

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, JANUARY 26, 2013

FRANKLIN'S GARDENS – LV= CUP

DOGGED GLOUCESTER COMES UP SHORT AT SAINTS

NORTHAMPTON SAINTS 26 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 7

A much-changed Gloucester effort gave it everything in Saturday's LV= Cup encounter at Northampton, but the home side had just too much class and experience and emerged 26-7 winners.

The defeat means that Gloucester can't catch Harlequins in the standings, so a semi-final place is out of the question. But Gloucester can take great heart from the performance.

A number of players were making their first appearance of the season, and a host of others have only a handful of games to their name.

Yet this much shuffled side gave it absolutely everything at Franklin's Gardens, and the final score-line didn't really do them justice.

They played with ambition and no little skill, and can look back on a number of good scoring chances that they didn't convert.

Combine that with Gloucester being very much on the wrong side of the refereeing decisions for most of the afternoon, and a set piece that did misfire at times, and that was the difference.

The latter in particular hurt Gloucester as it cost them vital territory and possession, and nipped a couple of promising moves in the bud.

But there were plenty of positives. Andy Hazell played as though he'd never been away, securing possession and making a nuisance of himself when he couldn't quite turn the ball over.

New signing Lua Lokotui came through his first taste of English club rugby well, while Ryan Mills got 80 minutes under his belt after his lengthy injury absence.

And the likes of Elliott Stooke, Tom Heard and Steph Reynold will all benefit from this experience of top class rugby on the road and come back stronger.

Gloucester, sporting their change strip, made a promising start. The returning Andy Hazell snaffled loose ball on the deck and a good attacking spell followed.

There was good interplay between backs and forwards, and Gloucester were confident to kick for the corner when awarded a penalty. However, the Saints defence held out.

Saints, aided by a couple of borderline penalties, moved downfield and benefitted from an overthrown Gloucester lineout to earn an easy penalty chance. Ryan Lamb made it 3-0 after 10 minutes with ease.

Gloucester certainly weren't getting much change out of the referee in these early stages, and the cheap possession was allowing the home side to make easy territory.

Nigel Davies' side hung on in defence and very nearly snatched a breakaway try, but Henry Trinder knocked on when chasing a kick ahead after a Lamb knock on with an open field ahead of him.

The handling error was compounded as play came back for a scrum; Gloucester were promptly penalised and Lamb's penalty made it 6-0.

Gloucester duly stunned the home crowd. Steph Reynolds fielded a kick downfield and his long pass saw Shane Monahan slip a tackle and set off on a weaving run into the Saints 22.

Quick ball gave Ryan Mills a sight of the line and he fought his way over through Ryan Lamb's tackle, before dusting himself off and converting his own effort. 7-6 to Gloucester after 25 minutes.

Gloucester were making a good fist of it, but were caught cold just as it looked as though they would make half time with the lead intact.

The home forwards made good ground and, with the Gloucester defence in retreat, centre Luther Burrell took a great line in midfield to steam in from 25 metres out. Lamb added the extras to make it 13-7.

There was still time for Gloucester to threaten. Tim Molenaar made a great break from his own 22, but Ben Foden got back to clean up the kick ahead and save the day for Saints.

So, the home team went into half time with the advantage and, to be fair, were probably just about value for it.

However, this young Gloucester side were giving it a lash against a considerably more experienced side. The set piece was creaking at times but the ambition in attack and attitude in defence couldn't be faulted.

Dario Chistolini had been replaced by Tom Heard in the latter stages of the first half, and Mike Tindall came on for Henry Trinder at half time as Gloucester looked to battle their way back into the game.

The opening stages were scrappy, although Shane Monahan almost blasted his way through only for his offload to find Saints hands. The home side responded well, but butchered a two-on-one chance with Gloucester at full stretch.

Both teams made replacements in a bid to break the stalemate, and it was one of Northampton's new faces, Stephen Myler, who obliged with a 56th minute penalty.

Gloucester came back well. Tindall cut a good line to get over the gain line to set up good field position. Lee Dickson was penalised for coming in at the side but Ryan Mills' penalty was a whisker wide of the right hand upright.

Stephen Myler, however, made no mistake a few minutes later as Gloucester failed to release the tackled player and his second penalty opened up a 19-7 lead.

Gloucester were again getting the rough end of the refereeing decisions as the game ticked its way into the final quarter, with the coaching team up in the stands absolutely baffled.

One such call saw Myler kick into the corner and put Gloucester just a few metres from their own line. The rolling maul was well defended, but prop Alex Waller burst out of the ruck and dived over unopposed. Myler converted for 26-7.

The outcome was now beyond doubt, but Gloucester kept fighting and put the home defence under real pressure with Cowan, Tindall and Monahan all threatening.

However, their efforts went unrewarded as, although the Saints defence was stretched, it never quite broke.

Next up for Gloucester are Bath Rugby and no hint of a dead rubber about that one!

There is plenty to build on from today, and Bath are an opponent that no-one wearing the Cherry and White will want to finish second best to!

JC