

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SUNDAY, APRIL 24, 2011

VICARAGE ROAD – AVIVA PREMIERSHIP RUGBY
GLOUCESTER RUN OUT OF STEAM AT SARACENS

SARACENS 35 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 12

Match Report by Duncan Wood

Three games in eight days proved to be a step too far for Gloucester on Easter Sunday as in form Saracens produced a clinical and impressive display to clinch a home play-off semi-final courtesy of a 35-12 win.

The last thing Gloucester needed after such a tough week was perhaps to have to turn out in hot conditions against a team bang in form.

There was plenty of endeavour on show but Gloucester couldn't impose any sort of control against an opponent who approached the game in typically pragmatic fashion.

Saracens sought to win the physical encounters, kick tactically for position and take any points on offer. And they duly ticked all the boxes.

Mainly on the back foot, Gloucester defended stoutly but tired minds and bodies were eventually ground down. It wasn't always pretty but it was mightily effective.

Gloucester may well be back here in the playoffs in a few weeks and will know exactly what they'll be up against. Hopefully, it'll be a different outcome.

Gloucester welcomed back James Simpson-Daniel after a ten week absence and also second row Jim Hamilton on a scorching afternoon in Watford.

Both sides knew that a win would cement an end of season playoff place while Saracens had the added incentive of taking on a side who had beaten them twice already this season at Kingsholm.

The home side started off showing the confidence of a side who had won eight successive Premiership fixtures and quickly had Gloucester in trouble through a variety of kicks.

A delicate chip through from Alex Goode bounced awkwardly after 4 minutes, was re-gathered by Saracens and Gloucester conceded a penalty but were let off the hook as Goode dragged the penalty wide.

It was all Saracens in the opening stages and Gloucester were starved of possession although the early defence was committed to the frustration of a lively home crowd.

Gloucester's opening salvos were restricted to some long-range tactical kicking but these tended to be overcooked in the opening quarter and easily dealt with.

Determined defence did give Burns a long range shot at goal on 20 minutes but the ball rebounded off the left hand upright and Gloucester paid the ultimate price for not following up.

Strettle ran it out of defence and made good yards. The ball went left and James Short bumped off a couple of tackles before slipping an inside pass to the supporting Schalk Brits who scampered over to open the scoring. Goode converted for 7-0.

It was a bitter blow after such determined defence as both teams took a drinks break. Saracens had enjoyed the upper hand thus far with Gloucester yet to hit their stride.

And another wayward chip resulted in another score for Saracens on the half hour. Goode collected the chip and de Kock pinned Gloucester back with a superb chip through which Dave Lewis could only carry into touch.

Saracens went for the catch and drive, changed the point of attack well and bundled their way over for a pushover try with Ernst Joubert eventually awarded the try once the TMO had confirmed the score.

Finally, Gloucester clicked. Swift scrum ball saw Sharples come into the line off his wing and slice through the initial defensive line. Voyce took it on and moved it on to James Simpson-Daniel who ghosted into the left hand corner to narrow the deficit to 12-5 after 35 minutes.

It was a devastatingly simple yet superbly executed try and showed exactly what this back line is capable of given half a chance.

Saracens came straight back at Gloucester via Goode's counter attack, however the defence on their own line was as impressive as it was on Tuesday evening at home to Northampton and the home side were bundled into touch at the corner.

It was all hands to the pumps defensively as Saracens looked to finish the half on a high. Gloucester buckled but didn't break although a penalty came and Goode made it 15-5.

It had definitely been Saracens in the ascendant in the first 40 minutes. Gloucester were working hard in defence and had scored a sensational try but Bryan Redpath's side needed to keep the ball away from the Men in Black in the second half if they were to get back into this one.

Half time saw Gloucester forced into a key change as Ryan Mills replaced Freddie Burns and duly made his Premiership debut while Saracens introduced Andy Saull and Richard Wigglesworth.

It was a big moment for the U20 international but his first kick failed to find touch and Schalk Brits delighted his adoring audience by booming a return back.

It set up a superb position for Saracens and they pounced, Wigglesworth darting around a ruck and offloading for Matt Stevens to crash over. Goode converted for 22-5 and a long second half loomed.

It quickly became 25-5 as Gloucester tried to run from deep but only fumbled the ball over their own dead ball before dropping the ensuing scrum and Goode landed the penalty.

Gloucester were playing for pride now as the home side were pushing hard for the bonus point try and one well executed catch and drive came up just short but an easy penalty for Goode followed.

A bloodied and bandaged Henry Trinder added Gloucester's second try to restore some pride after Saracens coughed the ball up in midfield and Brett Deacon intelligently flicked it up to Ryan Mills who moved it quickly on for the centre to race clear. Ryan Mills slotted an impressive conversion to open his senior account.

It provoked a furious response from Saracens and Gloucester were forced to resort to desperate measures to keep the Men in Black at bay and skipper Luke Narryway was sinbinned for a team offence with eight minutes to play.

Keeping Saracens at bay in the final few minutes would constitute a minor triumph in the circumstances and Gloucester had to endure wave after wave of attack.

However, the line was finally breached with a minute left to play as Wigglesworth switched play and Strettle stepped his way to the line and Goode converted for 35-12.