

THE CITIZEN

TUESDAY, APRIL 17, 2001

YOUNG GLOUCESTER SLIP UP AGAINST IRISH PACE

FORRESTER SCORES FINE TRY AS PROMISING ACADEMY STARS
ARE GIVEN A CHANCE

LONDON IRISH 35 GLOUCESTER 10

This was a means to an end and a match of little significance to Gloucester in terms of their Premiership finish, but it held its own vital importance for the men from Kingsholm.

Gloucester ended their Premiership campaign with a defeat, just as they started it, in a season that tested every inch of their powers of commitment and every ounce of resolve.

It has been tough, make no mistake, and this was another step on the learning curve.

They knew it was an 80 minutes of little consequence, but that would belittle the calculated and highly professional approach of coaches Andy Keast and John Brain.

The pair had planned meticulously for a victory, but in truth Gloucester were always going to be three or four players short of a side capable of that, with three Academy players making their debuts.

It would have been a fantastic effort had they won, and now the real meaning of their victories over Sale and Leicester last month can be appreciated.

There are now only five days to go before their Heineken Cup semi-final and the thought of needing a victory against the Irish in their last game in order to qualify for the play-offs was highly unpalatable.

In that respect, Brain and Keast engineered a job well done, and for half of the contest yesterday their rebuilt team did them proud.

Mistakes littered play and the Irish themselves seemed desperate not to face a trip to Leicester in the play-offs.

The scrappy nature of play enabled the Gloucester youngsters to bed in, and they did well.

The leggy and highly mobile James Forrester made a splendid debut in the Premiership. He was full of running, strong and desperate to succeed. His individual try at the end was a fitting climax to his debut. It took guts to tap a penalty and burst through behind the posts.

Skipper Andy Deacon met each of them as they took the field and summoned a performance in the first period that deserved more than their 9-3 deficit.

Forrester, centre Duncan Murray and Jon Goodridge at full-back all played their part and made an impact in a team display full of endeavour.

Murray made a bullocking tackle on his opposite number, while Goodridge almost grabbed a try in the first period following a blindside move, before the Irish wrestled control.

Gloucester's problem all season has centred around the half-back combination and it was at the crux of their deficiencies here.

With Deacon and Mark Cornwell leading the youngsters into a full-frontal assault, Gloucester battled toe-to-toe with the Irish but Byron Hayward missed two highly kickable first-half penalties, so instead of disappearing down the tunnel level, Gloucester were six points down.

However, it started to go wrong as early as the fourth minute. Stephane Sanchez pulled a calf muscle at the second scrum, so Phil Vickery, returning after a month, was given 76 minutes to prove his fitness instead of 20.

He came through well, and was perhaps the only man capable of driving at the heart of the Irish defence. He is a hard man to stop, as is Olivier Azam, who emerged in the second half in his usual highly combustible self.

Irish grabbed a foothold when Herve Gregoire-Mazzocco was sinbinned. They attacked a man stronger but it was a mistake by Elton Moncrieff, who had enjoyed a riveting first period, that handed Irish their first try.

Gloucester had done well to turn over possession and secure a scrum, but Moncrieff's clearance kick was charged down by Kieran Campbell who was able to dive over and score.

That took the score to 19-3 and a Barry Everitt penalty stretched them away further. He managed 17 points in all before Irish stole their second try.

It was ironic because it came from a well constructed Gloucester move; their first real sortie of the second period.

They moved play from the blindside to open, but Hayward drew the cover on to Goodridge before delivering a suicidal pass.

Paul Sackey robbed him of possession and raced from his own 22 to score.

Gloucester were out on their feet now and although disrupting Irish at the scrums, they could maintain no structure of movement behind them.

By the time Nnamdi Ezulike scored in the far left corner, Gloucester knew time was up.

They deserved a try, solely for their hard work. Fittingly, it was Forrester who snatched it with a devilish piece of quick thinking from a penalty.

There is life in the grand old club. English life, but Gloucester have bigger sights than this on the horizon.

On Saturday, the real Gloucester will be on show in the Heineken Cup.

LONDON IRISH: J. Cunningham; P. Sackey, M. Oliver, R. Hoadley, N. Ezulike; B. Everitt (S. Hunt, 75), K. Campbell; M. Worsley, R. Kirke (A. Flavin, 75), N. Hatley, R. Strudwick (capt.), G Delaney, E Halvey (J. Cockle, 54), D. Danaher, K. Dawson (R. Bates, 62).

GLOUCESTER: J. Goodridge (J. Goatley, 63); R. Todd, D. Murray, C. Yates, R. Greenslade-Jones; B. Hayward, E. Moncrieff; S. Sanchez (P. Vickery, 7), J. Djoudi, A. Deacon (capt.) (O. Azam, 60), A. Eustace (E. Pearce, 58), M. Cornwell, J. Forrester, S. Ojomoh (T. Miklausic, 71), H. Gregoire-Mazzocco.

REFEREE: A. Spreadbury (Bath)

ATTENDANCE: 7,500

STAR MAN: J. Forrester

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