

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 11, 2012

KINGSHOLM – AVIVA PREMIERSHIP RUGBY

GLOUCESTER EDGE NORTHAMPTON SAINTS IN 27-24 THRILLER

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Match Report by Duncan Wood

You could barely separate Gloucester Rugby and Northampton Saints at Kingsholm on Saturday as they served up an enthralling Aviva Premiership encounter with Gloucester emerging triumphant – just.

With the Cherry and Whites clinging on to a narrow 27-24 lead, it all came down to one last scrum in the home 22.

The front row trio of Dan Murphy, Matias Cortese and Shaun Knight haven't played much game time as a unit this season but came up big when it mattered and won the penalty which settled the encounter.

Freddie Burns thumped the ball gleefully into the Shed and the Kingsholm faithful erupted in a mixture of triumph and relief as the visitors were finally put to bed.

If it went down to the wire, much of that was due to the tenacity of the visitors who simply refused to capitulate even when Gloucester looked to be on the verge of opening up a decisive gap.

George Pisi's try six minutes from time drew the Saints level at 24 points apiece and it looked as though this one might slip away from Gloucester.

To be fair, defeat would have been harsh on either side but Freddie Burns' 75th minute penalty clinched the points and sent the visitors home disappointed.

Gloucester were forced into a late reshuffle as skipper Peter Buxton failed a late fitness test on his elbow. Tom Savage came into the starting line up on the blindside flank.

It was a good start from the Cherry and Whites and, although a high tackle on Charlie Sharples was missed by the officials, Jonny May was inches away from the opening score, just hauled down as he latched onto an inside pass from Qera.

Eliota Fuimaono-Sapolu then carved open the Saints midfield and sprinted into the visitors 22 but the support wasn't up with him and his offload found Saints hands.

The frenetic pace continued as Gloucester caught Northampton napping with a quick lineout. Jonny May made good ground before quickly recycled ball gave Sharples room to run and he carved his way to the line. Burns added the extras.

The visitors settled although they lost Jamie Elliott to injury and were next on the scoreboard as Ryan Lamb slotted an easy penalty after Gloucester were penalised at the breakdown.

Gloucester's vaunted catch and drive then very nearly created a try for Darren Dawidiuk who burst clear of the maul only to be halted by a brave last-ditch tackle.

Saints promptly came in at the side of the ensuing ruck and Burns punished them with the penalty for a 10-3 lead after 17 minutes.

The visitors then very nearly opened up Gloucester as Courtney Lawes went blindside from quick ball but lost possession in contact near the line and Gloucester were able to clear.

It was a good spell from the Saints who tested the Gloucester defence with a long, punishing rolling maul before settling for a 27th minute penalty attempt from Lamb who dragged it wide to the delight of the Shed.

It was potentially a key spell of the game especially when, having soaked up the pressure, Gloucester moved into the Saints half and Burns landed a long-range penalty for 13-3, only for Lamb to respond in kind a minute later.

The former Gloucester fly half then added his third penalty of the afternoon as half time approached but Gloucester weren't done.

Saints spilled the restart but a loose pass looked to have killed the opportunity. However, the scalding pace of May created an opening for Sharples who set the ball up nicely for Dawidiuk to crash over from close range and secure an 18-9 half time lead.

It had been a captivating half of rugby. Gloucester were edging it on the scoreboard but Northampton were asking plenty of questions.

Gloucester were looking threatening with ball in hand but needed to be wary of turning the ball over in key areas and cleaning up the restarts and exits.

It had also been a half where Bryan Redpath's side had put in a lot of work in defence. A similar effort would probably be needed after the break.

Saints got the better start. Gloucester knocked on the restart and then dropped the ensuing scrum only for Lamb to push his penalty across the posts. Again, the Shed roared its approval.

Lamb, though, was given a much easier chance a few minutes later for a high shot on Paul Diggin after some nice Saints build up play and duly made the score 18-12 after 49 minutes.

Gloucester came straight back. Using the high ball on Saints full back Paul Diggin set up a penalty opportunity as the ball was spilled under pressure and Burns made it a nine-point game again at 21-12.

This tight game continued to ebb and flow and, on the hour, Saints opted to kick for the corner and it paid off with a catch and drive try for Soane Tonga'uiha, converted by Myler to cut the gap to 21-19 and set up a tense final quarter.

One man not feeling the pressure though was Freddie Burns and he stepped up to make it 24-19 with a penalty just inside the Saints half on 65 minutes.

However, Kingsholm was then stunned as Gloucester were caught cold on the blindside and George Pisi romped down the five metre channel to score from 30 metres and level the scores.

Gloucester were rattled and needed a break and got it when Alex Brown charged down a clearance from Roberts.

It set up good lineout possession for Gloucester and Northampton promptly dragged down the maul only for Burns' penalty to hit the post.

However, Burns made no mistake when presented with a chance in front of the posts just a minute or so later to edge Gloucester back in front at 27-24.

There was still time for drama. Northampton thought they'd breached the Gloucester defensive line again only to be called back for a forward pass to the chagrin of James Downey.

One last defensive stand was needed and the Gloucester pack dug deep to win the crucial penalty.

The win and a vital four points sees Gloucester keep in touch with the top six and a huge West Country derby next week at Bath now lies in wait.