to clear.

There were a few murmurs of frustration around Kingsholm as the first quarter drew to a close. Connacht were living on the limits of the offside line and unforced errors prevented Gloucester gaining real momentum.

Lesley Vainikolo almost burst through on 25 minutes but a knock on followed once the ball was recycled and a subsequent James Simpson-Daniel break called back for crossing.

Connacht were visibly growing in confidence and struck from deep as the half hour approached with Gloucester on the front foot. However, the ball was left unprotected at a ruck and centre Keith Matthews stepped in to scoop up the ball and sprint home from his own 22.

Keatley's conversion hit the upright and stayed out but Connacht had an unlikely 12-0 lead and the sight of Lesley Vainikolo limping off did little to lift the mood.

However, Nicky Robinson gave the crowd something to cheer as he caught the Connacht defence napping with a quick tapped penalty and scampered over to open the Gloucester account, duly converting his own try for a 7-12 scoreline after 36 minutes.

Visibly lifted, Gloucester looked to finish the half on a high. Akapusi Qera smashed his way close to the line and James Simpson-Daniel almost ghosted his way through a gap but his attempted offload fell forward.

Gloucester then scrummaged in the shadow of the Connacht posts, spurning three points from a certain penalty, but Robinson's cross kick for Charlie Sharples was a fraction too high to end the half.

Connacht went in with the lead and had showed a certain amount of ambition but Bryan Redpath's side had dominated territory and possession and would have been frustrated at the turnovers which had gifted points to the visitors.

The nature of Bryan Redpath's half time team talk would remain a mystery but Gloucester started the second half like a scalded cat.

Rory Lawson made one scything break from a set scrum before Nick Wood took a midfield line worthy of a centre to spring home near the posts. Robinson's conversion gave Gloucester a 14-12 lead.

There had been no lack of commitment from Gloucester in the first period but there was a visible extra edge to their play now after the interval and Connacht began to look stretched for the first time.

Qera was almost put in by some neat sleight of hand from Robinson, Sharples threatened and Carlos Spencer almost touched down but the thin green line just held firm.

The visitors then incurred the displeasure of the Kingsholm crowd by opting to go for the posts with a long penalty on 58 minutes but Keatley's kick drifted right of the posts.

Perhaps stung by the prospect of losing their lead, Gloucester went back to basics and a catch and drive so nearly forced its way over and then Mike Tindall was held up over the line but still Connacht refused to buckle.

But the seemingly inevitable duly happened and, from a 5 metre scrum, James Simpson-Daniel showed some nifty footwork to score the third Gloucester try and Robinson converted from wide out for 21-12.

Credit to Connacht, however, who weren't done just yet. A series of Gloucester infringements gave them territory and the back row then forced an error from Dave Lewis leading to a simple score for Mike McCornish. Troy Nathan converted to make the game 21-19 going into the final 10 minutes.

The game was perhaps closer than it should have been but replacement hooker Adrian Flavin didn't help his team's cause when he was yellow carded for leading with his shoulder in the tackle and Robinson slotted an easy penalty for 24-19.

Still the game wasn't done as referee Martin Fox sent a bemused Mike Tindall to the sinbin for tackling the man without the ball and still Connacht had a sniff.

It was all hands to the pumps in defence for Gloucester as they had to defend a 5m lineout but the pack did their bit and forced a penalty for holding on in the tackle.

Jonny May then settled the nerves as Connacht failed to deal with a Lewis up and under and the replacement centre scooped up the loose ball to score. Robinson was just off target with the conversion but the result was now settled at 29-19.

Next up are the Ospreys who visit Kingsholm on Saturday August 29th, kick off 3pm.

JC