

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 9, 2009

KINGSHOLM – HEINEKEN CUP

ROBINSON'S LATE PENALTY CONDEMNS DRAGONS TO DEFEAT

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 19 NEWPORT GWENT DRAGONS 17

Match Report by Duncan Wood

Nicky Robinson put in a Man of the Match performance, slotting the winning penalty with just six minutes to go as Gloucester edged out the Dragons 19-17 in a tight Heineken opener.

It was a tight and tense battle at Kingsholm on Friday evening with Gloucester having just enough in the locker to overcome a half time deficit and take the spoils.

A huge physical effort was required on a damp and dark night with the conditions proving to be a great leveller and it certainly wasn't a night for the faint hearted – on or off the pitch!

Gloucester prevailed because they cut out the errors in the second half and made smarter decisions tactically than they had in the first period.

It was an evening when the pack really had to front up and that they did, particularly in the second half when they laid the platform for victory.

Hard work and character was the order of the day but Bryan Redpath's men have got their 2009-10 Heineken Cup campaign off to a winning start.

The rain had been fairly persistent throughout the day at Kingsholm and this was evident in the early stages as Gloucester coughed up possession twice when the greasy ball simply squirmed out of the ball carriers' grasp.

Both sides took time to size each other up and a tactical kicking duel quickly established itself although Gloucester did seem to enjoy early superiority in the scrum.

Gloucester's first chance came when Charlie Sharples chased, leapt and superbly caught a Rory Lawson up and under into the visitors' 22 but the wet ball again slipped free as Bryan Redpath's men tried to work the phases.

It was a dogfight up front with very little to choose between the teams but Nicky Robinson almost jinked his way clear on 19 minutes and the supporting Akapusi Qera romped to within metres of the line but couldn't find the offload.

However, Lesley Vainikolo inspired the breakthrough as he gathered a long kick and scythed his way through, pausing only to wait for his support. Tim Molenaar was there and Qera was on hand to gallop home. Robinson added a good conversion for 7-0 after 25 minutes.

Gloucester immediately lost Alex Brown to injury and promptly dropped the restart to put themselves under real pressure. The defence was spirited as the Dragons maintained possession well and Luke Charteris was held up over the line by Rory Lawson.

It was a short-lived reprieve, however, as fly half James Arlidge took a flat pass from the 5 metre scrum and had enough power to force his way over between the posts, adding the conversion himself to level the scores after 30 minutes.

Buoyed by the score and, using the grubber kick to good effect, the Dragons forced a turnover from Charlie Sharples and a lovely reverse pass from scrum half Wayne Evans to Joe Bearman gave the number eight enough room to force his way over. Arlidge converted to stun the home crowd.

The final few minutes of the half ticked by without further incident leaving Gloucester the thorny question of how to regain the momentum

that had been theirs when Qera had dashed over but which had been wrested away by a strong Dragons' fightback.

Gloucester needed to give the crowd something to feed on and a Dragons' knock on in midfield provided good counter attack ball for Nicky Robinson. Scott Lawson took the ball on well and the Dragons were penalised on the deck. Robinson kicked the goal for 10-14.

Gloucester were trying to stay patient but the Dragons were scrapping for their lives in defence and gaps were hard to find and a penalty from Robinson had to suffice to narrow the gap to 13-14 after 51 minutes.

Discipline was starting to hurt the Dragons a little and Robinson was on target with a long-range penalty three minutes later to edge Gloucester into the lead while Arlidge struck the upright with his own penalty attempt a couple of minutes later.

However, Arlidge was gifted another chance just moments later as a Gloucester hand slapped the ball out of the scrum half's hands at a ruck and made no mistake to restore the Dragons lead and frustrate Gloucester yet further.

With the game going into the final quarter, the Dragons seemed to have re-gathered their composure and had gone back to the tactical kicking game that suited the conditions.

Gloucester moved doggedly downfield but Robinson was just wide of the right post with his penalty attempt to let the visitors off the hook.

Gloucester pressed hard and pinned the Dragons back and Arlidge was finally forced into an error kicking from his own in goal area when under severe pressure.

The Dragons were caught offside and Robinson was under similar pressure as he went for the posts from wide out but he nailed the 74th minute kick to make the score 19-17.

Cool heads were needed from both sides and Gloucester just about kept their wits about them, maintaining enough of the possession in the final stages to starve the Dragons of any scoring opportunities.

Defeat was tough on the visitors but Gloucester will gladly take the points.

JC