

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 9, 2013

FRANKLIN'S GARDENS – AVIVA PREMIERSHIP RUGBY

MAY SCORES TWICE AS GLOUCESTER CLINCH MEMORABLE WIN
AT NORTHAMPTON

NORTHAMPTON SAINTS 11 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 27

Jonny May scored two tries and Rob Cook added 17 points from the boot, but it was a fine team performance overall that clinched a fine 27-11 Aviva Premiership win at Northampton Saints on Saturday afternoon.

The four points were nothing less than Gloucester deserved, as they delivered as close to a complete performance as they have all season.

The Cherry and Whites took the game to their opponents from the very first whistle, playing with an intensity that seemed to rock the Saints.

Nigel Davies had said before the game that the set piece would be crucial, and the Gloucester pack fronted up in style on the day.

Granted, on the day, the Saints did get their rolling maul going. And there were, as always, some curious decisions at scrum time. However, the Gloucester pack can look back on their day's work with pride.

The defensive effort was phenomenal. Time and again, the big Saints ball carriers were cut down behind the gain line, and a number of jarring hits produced several turnovers.

And the cutting edge was back in attack. The first try was a move straight off the training paddock, clinically executed. The second showcased the predatory instincts of Jonny May.

If Northampton seemed stunned, so too did the Franklin's Gardens crowd. They were heading for the exits a good ten minutes before full time and the travelling Gloucester support gloried in a rendition of "When the Glaws go marching in."

It's just one match completed in a key sequence of four, but it's a very fine start and one that would have the team in good heart ahead of the trip to Wasps next weekend.

Shane Monahan failed a late fitness test on a calf injury, and Henry Trinder took his place on the bench. Otherwise, Gloucester were as announced on a cold, dank afternoon at Franklin's Gardens.

The early season meeting between the two teams, at Kingsholm, had seen the Saints make the most of their rolling maul. Early signs were that it was in good working order.

However, it was the home scrum that earned the first scoring opportunity after Ryan Mills knocked on a high ball. The scrum went to deck, Gloucester were penalised and Stephen Myler made it 3-0.

However, a turnover straight from the restart saw a Saints forward fail to roll away from the tackle area. Rob Cook levelled the scores with ease.

And the bright start from Gloucester continued, as their defence stood firm while their attack looked lively. Saints were caught offside after a dangerous counter and Cook's second penalty earned Gloucester the lead after 12 minutes.

Then a gem of a try followed. Clean lineout ball on halfway was spun into midfield where Jonny May took over. His arcing run saw him slip a tackle, and his strength pace[sic] took him clear for the score. Cook's conversion attempt shaded the post but stayed wide. 11-3 to Gloucester after 20 minutes.

The Cherry and Whites were indebted to a superb cover tackle from Sione Kalamafoni moments later, though. Mike Hayward took an offload from Ben Nutley but was dragged down just short of the line.

Northampton were working hard to get their big runners into the game, but the Gloucester tackling was up to the task and forcing some key knock-on's.

The home team did narrow the gap on 27 minutes, however, as Myler's second penalty punished another scrummage indiscretion, only for the scrummage guessing game to continue five minutes later, Rob Cook kicking the penalty.

When Mike Tindall won a penalty, competing for the ball at a ruck shortly after the restart, Cook kicked his fourth penalty and made the score 17-6.

Cook then inspired a superb counter attack from deep with help from Tim Molenaar and Jonny May, which took Gloucester to within inches of the Saints line. GJ van Velze was sinbinned for killing the ball and Gloucester went for the scrum.

Several times the scrum was reset but, unbelievably, referee Martin Fox penalised Gloucester, and Northampton escaped down the tunnel trailing only 17-6.

Only time would tell if this would prove to be a key moment. But Gloucester could reflect on a strong 40 minutes thus far.

A fight-back was bound to come, and Gloucester had to be prepared for that. However, the first half had shown that Nigel Davies' looked to be up for the fight today.

And it was a dream start for Gloucester. A handling error in attack by Northampton bounced up ideally for Jonny May, and the flyer was off to the races for his second try. Cook added the easy conversion.

Northampton needed a quick response and they got it. A penalty allowed them to move into Gloucester territory and set up two powerful rolling mauls. May, of all people, was sinbinned after the first and the home pack lost the ball going over the line from the second.

The home crowd were livid, although Gloucester will feel justice was done as Soane Tonga'uiha clearly knocked on in the build-up.

However, the pressure finally told. Gloucester were bizarrely penalised at their own lineout to allow Saints to camp on their line again, and Phil Dowson burrowed over from close range.

Samu Manoa was yellow carded for punching in the aftermath of the try as Jonny May returned to the fray with Gloucester leading 24-11.

With the game still very much in the balance, the home side threw the kitchen sink at Gloucester. Yet another driving maul almost breached the Gloucester line, but superb defence from Lua Lokotui saved the day.

Crucially, with six minutes left to play, Rob Cook extended the lead to sixteen points with his fifth penalty of the day and Gloucester had some breathing space.

Northampton did try in vain to move the ball around as they probed for an opening to get back into the game, and perhaps secure a losing bonus point.

But Gloucester were now within sight of the finishing line, and in no mood to concede even that.

A good day at the office for the Cherry and White, and one that will be savoured – but not for too long.

There's still a long way to go this season and a lot of hard work lies ahead.