

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 10, 2011

GALWAY SPORTS GROUND – HEINEKEN CUP

GLOUCESTER DOG OUT NARROW 14-10 WIN IN CONNACHT

CONNACHT RUGBY 10 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 14

Match Report by Duncan Wood

Gloucester finally emerged on the right side of a close score-line as they battled their way to a 14-10 win in a tense, often feisty encounter with Connacht in Galway on Saturday afternoon.

It was hard earned and, at times, it wasn't pretty. But it was a very important result for Gloucester.

And, like so many fixtures recently, it could easily have slipped away. Gloucester led by a single point for a large part of the second half and, with a boisterous crowd behind them, Connacht scented blood.

However, dogged determination saw Gloucester take an iron grip on the game in the final quarter. Replacements like Cortese, Harden and Qera made a real impact when they arrived and helped revitalise team mates who may have been on the point of flagging.

Credit to Connacht who gave it everything in the quest for an historic first Heineken Cup victory. They didn't threaten over much in attack but they worked like demons in defence and prevented Gloucester from breaking through and making life easier.

But Gloucester seem to like testing the blood pressure of their supporters in recent times and once again failed to kick on when they had a decent lead.

11-0 with just a few minutes to go until half time was a good position to be in. However, a soft score was duly conceded and Connacht were right back in it.

Criticism is churlish today though. Every man in a Cherry and White shirt gave it everything and played their part in earning a win which had to be secured the hard way.

The same opponents visit Kingsholm next weekend and an equally tough fixture lies in wait in a game Gloucester will be seeking to win in order to keep their European hopes alive.

Game time dawned with a blustery wind sweeping a fairly chilly Galway Sportsground although the rain had mercifully held off.

It was Gloucester's first competitive fixture in these parts and a Connacht side looking for their first ever Heineken Cup win would be a doughty opponent.

And, indeed, there was an early scare for Gloucester as Connacht turned over possession just inside their own half and counter attacked with ambition, a Mark McCrea grubber causing problems until a knock on halted their momentum.

But it was Freddie Burns who scored the game's first points on eight minutes as he slotted a long-range penalty with ease as Connacht were caught offside although Niall O'Connor missed an immediate chance to respond in kind.

Burns then had another crack at the posts from well inside his own half as Connacht were penalised at scrum time but his effort was just wide left.

Burns promptly made amends with a lovely jinking break, taking play up to the home 22 where the ball was killed. The fly half bisected the posts and made it 6-0.

However, Burns was unlucky four minutes later as another well struck penalty hit the right upright and bounced clear. The opening quarter had seen precious few try scoring chances and the boot was certainly dominating.

Gloucester started to apply real pressure as the half hour approached and enjoyed plenty of possession but the home team defended with passion around their 22.

Finally, after a huge catch and drive from the pack, the patience paid off and a delightful offload from Fuimaono-Sapolu put James Simpson-Daniel in at the corner for an 11-0 on minutes[*sic*].

However, the home team then got a real break as Gloucester failed to deal with a high ball and Gavin Duffy pounced on the bouncing ball to make the line. O'Connor converted to make it 7-11.

The Irish side now had their tails up and the crowd were right back in the game as half-time approached. It was a testing moment for Gloucester, having enjoyed some real domination thus far.

However, they managed to move downfield and, after some slick work from the backs, almost extended the lead but Charlie Sharples couldn't quite ground Henry Trinder's chip through as he just ran out of space and the ball went dead.

So Gloucester went into half time with an 11-7 lead but knew that they were well and truly in a dogfight.

Frustratingly, they could have been better positioned but conceded the try just after they'd opened up a useful looking 11-0 lead.

But, focussing on the positives, Gloucester were looking dangerous and seemed to have more tries in them if they remained patient and worked hard to break the Connacht defence down.

Connacht started the second half well and pounded Gloucester around the fringes. A penalty eventually came and 11-7 became 11-10 as O'Connor found the target.

Gloucester responded well but got little change out of a rugged home defence. When Connacht spoiled a good-looking catch and drive, Gloucester frustrations threatened to spill over and the respective number fives received a talking to from the referee.

The tension was palpable at the Sportsground with the feeling growing that a score either way could settle this and Gloucester were close on 57 minutes but Trinder and Simpson-Daniel couldn't quite latch on to Burns' grubber near the Connacht line.

It was tense and attritional. Every decision that went Gloucester's way was greeted with howls of derision by the home crowd and, when Burns finally added to Gloucester's lead with a 72nd minute penalty, you could probably hear the boos in Dublin!

Gloucester tried to run out the clock near the Connacht line but conceded a penalty with less than a minute to go to ensure some nervy final moments but there was no fairytale ending for Connacht and Gloucester secured the win.

JC