

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 2011

FRANKLIN'S GARDENS – AVIVA PREMIERSHIP RUGBY

IT'S MAY DAY AS GLOUCESTER GO MARCHING ON

NORTHAMPTON SAINTS 16 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 18

Match Report by Duncan Wood

Gloucester Rugby made it eight wins in a row at Franklin's Gardens on Saturday afternoon, defeating Northampton Saints by 18 points to 16 in a tight hard-fought encounter.

It was a match where barely the width of a cigarette paper separated the two sides throughout and finished with Gloucester grimly defending a narrow lead.

Conditions played a huge part. A strong wind gusted towards the Burrda Stand throughout the game, benefitting Gloucester in the first half and the home side in the second.

Gloucester led 12-6 at the break, with Jonny May scoring two excellent tries but the nagging feeling was that the lead wouldn't be enough.

And, when Saints struck to take the lead early in the second period, it looked as though Gloucester's worst fears had come home to roost.

However, this Cherry and White clad band of brothers are made of stern stuff at the moment and dug deep.

Nicky Robinson booted two magnificent penalties from deep to edge his side back into the ascendancy and a massive defensive effort did the rest.

It sets up a huge West Country derby against Bath Rugby at Kingsholm next weekend and spirits couldn't be higher.

Heavy rain was the order of the day on Saturday morning and, although it abated in the hour or so before kick-off, the surface at Franklin's Gardens was obviously heavy.

And the kick off itself was delayed by several minutes with referee Martin Fox concerned about two holes on the 22 metre line at the Shrubbery Terrace end of the ground.

It was always going to be a tussle up front and Gloucester won the first moral battle as they forced a penalty at the first scrum on Saints' put in but Robinson's kick from distance was just wide left.

A couple of soft penalties saw Northampton move up-field and Mark Easter carried to within the shadow of the Gloucester posts. The defence came up offside and Myler had a simple kick for 3-0.

Errors were preventing Gloucester getting a real foothold in the game but a kick ahead and chase from Jonny May showed the threatening pace that he could offer.

Gloucester's first real attack was courtesy of a show and go from Robinson who was well supported by Fuimaono-Sapolu and Voyce but the home side got back to quash the threat as referee Fox ruled that the ball was held up off the ground.

Gloucester's pack regrouped and Saints looked to have pulled down the maul but no penalty was given before Jonny May was tackled into touch just metres short.

May wasn't to be denied although a loose pass in midfield helped out. The Saints defence hesitated momentarily and the winger was through the gap and away to score a sensational solo try. Robinson had an easy conversion for 3-7 after 22 minutes.

The home side promptly hit back as Robinson's kick ran dead. The subsequent scrum saw Gloucester penalised and Myler's penalty was on the money for 6-7.

The home fans were treated to the rare sight of Soane Tonga'uiha flying out of a scrum as the Gloucester pack applied some real pressure although a promising position, set up by a jinking run by Fuimaono-Sapolu, was called back for crossing.

With time ticking away, however, Gloucester struck again as Hamilton nicked a Saints lineout. Robinson again made the initial break with Fuimaono-Sapolu on his shoulder. A long pass found Morgan and he put May into the corner. The conversion hit the upright and stayed out but Gloucester were up 12-6.

No further incident before the half time whistle and Gloucester could reflect on a good first half in which they largely took the home crowd out of the equation.

However, the wind was going to be a key factor after the break and Gloucester had already fallen foul of the referee enough to know that discipline would be key.

Predictably, Gloucester had some serious defending to do at the start of the second half as clearing their lines became problematic due to the wind but the early signs were promising.

However, the pressure told as a delayed scrum put in had Gloucester on the back foot. Myler slid a grubber in behind the defensive line and Greig Tonks stooped to gather and score. Myler's easy conversion nudged the home side in front at 13-12.

Gloucester immediately tried to counter and attacked from deep only to concede a penalty for holding on but Myler's attempt was too short.

Robinson then defied the elements to bang home a penalty from near halfway and take his side back into a narrow 15-13 lead after 56 minutes.

Moments later, Robinson repeated the feat although this one was more impressive as he was closer to the touchline only for Myler to respond on 63 minutes.

Gloucester must have longed for the comforting surroundings of Kingsholm and the roars of the Shed to guide them home but this one was going to have to be done the hard way.

The tension rose as the game went into the final ten minutes and the Gloucester[*sic*] put in a magnificent shift to keep the ball away from the home side and keep the ball at the right end of the pitch.

Despite best efforts of the home side as time expired and with the Franklin's Gardens faithful screaming themselves hoarse, a penalty to Gloucester at the final scrum of the day clinched the win and Gloucester go marching on.

JC