

# THE TIMES

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KINGSHOLM – HEINEKEN CUP

MAY TO THE RESCUE IN LATE GLOUCESTER WIN

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 23 CONNACHT RUGBY 19

Match Report by Duncan Wood

Just as it looked as though Gloucester would be slipping to an unprecedented fourth defeat in a row at Kingsholm, up stepped replacement Jonny May to score the crucial try in a 23-19 win over Connacht.

It came as a massive relief to Gloucester who had almost run out of ideas against an obdurate Connacht outfit who did very little wrong on the day and probably didn't deserve to run out losers.

The fact that Gloucester had to wait until the 77th minute to score the decisive try speaks volumes for just how close Connacht came.

The visitors kept it simple. The centres ran hard and tackled like demons. The pack refused to take a backward step. And in Niall O'Connor, they appear to have a gem of a fly half who takes all the right options.

Gloucester will probably look back on this and breathe a sigh of relief. However, a month ago they were losing games by a score. They've now just edged a couple by a score so things are moving in the right direction, albeit slowly.

And, of course, a team that can win when playing poorly is always said to be a good team. There is still much better to come from the Cherry and Whites.

It's just a case of confidence. Things will click soon and Bryan Redpath's side will be off and running.

For Connacht, defeat will be a bitter pill to swallow. However, they deserve real credit for their play in these past two encounters. They're a good side.

After the torrential rain of the week leading up to the game, match day dawned clear but cold. However, it was obvious to the naked eye that the going was heavy underfoot.

It was a bright start from the visitors and Gloucester were deprived of possession for much of the opening few minutes but were sound defensively in the face of repeated phases of possession.

Despite this, Connacht had the first chance of points as Gloucester went in at the side of a ruck. The kick from Niall O'Connor was from distance and out wide though, and fell well short.

The first incisive break with ball in hand was from James Simpson-Daniel who glided through a gap as he returned a high ball and made his way into the visitors 22. A great chance was missed because of uncertain handling but Connacht were offside and Tim Taylor's penalty opened the scoring.

Over ambition then cost Gloucester dear as intricate interplay in the backs only produced an interception by Frank Murphy. Morgan and Sharples both made despairing cover tackles but Tiernan O'Halloran took the offload and scored. O'Connor added a fine conversion for a 7-3 lead.

Gloucester were patient as they responded and Connacht were resolute in defence until they had real problems dealing with a Tim Taylor grubber kick. Charlie Sharples battled to ground the loose ball but the TMO didn't award the try.

An attacking five metre scrum was the outcome and Gloucester got on a nudge in the scrum. However, it was Tim Taylor who spotted a gap as the ball was moved out and darted his way over the line before converting his own try to restore Gloucester's lead at 10-7.

A great catch and chase from Morgan then had the crowd on its feet as Gloucester were back on the front foot. Tindall and Fuimaono-Sapolu were in support but Connacht just scrambled across in time to deny the Cherry and Whites.

Connacht weathered the storm and then threatened as replacement back Tonetti took a neat offload from O'Halloran to storm into the Gloucester 22. A penalty followed and O'Connor levelled the scores on 31 minutes.

Indeed, the visitors were mixing things up really well and certainly giving Gloucester lots to think about. There was more ambition than last week in Galway and the Cherry and Whites knew they were in a game.

Never more so than when Connacht were denied another try when Runciman's kick near his own line was charged down but referee Hodges was playing an advantage and Gloucester escaped.

However, O'Connor kicked Connacht back into the lead with a 38th minute penalty and murmurs of discontent started to come from the Kingsholm crowd as Gloucester kicked away possession wastefully as the first half came to an end.

There was no denying that Connacht were worthy of their half time lead. They had played with spirit and ambition whereas Gloucester looked slightly sluggish.

O'Connor was putting his team in the right places, kicking beautifully from hand whereas, far too often, Gloucester were simply kicking down Gavin Duffy's throat. And Connacht were defending stoutly whenever Gloucester took them on ball in hand.

The game was very much still in the melting pot but Gloucester were going to have to take things up a notch in the second half.

Freddie Burns was a half time replacement for Gloucester and immediately sparked things with a neat chip over the top of the defence but couldn't free his arms to free Sharples outside him and the chance was gone.

But Connacht again remained patient when they regained possession and moved efficiently into kicking range where Gloucester again offended at the ruck area. O'Connor stepped up and confidently made it 16-10 to the visitors.

Gloucester needed a spark and Head Coach Redpath didn't hesitate to make replacements, sending on Qera and Rory Lawson after 49 minutes.

Gloucester pressed but still the errors came whenever they moved into a vaguely dangerous position although Burns reduced the arrears with a 58th minute penalty to slightly reduce the tension, but not by much!

With nothing seemingly happening for Gloucester, Burns then showed great nerve to level the scores with a penalty from distance on 68 minutes and leave it with all to play for.

But it was the Connacht danger man O'Halloran who again split the Gloucester defence on 72 minutes. The defence got back but at the expense of a penalty and O'Connor again bisected the uprights to take his side back in front at 19-16.

It looked as though (and pardon the Christmas pun) that Gloucester's goose was cooked.

However, it took just one missed tackle to snatch the win. May burst clear of the initial defensive line and had way too much pace for the cover defence. Burns converted magnificently from the touchline to move Gloucester four points clear.

With only a couple of minutes left, Gloucester just had to keep their line intact and did so without any real alarms.

The points were in the bag and thoughts were already turning to the Boxing Day clash with London Wasps.

JC