

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 27, 2009

VICARAGE ROAD – GUINNESS PREMIERSHIP

GLOUCESTER CAN'T QUITE HANG ON AT VICARAGE ROAD

SARACENS 19 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 16

Match Report by Duncan Wood

Gloucester restored pride at Vicarage Road on Sunday afternoon but were unable to overcome a crippling penalty count and couldn't quite hold on to the lead as Saracens struck late to snatch the points.

It was harsh on Bryan Redpath's men, missing so many men through injury and suspension, who gave it everything on a warm afternoon.

Gloucester led from the second minute until the 66th but were never able to completely shake off a pragmatic Saracens side who were kept in touch through Glen Jackson's boot in a game that was anything but a classic.

And, ultimately, the men in black had enough class on the bench to make the difference as they carved out the crucial late try.

Gloucester will feel hard done by as they were certainly on the wrong end of several refereeing decisions which proved to be pivotal in the end.

Despite the defeat, Gloucester answered a lot of questions on the day and similar commitment will surely get them back to winning ways next weekend at Leeds.

Gloucester came out of the starting blocks firing on all cylinders with Vainikolo and Fuimaono-Sapolu getting early touches and Nicky Robinson pinned Saracens into their own corner with a great touch finder.

Gloucester then nicked the ball at the front of the lineout giving Rory Lawson the chance to scamper over the line for a dream start. Robinson converted and Gloucester were off and running.

It was a good opening for Gloucester and Lawson and Robinson linked well down the blindside to move menacingly into the home 22 but slow ball resulted in an attempted drop goal from Robinson but the right foot effort was poorly struck.

Glen Jackson then attempted a drop goal from distance but was well wide before referee Fox decided that a Gloucester man played the ball in an offside position after a knock on. It looked a poor decision as no contact appeared to have been made but Glen Jackson gratefully kicked the penalty.

And Jackson did likewise on 11 minutes when Adam Eustace fumbled an up and under and his team mates were again caught offside to reduce the gap to 6-7. Saracens were back in the game without really having to threaten.

In fact, the penalty count against Gloucester was rising and preventing them from getting any real sustained possession and therefore territory.

However, Eliota Fuimano-Sapolu did his best to lift the pace as he took a long Robinson pass in midfield and broke into the 22. The ball went loose, however, Saracens had broken early from the scrum and Robinson kicked the penalty for a 10-6 lead after 22 minutes.

Gloucester were still incurring the wrath of the referee although at least one decision looked to be harsh. However, Jackson wasn't complaining and promptly reduced the arrears with another long-range kick.

Gloucester then finally got a call in their favour after a Tindall half break and offload followed by a rumble from Olivier Azam. Saracens came in at the side of the ruck and Robinson kicked the penalty despite the stadium PA continuing to blast out music as he lined up the kick.

Sadly, the inevitable finally happened as referee Fox's patience finally ran out with half time approaching. Rory Lawson failed to get away from the tackle area quickly enough and was duly yellow carded but Jackson missed a straightforward chance to rub salt into the wounds by kicking the penalty.

Gloucester made it into the break with a 13-9 lead but would have been worried about the penalty count. Playing the referee would be as crucial as playing Saracens in the second period but the effort and commitment thus far couldn't be faulted.

However, Saracens got the start they wanted as Jackson's hanging restart created problems and the home team re-gathered. The forwards could make no progress around the fringes so Jackson sat back in the pocket and dropped a goal for 12-13 before Robinson restored the four point margin with a long range penalty.

Gloucester then had a glorious chance to extend the lead as Mike Tindall timed his hit perfectly to force a turnover as he chased a Robinson up and under. Dickinson fed Robinson but Alex Goode knocked him into touch at the corner flag.

Buoyed by the reprieve, and boosted by the replacement of their entire front row, Saracens tore into Gloucester who withstood the initial surge but frustratingly gave away another soft penalty and were grateful when Jackson was off target.

A long-range kicking duel followed with the home team getting the better of things and Gloucester were indebted to Rory Lawson who forced a knock on from Brad Barritt near his own posts after the centre gathered a neatly weighted grubber kick.

More kicking followed and the Vicarage Road crowd were growing restless as the game went into the final quarter and the home team responded by throwing more replacements into the fray.

Turning down a kick at goal, Saracens went for the jugular and the initial Gloucester defence was tigerish. However, Justin Marshall, showing all his guile, created just enough of an opening for Schalk Brits to power over. Jackson converted and Saracens had their first lead of the afternoon, 19-16 after 67 minutes.

Gloucester gave it everything in an effort to get back on level terms but Robinson's off target right footed drop goal was the closest they came.

JC