

# **GLOUCESTER RUGBY**

**SUNDAY, MARCH 13, 2011**

**KINGSHOLM – LV= CUP**

**SHARPLES THE HERO AS GLOUCESTER SLAY DRAGONS**

**GLOUCESTER RUGBY 45 NEWPORT GWENT DRAGONS 17**

**Report by Duncan Wood/Tim Lamden**

Gloucester Rugby winger Charlie Sharples ran in four tries as his side booked their place in next weekend's LV= Cup Final with a 45-17 victory over the Dragons at Kingsholm.

It sounds easy enough but Head Coach Bryan Redpath declared afterwards that he thought that it had been his side's worst performance for ten weeks.

Certainly, the Dragons had enough about them that, following a dreadful start, they were able to ask questions of the Gloucester defence and certainly didn't shirk the physical challenge.

However, Redpath's side ultimately had too many weapons at their disposal for the Dragons to be able to compete for the full 80 minutes and a seven try return was testimony to their superiority.

The win was based on a formidable forward effort which pushed and drove the Dragons all over Kingsholm while Sharples and Co. added a cutting edge behind the scrum.

The only downside for Gloucester was that the physical nature of the game appears to have left several players nursing bumps and bruises – it will be a busy week in the Gloucester physio room.

Gloucester will now face Newcastle Falcons in the final at Northampton's Franklin's Gardens next Sunday with their first piece of silverware for the season at stake.

It was a dream start for Gloucester who opted for a catch and drive within five minutes and, from the resulting lineout, Andy Hazell crashed over from close range. Robinson was unlucky to hit the upright with a sweetly timed conversion attempt from the touchline.

The Cherry and Whites only mounted further pressure on the visitors[*sic*] and on 12 minutes an exquisite midfield scissor move between Robinson and Fuimaono-Sapolu from a Gloucester scrum put the Samoan in for a well-worked try. Robinson converted to extend Gloucester's lead at 12-0.

Visibly shattered by this opening, the Dragons showed great fortitude to hit back. Indeed, Gloucester had a couple of nervy moments as the visitors were unlucky not to open their account.

Just as Newport looked to be getting back into the game, their ambition in attack was exploited and on 33 minutes Robinson intercepted a cut-out pass in midfield for a 60m dash to the line to extend the lead to 17-0.

As half time approached, Robinson was off target with a penalty attempt and the Dragons threatened with a close-range lineout only for Olivier Azam to come up with a vital turnover.

A 17-0 half time lead was impressive on the face of it but the visitors had shown real enterprise when they finally got their hands on some decent possession and Head Coach Redpath no doubt had plenty to talk about in the dressing room.

However, the second period rapidly became the Sharples show.

On 44 minutes, the home side found themselves camped in the visitors' 22 and a delicate offload from Jim Hamilton put an advancing Yann Thomas into space.

The substitute prop was brought down close to the Newport line and the ball was recycled for Robinson to deliver a delightful miss pass to Henry Trinder who put Sharples in for a simple finish in the corner. This time Robinson was successful from the conversion on the touchline.

On 51 mins, Newport finally registered their first contribution to the scoreboard after a strong drive from Toby Faletau towards the Gloucester line.

The number 8 was brought down just short and left it to Wayne Evans to put Adam Jones in for a try in the corner. The visitors could not add the extras to leave them trailing 24-5.

Nicky Robinson was in outstanding form by this point and on 54 minutes a simply sublime missed pass from the fly-half allowed Morgan to utilise the space in front of him and put Sharples in for another score in the corner. Robinson clearly found his kicking boots at half-time and slotted the conversion from the corner. 31-5.

The visitors were now really on the ropes and a sloppy overthrow at a Newport lineout on the Gloucester 22 was picked up by substitute Akapusi Qera who broke away and fed Sharples for a scintillating surge to the line for his hat-trick. Robinson furthered his reinvigorated kicking form with another conversion, this time from the opposite touchline.

On 65 minutes, Gloucester rubbed salt into Newport wounds as replacement Tim Taylor received the ball blind from a scrum and shifted it on for substitute Jonny May to feed Sharples for his fourth score of the afternoon. Robinson's boot was on fire and his conversion from the corner gave Gloucester a 45-5 lead.

Gloucester had by now emptied their bench and had Taylor at scrum half and Dawidiuk at openside flanker as the physical nature of the encounter took its toll.

With ten minutes left on the clock, Newport had nothing to lose and a kick into the Gloucester corner from the Welshmen was collected by fly-half Jason Tovey who flicked inside to winger Aled Brew to score. Matthew Jones was unable to convert from the corner to leave the visitors trailing at 45-10.

There was nothing left in this semi-final now for Newport but pride and in the final minute they restored some of that with a try from replacement Jevon Groves.

Tovey drop goaled the conversion to conclude a fantastic 45-17 victory for Gloucester that sends them into a final against Newcastle Falcons at Franklin's Gardens next week.

JC