

THE CITIZEN

MONDAY, APRIL 30, 2001

DREAM DIES AFTER ONLY A TERM AT EURO SUMMIT

WASPS 18 GLOUCESTER 6

And so Gloucester's European torch is finally blown out. It flickered bravely yesterday to suggest there might be one last twist to the season, but the dream has died after only one term at the summit.

While it lasted, it was sensational, but Gloucester can have few complaints about their overall campaign. Near is not good enough and for all their tremendous application and heart, defeat at Loftus Road proved to be a microcosm of their season.

They will know that over the entire season they have been too inconsistent, too infrequent at hitting the heights to ensure they remain as one of the feared teams on a constant basis.

As they showed yesterday, they do possess enough spirit and sheer iron determination to mix it with the best on the one-off occasions. But the tag of spirited losers wins you nothing and that is what will sting at Kingsholm this morning.

Gloucester showed what they could do when there was some meaning to the outcome and that is why, when the season is put to bed, it will be one of the most infuriating in recent memory.

If only they could play like that all the time. At the coal face, there is hardly a team better.

There was bite and gnarl in their play and a willingness to take Wasps on, but it was when it comes to the guile – when little things have to be done well – that Gloucester are found wanting.

The components that make Leicester and Wasps so good is their ability to rely with a sense of inevitability on the basics and fashion chances they know will be taken.

For all the red-blooded graft of Steve Ojomoh, the skittish pace of Andy Hazell and the ever-present forcefulness of Chris Fortey, there was always the feeling Gloucester would simply not win.

That does not mean they couldn't, far from it. They constructed in the first period one of their best 40 minutes of the season.

They were sure of their step and quick to the breakdown, rock solid in the tackle and devilish on the floor.

They turned Wasps over at will and got more men to the rucks and mauls when they were needed.

If coaches John Brain and Andy Keast worried about the mental approach, they would have got a splendid answer with a bristling opening.

Gloucester managed to summon from somewhere enough resolve to go 6-0 ahead with two Simon Mannix penalties, but more significantly than that, manipulate the entire period.

Again they did enough to stretch themselves way ahead, but they just did not have the pace to break the defence and score.

Gloucester have got the know-how, but when crucial balls needed to be held, tackles made or passes held, Gloucester could not do it.

They piled into Wasps and inflicted one of the toughest opening periods of their season. They kicked well and with Andy Gomarsall continuing his excellent form they had enough ball to cause some real damage.

They grew into the match, Ojomoh making charging runs and Jason Little marshalling the midfield with some excellent defensive work, before it all started to go wrong.

Hazell almost scored from a wayward Wasps line-out, charging through tacklers to be stopped just short and James Simpson-Daniel gave another exhibition of his splendid football skills.

Gloucester should have been six points up before they scored, but Mannix missed two penalties he would normally kick in his slippers, before the crushing irony of a Wasps reply.

Wasps had not been in the game. It was embarrassing how Gloucester had disrupted them before they scored the first of their two tries four minutes before half-time.

Gomarsall's kick was well placed and Rory Greenslade-Jones chased well. However, Kenny Logan collected possession and hustled into midfield. Gloucester's defence had been sucked in and Paul Sampson made a beautifully angled burst away from Terry Fanolua and Jon Goodridge for the score.

In one stroke, the previous 36 minutes work had been undone. Wasps made it look disconcertingly easy and that was always the worry for Gloucester.

They were still one point ahead, but they could easily have been seven and it was the scent of victory Wasps needed.

Logan eased Wasps 8-6 ahead with a 41st minute penalty before Goodridge saved a certain try with a smothering tackle on Martyn Wood as Wasps turned up the tempo.

Jake Boer and Hazell then combined to snap into Lewsey's angled burst for the posts minutes later as Gloucester held firm.

To credit them, their defence was outstanding. Wasps could get no pace on the ball and with Phil Vickery, Olivier Azam and Rob Fidler in disruptive form, Gloucester hung in.

But just when they needed to grow stronger, Wasps stretched themselves a score ahead. Ironically it came from a Gloucester drop-out and Ian Jones' lay-back fell to Joe Worsley, who galloped free, only to lose his footing. But Gloucester infringed and Logan pushed the hosts further ahead.

It was tense and fiery, committed and passionate and Hazell almost scored from a Mark Cornwell knock-down but again, he was held short. That seemed to sum up Gloucester's afternoon. Close, but not close enough and Logan rubbed salt in Gloucester's wounds when he burst clear in added time to score beneath the posts. Gloucester were out on their feet. They had given it their all, slugged it out, but could not deliver the crucial blow.

What might have been. If only Gloucester had delivered at key moments.

WASPS: P. Sampson; J. Lewsey, F. Waters (R. Henderson 61), M. Denney, K. Logan; A. King, M. Wood; D. Molloy, T. Leota (P. Greening 61), W. Green, R. Birkett, S. Shaw, J. Worsley, P. Volley, L. Dallaglio.

GLOUCESTER: J. Goodridge; R. Greenslade-Jones, T. Fanolua (C. Yates 48), J. Little, J. Simpson-Daniel; S. Mannix, A. Gomarsall; O. Azam (A. Deacon 79), C. Fortey (J. Djoudi 80), P. Vickery, R. Fidler (M. Cornwell 63), I. Jones, J. Boer, A. Hazell, S. Ojomoh (K. Jones 74).

ATTENDANCE: 4,986

REFEREE: Steve Lander (Liverpool)

STAR MAN: Steve Ojomoh