

# **GLOUCESTER RUGBY**

**SUNDAY, 21 MARCH, 2010**

SIXWAYS – LV= CUP

GLOUCESTER INCHES AWAY FROM LV= CUP GLORY

NORTHAMPTON SAINTS 30 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 24

Match Report by Duncan Wood

Gloucester went toe to toe with the Northampton Saints on Sunday and came desperately close to taking home the trophy before the Saints took the spoils with a 30-24 win.

It was harsh on Gloucester who dominated large parts of the game. Northampton were rattled and on the ropes when they trailed 14-6 on the half hour.

However, credit is due to Jim Mallinder's side, who hit back in style to score twice before the half time interval and then responded in similar fashion when Gloucester took the lead once again in the second half.

In a game where territory is a big component, it's surprising just how often a rugby union match comes down to a matter of inches.

With one score in it, Nicky Robinson jinked his way towards the Saints' line and seemed to have touched the ball down on the goal line.

After the game, Robinson was convinced he had scored and claimed that one of the Saints' back row had admitted as such to him as well. However, the TV footage was inconclusive and Gloucester's chance of glory was gone.

There was plenty for Gloucester to take from the game. Deprived of several players through international call ups and injuries, they gave it everything and had to overcome losing more key players during the course of the game.

They can take pride from pushing Northampton all the way but the Saints were just about worth the win on the day and kudos to them for that.

Matchday dawned bright and clear and both sets of supporters indulged in some vocal backing of their respective teams as the final warm ups took place.

Gloucester got off to a promising start as Alex Brown nicked the first Northampton lineout and swift ball gave Lesley Vainikolo the chance to smash past Paul Diggin. A knock on slowed the move but the Gloucester pack won a penalty at the resultant scrum only for Nicky Robinson to drag his penalty attempt across the posts.

Gloucester peppered the Saints back three with a number of early up and unders, primarily to test Shane Geraghty at full back, but the Saints held up well.

It was frenetic early stuff from Bryan Redpath's men and Northampton looked a tad rattled with their defence having to work overtime.

Another penalty opportunity presented itself on 11 minutes and, on this occasion, Robinson made no mistake for a 3-0 lead.

However, Gloucester offended from the start to give Stephen Myler an immediate chance to hit back and the Saints' fly half levelled the scores.

Gloucester were then dealt a blow as Freddie Burns' kick from deep ran dead at the Saints' end. Roger Wilson carried powerfully from the base and Gloucester were caught offside. Myler did the rest for 6-3 after 16 minutes.

This see-saw encounter continued as Saints promptly killed the ball on their own 10m line and Robinson kicked his second penalty of the afternoon to bring a fascinating opening quarter to a close with honours even.

Gloucester were still pressing hard and Rory Lawson's excellent kick pinned the Saints back. Another penalty followed and Robinson was on the money for 9-6 after 23 minutes.

Gloucester's pack were putting in a masterful display and paved the way for the game's opening try on 28 minutes. A catch and drive sapped the Saints defence before Eustace gave Akapusi Qera just enough space to squeeze home in the corner for a 6-14 lead.

However, a ferocious Saints response followed. Myler made a great break and Sharman and Wilson were in support before the offload found Soane Tonga'uiha who was unstoppable from close range. Myler converted to make it a one point game at 13-14.

Northampton were revitalised and, with play moving rapidly from one end to the other and through countless pairs of hands, finally outflanked the Gloucester defence and James Downey touched down. Myler converted for a 20-14 lead.

It had been a breathless spell of play and James Simpson-Daniel had almost streaked clear himself but Northampton's quick offloading game had temporarily won the day.

In a double blow for Gloucester, a visibly shaken Alex Brown had to be helped from the field to be replaced by Apo Satala.

The first half ended with Northampton holding the lead despite a thrilling late Gloucester attack.

Gloucester had had most of the game but the Saints had showed exactly how dangerous they could be with ball in hand. It was all to play for in the second half.

Gloucester emerged first from the tunnel and it became evident that injury had struck again as Charlie Sharples had replaced Tim Molenaar necessitating a reshuffle of the back line.

Perhaps because of the changes, it was a nervier, more imprecise start to the second half on the part of Gloucester as a couple of passes didn't go to hand and a couple of unforced errors crept in.

And, given the breathless nature of the first period, it was probably no surprise that the second half was a slow burner in the opening stages although Fuimaono-Sapolu, Simpson-Daniel and Vainikolo did almost unlock the Saints' defence on 50 minutes.

The pressure (and volume) increased as Myler had a kick charged down in his own in goal area. A 5m scrum followed and the Gloucester pack produced the shove of their lives to earn a penalty try. Robinson converted for 20-21.

Gloucester needed to consolidate but let the restart bounce before conceding a free kick on their own throw in their own 22. Tongu'uiha almost made the line but Dickson took the offload to make the line. Myler converted for 27-21.

Gloucester's pack again responded with a powerful drive before Fuimaono-Sapolu made the half break and Robinson thought he'd made the line but was adjudged to be just short. Gloucester couldn't repeat the previous 5 metre scrum heroics and the chances was gone.

This incredible game then delivered more highlights as Gloucester turned ball over near the Saints' line and Tonga'uiha rumbled downfield for more than 60 metres. Geraghty seemed set to score, as did Mujati, but Gloucester just got back to force a knock on.

Composure was needed but, with 13 minutes to go, Gloucester infringed at a ruck to give Myler a sight of goal and he made no mistake for 30-21.

Robinson promptly got Gloucester back to within one score as he punished Saints with a penalty after they failed to retreat when chasing a downfield kick so still the drama continued.

With time ebbing away, Gloucester had one last chance but a midfield turnover saw the Saints close the game out and it was heartbreak for Gloucester.

JC