

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, APRIL 21, 2012

KINGSHOLM – AVIVA PREMIERSHIP RUGBY

ANOTHER ONE SLIPS AWAY AS SALE TAKE THE SPOILS

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 19 SALE SHARKS 24

Match Report by Duncan Wood

The recent story of Gloucester's 2011-12 season continued at Kingsholm on Saturday afternoon as Sale Sharks overcame a nine point deficit on their way to a 24-19 win.

The Cherry and Whites have led so many games recently only to see the game slip away in the final few minutes and it proved to be the case again.

To be fair to the Sharks, they played a very sensible game in the second half, maintaining high field position and taking whatever points were on offer.

But they certainly had to work for the win. Gloucester were a different outfit from the one that suffered a disappointing defeat at home to Newcastle last weekend.

In fact, had it not been for a couple of marginal calls, it could well have been Gloucester celebrating the win.

However, the fact of the matter is that Sale have now clinched sixth place in the Aviva Premiership table and the Heineken Cup spot that goes with it while Gloucester only have pride to play for at London Irish next weekend.

It was a sad way to sign off at Kingsholm for a number of players making their final appearance at Kingsholm but the Sharks did a good job on the day.

Sale took to the field amid a crescendo of boos while Gloucester, predictably, were greeted by a wall of sound.

The visitors were quickly on the back foot as Alex Brown charged down an attempted box kick but Rupert Harden couldn't quite gather the bouncing ball and the chance was gone.

Another opportunity followed just moments later as Tim Molenaar made a stunning line break. Tindall was in support and sent James Simpson-Daniel scurrying into the 22 but the cover just got to the winger.

A mass brawl followed with players flying in from all angles and Akapusi Qera and Rob Miller were both sinbinned after a lengthy debate between the officials.

The high tempo continued and Gloucester were eventually first to score as Freddie Burns stroked home a seventh minute penalty while Nick Macleod was just short with a 13th minute effort but on target a minute later to level the scores.

Burns had an immediate chance to restore the lead as Sale failed to roll away from the tackle area but nudged the long-range attempt wide.

The Kingsholm faithful were massively up for the game and referee Rose was winning no friends locally with a series of decisions that baffled the home supporters who weren't slow to let him know.

And the crowd were stunned on 23 minutes as Gloucester overthrew a lineout and quickly moved the ball wide[*sic*]. Addison made the half break and Rob Miller took a great line to just make the line. Macleod converted.

The reply was instant. Sale failed to handle the restart and the ball bounced kindly for the chasing Charlie Sharples who stepped the last man to score. The conversion from Burns made it 10-10.

Sharples was nearly in again minutes later after a great catch and drive from the pack but the scramble defence from Sale just held out as the rain started to hammer down.

Gloucester were dealt a blow as James Simpson-Daniel was forced to limp out of the action but spirits were promptly lifted as a Burns penalty put the Cherry and Whites back in front.

It looked as though that was it for the first [half] action only for the Gloucester pack to force a penalty out of the Sale scrum and Burns nailed a difficult kick for a 16-10 half time lead.

It had been a much-improved performance from Gloucester from the Newcastle defeat a week before.

Pride and passion were back on the menu and the crowd were rising to the team's efforts. Had it not been for one lapse, it would have been a comfortable lead at the break.

However, Sale had shown in that instant that they possessed real danger and were capable of punishing any errors. A pulsating second half lay in wait.

Gloucester came out fired up and nearly added a second try with the excellent Tim Molenaar producing some muscular running but the Sale defence held out under real pressure, limiting the damage to a 48th minute penalty from Burns.

Gloucester were looking comfortable but a Burns clearance from near his own line only found Mark Cueto and his suspiciously forward looking pass put Miller clear to score. 19-15 and game on with half an hour to go.

The tension was palpable and referee Rose stunned Kingsholm again by penalizing Gloucester at a scrum when they looked clearly on top and Macleod rubbed salt in the wound with the penalty to make it 19-18.

A couple of needless knock-ons had hurt Gloucester in the build up to the previous score and more turnovers gave the Sharks gilt edged field position as the game moved into its final quarter.

This proved crucial as Gloucester defended their line, but at the expense of a penalty which, if kicked, would have given Sale the lead.

The ball fell off the tee as Macleod approached it and he failed to drop kick it, instead replacing the ball and kicking it through the posts. Referee Rose correctly awarded the scrum to Gloucester.

The fly half promptly made amends as he drilled a penalty over from several yards inside his own half to give his team the lead with eight minutes to go and landed a further blow with a 76th minute drop goal.

It was too much for Gloucester to overcome as they tried to move upfield into the stiff breeze.

One Matt Cox threatened at a memorable last-ditch comeback but a knock on followed as the ball was recycled and Gloucester were left to reflect on what might have been.

JC