

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SUNDAY, JANUARY 1, 2012

VICARAGE ROAD – AVIVA PREMIERSHIP RUGBY

**GLOUCESTER DRAW AT SARACENS THANKS TO BURNS'
COOL HEAD**

SARACENS 15 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 15

Match Report by Duncan Wood

On a wet and miserable afternoon at Vicarage Road, Gloucester came close to toppling the Aviva Premiership champions but settled for a 15-15 draw thanks to a Freddie Burns' late penalty.

Burns kept his head to slot a late penalty from a good 40 metres out to earn Gloucester the draw, the least they deserved on a day when they fronted up manfully to the Men in Black.

It wasn't a classic, not even the most one-eyed Gloucester or Saracens fan could claim that. Conditions dictated that it was going to be a day for tactical kicking and taking chances when they presented themselves.

And so it proved as two of England brightest young fly half talents, Freddie Burns and Owen Farrell kicked five penalties apiece with neither side remotely threatening the try line.

Burns though will be the first to admit that he was given the chance to earn the headlines by the sterling efforts of his forwards who dug deep when it was absolutely needed and created the opportunities which their fly half finished off.

But equally impressive was the dogged determination of Gloucester to simply refuse to throw in the towel, even when they were on the wrong end of a number of slightly baffling refereeing decisions.

In the cold light of day, Gloucester will gladly take the two points for the draw – few teams leave Vicarage Road with that reward for their efforts and it sets things up nicely for the short trip up the M5 next weekend and the local derby against Worcester.

Gloucester were forced to make two changes from the one announced on Friday with Mike Tindall replacing Eliota Fuimaono-Sapolu (shoulder) and Charlie Sharples coming in for Jonny May (unwell).

Saracens for their part were denied the services of Charlie Hodgson whose wife gave birth in the morning. Owen Farrell stepped in.

New Year's Day brought a grey and damp day at Vicarage Road with the floodlights on by kick off. The steady rain by the time the game kicked off meant that running rugby might be at a premium.

And, predictably, the first few minutes saw boot being put to ball on a frequent basis as the respective back threes were given a good workout.

Saracens had the best of the early possession but Gloucester's line speed in defence was good until they went off their feet at a ruck, but Owen Farrell dragged a straightforward penalty chance wide.

The home side went right back to the formula of up and under followed by a short pass to the forwards around the fringes and it paid off as failing to release the tackled player gave Farrell a second chance and he made no mistake for a 3-0 lead on 10 minutes.

Gloucester finally got a decision as the forwards hit back and drove powerfully. Again it was failing to release the tackled player and Freddie Burns stroked home an excellent long range penalty to level the scores.

Farrell promptly nudged Sarries back in front though as Gloucester were penalised at set scrum and then lineout in quick succession and an easy penalty was the result.

There followed a great chance for Gloucester as they countered after James Short failed to gather an up and under. Tindall moved menacingly into the home 22 but the inside pass found a black shirt when a try looked on the cards.

As the rain continued to teem down, it was fairly uninspiring fare and one wag in the home section quipped that Saracens were putting the ball in the air more often than landlords Watford...

However, a grubber created the next opening for the home side as a well weighted kick pinned Charlie Sharples back near his own line and Olly Morgan went to ground supporting him, thus killing the ball. Farrell duly made it 9-3.

Burns had an immediate chance to respond as his pack won a penalty at a Saracens put in but the kick was from just inside his own half and was short and wide.

Gloucester went on to enjoy a decent spell of possession but unlocking the watertight home defence was proving to be tricky as was hanging on to the ball in contact and settled for a long-range penalty from Burns on 38 minutes to reduce the gap to 9-6.

A rushed, missed drop goal brought a fairly forgettable half of rugby to an end. The conditions had ruled to be fair and both sides were doing what they could in the circumstances.

However, if things continued, the boot was going to carry on ruling the roost and referee Sean Davey could well have a big say in the outcome of this game.

Gloucester were competing well and it looked fairly even up front. The Cherry and Whites defence looked pretty solid but there had been little chance for the dangerous backs to shine.

For the first few minutes of the second half neither side really got a grip of the game but Gloucester's indiscipline finally let them down again as two quick penalties, the second for dragging down a maul, again gifted Farrell a penalty chance and he made no mistake for 12-6.

Again, however, Burns responded in kind as he slotted a 53rd minute kick to get Gloucester back to 12-9 as Saracens once again failed to release the tackled player.

Mark McCall now decided it was time for changes and replaced both starting props, sending John Smit and Carlos Nieto into the fray, but Gloucester won the next scrum penalty and Burns levelled the scores on 62 minutes.

Gloucester started to sense an upset but went in at the side of the next maul to afford Farrell another shot at the posts but the young fly half hooked his kick left of the posts. However, he made no mistake on 68 minutes to restore his side's lead at 15-12.

Bryan Redpath's side threw everything into it as they sought to get back on terms; no-one could accuse them of a lack of heart and effort today. However, they were up against a tough-as-teak defence and even a hint of an opening was scarce.

But there was one last throw of the dice as the Gloucester pack dug deep once again as time started to ebb away and earned Burns a chance to level the scores.

He was a long way out and the ball wasn't quite perfectly struck but it stayed on target and earned Gloucester a hard fought and well-earned draw.

JC