

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, APRIL 20, 2013

KINGSHOLM – AVIVA PREMIERSHIP RUGBY

MAY DAY COMES EARLY FOR GLOUCESTER IN SARACENS WIN

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Two tries from Jonny May led the way in a superb and often heroic 28-23 Aviva Premiership victory over league leaders Saracens at Kingsholm on Saturday afternoon.

It was a thriller of a game in front of a near full house, with the outcome still in question right up until the very last play.

Gloucester started well, were pegged back by the league leaders but then showed enough mettle to fight back in a tense second half.

The game was contested by two teams playing some great rugby, and it was a superb spectacle for the supporters.

Gloucester's backs revelled in the dry conditions, the likes of Burns, May and Trinder were always a threat with ball in hand. However, the forwards deserve many plaudits.

The set piece was pinpointed in the media as a possible area of weakness, coming into the game but all eight forwards, working together as a unit, produced a superb combined effort.

Indeed, in the final quarter, it was real backs to the wall stuff. Defending a narrow lead, with the Kingsholm crowd behind them, there were several key lineouts in the home 22.

But Koree Britton hit his man time and again, and the pack mauled their way to safety.

And, with the final kick of the game, Freddie Burns kicked his third penalty of the day to secure the 28-23 win and send the home crowd into raptures.

Bath cannot now overtake Gloucester in the table, and neither can London Wasps. Heineken Cup rugby next season is now assured. What an achievement that is, given where Gloucester were 12 months ago.

Kingsholm looked a picture as kick off time approached. The sun was shining, the pitch was in great nick, and supporters on all four sides of the ground were resplendent in Cherry and White.

It was a breathless start, with both teams looking to move the ball around and the ball not leaving the field of play for several minutes.

However, it was the boot that drew first blood. Rob Cook's quick tap and go and sharp break after he marked the ball, forced Saracens to concede a penalty and Freddie Burns made no mistake.

Gloucester were on fire. The pack disrupted a Saracens lineout in the visitors 22 and won key turnover ball. Swift hands moved the ball left, Henry Trinder gave Jonny May a metre of space, and the winger battled his way over. 8-0 after 9 minutes.

Saracens are famed for their resilience though, and hit straight back with an Owen Farrell penalty when Nick Wood was pinged for holding on in the tackle after the restart.

The Cherry and Whites attacking ambitions were still to the fore. Henry Trinder threatened to make a telling break, but was halted by a try-saving tap tackle from Ernst Joubert. Burns had a penalty chance but was off target into a strong breeze.

Saracens then struck after a good phase of play. A pass actually hit the deck and seemingly threw the Gloucester defence off balance.

Joel Tomkins needed no second invitation and a quick show and go saw him stroll over. Farrell's conversion made it 8-10.

One early area of concern for Gloucester was the scrum. A powerful effort from the Saracens eight produced a penalty chance on 27 minutes and Farrell duly extended the lead to 8-13.

Nigel Davies' side responded well, taking play into the visitors 22 with some powerful running but Saracens were defending well.

However, after another great run from Cook, Freddie Burns slid a sublime grubber behind the defensive line for Jonny May to run onto and score. Burns added the conversion for a 15-13 lead.

Gloucester's confidence was up and a quick tap from May forced a deliberate knock on from Sarries as they scrambled in defence and Burns took the three points on offer.

18-13 at half time and the Kingsholm crowd were in good voice. Their team had played a high tempo game which had really stretched the league leaders, who were really struggling to impose their physicality.

Both teams were still very much in the game. This one really could go either way. However, Gloucester were playing their best rugby for some weeks and looking to sign off at Kingsholm in style.

The second half started in similarly open style, with David Strettle unlucky not to wriggle free down the left, denied only by a foot in touch. Saracens looked determined and were asking early questions.

Ten minutes passed in the blink of an eye without the deadlock being broken, although replacement hooker Jamie George set alarm bells ringing with a fine break only for the scramble defence to get back.

At the other end, Billy Twelvetrees was desperately close to scoring as Goode fumbled his chip through, but couldn't quite make the line.

A number of contentious penalty calls then went against Gloucester, much to the fury of the home crowd, and a Farrell penalty reduced the gap to 18-16.

Gloucester were furious and channelled the anger the right way. Gathering the restart, Ben Morgan took the ball at pace to smash the defensive line before brushing off several tackles to score a superb try. Burns converted for a 25-16 lead with 19 minutes left to play.

Gloucester were immediately under pressure in defence, gallantly defending their own line and Dan Robson was sin-binned to heighten the tension.

The pressure was building. Alex Goode almost made the line but a superb cover tackle from May hauled him down. It only served to delay the inevitable, Vunipola offloading near the line for Tomkins to score. Farrell converted for 25-23.

You could now cut the tension with a knife. It was a time for cool heads and big hearts.

Saracens did everything right. They pinned Gloucester back in their own 22 for what seemed like an eternity, and waited for the mistake that would surely lead to a kick at goal from Owen Farrell.

It didn't come. The Gloucester lineout was rock solid, securing several key pieces of possession with just a few minutes to go, frustrating the Men in Black beyond belief.

As time ticked away, another powerful maul was pulled down by the visitors and the crowd rejoiced. Freddie Burns bisected the posts and a famous win was secured.