

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

TUESDAY, APRIL 19, 2011

KINGSHOLM – AVIVA PREMIERSHIP RUGBY

GLOUCESTER EDGE TITANIC SAINTS BATTLE

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 27 NORTHAMPTON SAINTS 15

Match Report by Duncan Wood

Gloucester emerged triumphant on Tuesday evening at Kingsholm with a 27-15 win over Northampton Saints but it was anything but easy.

Gloucester were never able to quite shake off the Saints after the visitors had taken a shock early lead. The visitors played with heart and no little skill and pushed all the way until the final whistle as they looked for at least a losing bonus point.

Much of the final quarter was spent on the back foot as Northampton used their powerful replacements bench to good effect and only tenacious defence kept the Saints at bay as Gloucester secured four more precious Aviva Premiership points.

It's a rare double over the Saints but, on both occasions, neither side was at full strength due to international restrictions so any joy must be tempered. However, Gloucester maintain their unbeaten Aviva Premiership record at Kingsholm this season.

The game got underway in perfect conditions with Gloucester playing towards the Tump End in front of a nigh on capacity crowd.

Both sides strove to gain a foothold in the opening few minutes which were most notable for Olivier Azam getting involved in a couple of 'scuffles' to the delight of the Shed.

There had been plenty of talk of Northampton fielding a so called 'weakened' team but they defied that in the early stages.

Playing with passion, they maintained possession through a number of phases with Shane Geraghty pulling the strings.

Eventually, prop Alex Waller received the ball on the right and touched down despite Nicky Robinson's best efforts. Geraghty's conversion was well struck but came back off the post.

Gloucester's comeback was swift, Tim Molenaar steaming onto a flat Nicky Robinson pass, slicing through the defensive line and stepping the final man to score. Burns converted for 7-5 after 14 minutes.

And it was 10-5 after 20 minutes when Geraghty dropped a pass in the shadow of his own posts and his pack dropped the subsequent scrum. Burns slotted the penalty.

The Saints still looked dangerous and a cunning chip from Geraghty could only be carried over his own line by Rory Lawson to concede a 5m scrum. Saints forced a penalty and Geraghty duly made it 10-8.

Again, Gloucester's reply was immediate. Slick hands across the backline, a grubber through from Burns and amazing pace from Charlie Sharples to claim the touch down. Burns added the extras from out wide.

Gloucester were on fire and the Saints looked stretched but the visitors dug deep to hold Bryan Redpath's side at bay as they sought a killer blow.

Gloucester pressed despite losing Nicky Robinson to injury and Eliota Fuimaono-Sapolu almost side stepped his way to the line but was just short.

It wasn't one way traffic and Northampton were still playing some attractive rugby but the final word of the half could have gone Gloucester's way only for Burns to miss his penalty attempt.

The second period began in lively fashion and a couple of refereeing decisions had the Kingsholm faithful up in arms.

The first incisive break came from the flying Sharples who made good ground down the right before Fuimaono-Sapolu almost wriggled clear and Doran-Jones was hauled down when he looked set to score.

Gloucester pushed for the try but couldn't make the line against dogged defence and had to settle for a 48th minute Burns penalty to open up a 20-8 lead.

The third try wasn't far behind. Akapusi Qera secured vital breakdown ball and Gloucester swept downfield and earned a penalty which went to the corner.

The catch and drive rumbled infield before Oliver Azam burst out of the back and his stretch just made the line to the delight of the Shed. Burns again converted and Gloucester had daylight at 27-8.

At this point, Northampton boss Jim Mallinder decided to act and sent on his big guns in Dowson, Tonga'uiha, Hartley and Mujati and their first contribution was an attacking 5m scrum.

The Gloucester scrum was under immediate pressure as referee Barnes had to reset the scrum several times but the home pack dug deep and won a vital penalty.

It was still a good spell for Northampton and they enjoyed considerable time in the Gloucester half as they looked for a lifeline.

Bryan Redpath's side were forced back onto their line for long periods and the tackling was immense to keep the line intact – just about!

The pressure eventually told as a 5m Saints scrum seemed to go beyond the 90 degrees and the ball squirted loose for Lee Dickson to pounce and dive over to score. Geraghty converted for 27-15 after 73 minutes.

It was now all Saints with Gloucester seemingly unable to buy a decision and gain any meaningful possession.

Soane Tonga'uiha thought he had touched down with a minute left on the clock but the TMO ruled that he'd lost the ball in the act of grounding and Gloucester's inspired tackling did the rest.

JC