

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 22, 2012

KINGSHOLM – AVIVA PREMIERSHIP RUGBY

GLOUCESTER EDGE TITANIC PREMIERSHIP CLASH WITH CHIEFS

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 18 EXETER CHIEFS 16

In less than perfect weather conditions on Saturday, Gloucester just thwarted the efforts of Exeter to win twice in a row at Kingsholm, edging their way to a tight 18-16 victory.

There was never much to choose between the two sides. Playing into the elements, Gloucester were level, 6-6, at half time but were nearly undone by a superb second half effort by the visitors.

In fact, when Simon Alcott forced his way over for the game's only try, it looked as though the game had swung decisively the Chiefs' way.

For a while, the visitors looked the better side and another score may well have finished off the game.

However, Gloucester have developed a steely edge this season, and they had to dig deep once again.

Backed by a sell-out crowd in full voice, it was a tense final quarter. But Gloucester chipped away at the Chiefs' four point lead, and two Freddie Burns penalties earned an 18-16 lead with just a few minutes to play.

Nigel Davies' side then turned the screw, camping in the visitors' 22, to run down the clock and earn a fine win.

Exeter were possibly the toughest opponent that Gloucester have faced this season, and the Cherry and Whites can reflect upon fourth place in the Aviva Premiership table with a sense of pride.

Not for too long, though! Leicester lie in wait next weekend and nothing but the best will suffice at Welford Road.

A sell out Kingsholm crowd gave Gloucester a rapturous reception as the two teams took the field. The pitch looked to be in good shape considering the weather.

The game started somewhat predictably given the pre-match downpours, with a lot of kicking for territory. However, Gloucester did show early signs of wanting to play an open game.

However, it was the Gloucester scrum that won early bragging rights. They forced a penalty at a scrum on 10 minutes, and Freddie Burns confidently opened the scoring.

The Cherry and Whites were looking the brighter, but conceded a soft penalty when Rob Cook and the ball was picked up in an offside position by Mike Tindall[sic]. Gareth Steenson duly levelled the scores after 19 minutes.

One thing in the Chiefs' favour though was the wind, and they were using it to good effect in the kicking game to keep Gloucester pinned back in their own half.

Gloucester's lineout was also a little shaky, and one overthrow gave the Chiefs the chance to break downfield. Despite good defence, Steenson was able to add his second penalty and nudge Exeter in front, 6-3 after 27 minutes.

Gloucester needed a spark and it nearly came from a strong run from Sione Kalamafoni. Shane Monahan was almost clear, Rob Cook halted just a metre short and Jimmy Cowan was held up over the line. Gloucester had to settle for a Freddie Burns penalty.

It was still a reasonably tight affair as half time approached with neither team really able to gain the upper hand. Burns tried to break the deadlock with a 37th minute drop goal but was just wide of the mark.

So, half time came with the teams locked together at six points apiece. It had been very much a game for the purist at this point, but Gloucester may have been the happier, with the wind at their backs after the break.

The Cherry and Whites were trying desperately to get their game going. But a combination of the difficult handling conditions and a dogged opponent were making life difficult.

They would presumably also be up against different tactics from Exeter. The Chiefs had been largely content to put boot to ball, but may have had to think about opening things up now.

The crowd were also losing patience rapidly with the refereeing. Several decisions clearly left the Kingsholm faithful baffled, and a crescendo of boos filled the air as Mr Geraint Roberts blew for half time.

There was a positive start to the half as the Chiefs immediately went off their feet at a ruck. The penalty was on halfway, but posed no challenge to Burns who made it 9-6.

And Burns duly made it 12-6 on 48 minutes, after great work by Ben Morgan produced a turnover in the Chiefs' 22 and forced the visitors to concede another penalty.

However, Steenson narrowed the gap to 12-9 almost immediately, as the Chiefs pack produced their best scrum of the day and earned a penalty which the fly half gratefully accepted.

A good spell of pressure then followed for the visitors. They remained patient near the Gloucester line and, eventually, hooker Simon Alcott smashed his way over. Steenson's conversion made it 16-12 to the visitors as the hour mark approached.

Burns had an immediate chance to respond. But the usually reliable fly half pushed a good penalty chance wide of the uprights.

A hint of tension spread its way around Kingsholm, but Burns made amends for his previous miss as he landed with fifth penalty on 65 minutes to narrow the gap to 15-16.

The Chiefs were playing like a team with the self-belief that comes from seven wins in a row, and only great defensive work from Cook and Monahan kept them at bay.

As the game moved into the final ten minutes, what Gloucester needed was possession. But the Chiefs were doing a good job keeping it away from them.

Gloucester finally secured the ball though, to move into the opposition half on 74 minutes. Charlie Sharples' jinking run had the defence on the back foot and a penalty followed. Burns held his nerve to make the score 18-16.

It was a time for cool heads, and Gloucester calmly ran down the clock. It was now Exeter's turn to desperately try and get their hands on the ball.

The countdown clock edged inexorably closer to zero, and Exeter had one last chance from deep. But the wet ball squirmed out of muddy hands, and Gloucester had the win that more than 16,000 supporters requested for Christmas.

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