

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 8, 2012

MADEJSKI STADIUM – AVIVA PREMIERSHIP RUGBY

NEVER SAY DIE GLOUCESTER PIP EXILES IN THRILLER

LONDON IRISH 31 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 40

Tries apiece and points aplenty at the Madejski but it was Gloucester who took the spoils against London Irish on Saturday as two late tries saw them earn a 40-31 triumph.

Gloucester experienced heartbreak on so many occasions last season as late leads resulted in narrow defeats. But that wasn't the case today.

A team that is still very much getting to know each other scrapped and fought and showed great resilience to dog out a win when, at times, it looked to have slipped away.

A narrow 16-14 half time lead had been clawed back by the home side and it looked as though two close range tries from the Exiles would be enough to edge it.

However, a spirited late surge from the Cherry and Whites saw James Simpson-Daniel and Akapusi Qera cross to secure a memorable win.

The latter came after a phenomenal, strength sapping catch and drive which drove the Irish from halfway back into their own 22 before Qera completed the job from close range.

For a team who have had their pack written off by so many pundits before the season even began, it was a powerful message.

The pack were superb on the day, bodies put on the line consistently but Freddie Burns is also worthy of a mention, the young fly half's goalkicking keeping Gloucester in the game when it could have slipped away.

It's a first Aviva Premiership win of the season and an important one. Wins on the road are never easy and this one really was earned the hard way.

Nigel Davies said after the game that he thought his side are still only functioning at 60%. The fact that there is plenty more to come still will be music to the ears of Gloucester supporters.

Both teams came into the game looking to bounce back after opening day defeats and conditions were perfect at the Madejski as kick off time approached. Even the blazing sun had relented a touch.

Gloucester were also seeking to banish the bitter memory of the heavy defeat suffered here on the final day of last season. There was plenty to play for.

It was the home team quicker out of the traps though as Jonathan Joseph claimed a high ball ahead of Jonny May before a dangerous half break from Topsy Ojo.

Gloucester were caught offside as they scrambled back near their own line and Steve Shingler made no mistake for a 3-0 lead.

But the Cherry and Whites were quickly back on terms after good work by the pack forced an indiscretion in their 22 by the home side and Freddie Burns slotted a good kick.

Gloucester enjoyed a good spell with ball in hand and were dealing comfortably with what Irish were throwing at them.

So it was slightly against the run of play when Gloucester were penalised at the ruck and Shingler's penalty restored his team's advantage at 6-3.

Irish then struck from nowhere. Slick hands from Tagicakibau gave Homer room to run and his grubber just held up in the in-goal area for Ojo to win the chase and touch down under pressure.

It was a well-executed score but Gloucester had conceded easy field position from being offside in the Irish 22 from the restart and would be kicking themselves for the lapse.

Gloucester needed a lift and a good break from Ben Morgan provided just that, leading to a long-range penalty chance for Burns who bisected the posts with precision.

And Burns duly made it 11-9 as the Exiles were caught offside fielding a wickedly bouncing kick from Billy Twelvetrees.

The fly half then showed his skills with ball in hand as he feinted to kick before bursting clear. Dan Robson was in support but the ball was spilled by the pack as Gloucester really started to threaten.

Gloucester paid instantly for the error, conceding two penalties in succession and Shingler drilled home an excellent penalty from just inside the Gloucester half, on the angle, to make it 14-9.

Dan Robson then very nearly caught Irish napping as he broke down the 5m channel and was seemingly checked into touch as he chipped ahead just a few metres from the line.

However, Irish transgressed at the ensuing ruck only for Burns to hook the penalty a foot or so wide of the left hand upright.

It mattered not as Ben Morgan showed exactly why Gloucester worked so hard to bring him to Kingsholm.

The big number eight got his side moving forward with a decent break on halfway, and then popped up several phases later to break from the ruck.

From outside the 22, he shrugged off Skivington, swatted aside O'Leary and romped home under the posts. Burns converted for a 16-14 lead.

This gave Gloucester a slight advantage at half time and, to be fair, they were probably worth it. They had enjoyed marginal superiority in terms of territory and possession but not really made it count.

The one Achilles heel was discipline as Shingler looked on song with the boot but Morgan's try was a real boost at a crucial point.

It was very nearly a dream start for home side after the restart as they boldly ran the ball from their own 22. Watson and Tagicakibau linked well but Marland Yarde was bundled into touch just short of the line.

Gloucester weathered the storm and worked their way downfield well, winning a scrum penalty and Freddie Burns duly made it a 19-14 score-line.

However, Irish hit straight back. A hint of crossing saw Jon Fisher made the key break and, although Watson was halted just short, replacement prop Halani Aulika was unstoppable from a metre out. Shingler restored the lead with the conversion.

The home crowd were lifted and the Irish backs suddenly had a spring in their step. These were dangerous times for Gloucester.

But the next scoring chance came courtesy of great work from the Gloucester scrum who won a penalty on halfway and Burns slotted it with ease for a 22-21 lead.

Again Irish hit back. A cunning grubber into the Gloucester in-goal area set up a 5m scrum and, after a strong carry from Marland Yarde, Tomas O'Leary battled his way over. Shingler added the extras.

Burns promptly kicked his sixth penalty to make it 28-25 going into the final quarter and everything to play for with little to choose between the sides and his seventh, on 65 minutes, levelled the scores.

The see-saw nature of the encounter continued, this time the way of the Exiles as good pressure saw Gloucester penalised at a ruck and it was Shingler's turn to kick the penalty.

Still Gloucester fought and a moment of magic from Dave Lewis, a smart break down the blindside, caught Irish napping and his floated pass inside found James Simpson-Daniel for the try. Burns' conversion made it 35-31 to Gloucester.

There was still more to come as the travelling Gloucester fans really found their voices.

A powerful rolling maul drove the home pack back into their own 22 from halfway and, although they halted the initial surge, Gloucester were still in control.

Twelvetrees almost jinked his way through and Shane Monahan supported well but it was a moment for the forwards as Akapusi Qera picked up from close range to complete the scoring.

Burns, for once, was off target with the conversion and there was still some defending to do as the home side went for the losing bonus point.

Bodies were strewn all around the pitch at one point but Gloucester held out to clinch their first win of the season and lift spirits considerably ahead of next weekend's trip to Sixways to take on Worcester.