

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 15, 2013

ALLIANZ PARK – AVIVA PREMIERSHIP RUGBY

**14 MEN BATTLE BRAVELY BUT ULTIMATELY SUCCUMB
TO SARACENS STRENGTH**

SARACENS 44 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 12

Gloucester Rugby's 14 men fought heroically at Allianz Park on Sunday following a second minute red card for Nick Wood, even leading at half time, but eventually fell to a 44-12 defeat.

Nigel Davies spoke after the game of his pride in the way his side fought after the early setback but, eventually, the effort of keeping Saracens at bay for so long took its toll.

Making so many tackles and working so hard in defence, finally caught up with the Cherry and Whites who fought so hard to deny their opponents a try scoring bonus point.

In fact, Gloucester battled and frustrated the home side hugely in the opening half, even going into half time with a narrow 12-10 lead thanks to four penalties from Freddie Burns, making his 100th competitive appearance for the club.

However, the danger signs had been present and Saracens quickly edged back in front at the start of the second half. Showing a grim ruthless determination, they turned the screw as Gloucester understandably tired.

Two tries in the final three minutes finally clinched the five points for the Men in Black and Gloucester were left to reflect on a second defeat in a row on the trip back to Kingsholm.

There's no time for negativity, however. Northampton Saints are the visitors to Kingsholm next weekend, and Gloucester will be straining every sinew to get their season off and running.

Nigel Davies' side travelled to Allianz Park for their first appearance at Saracens' new stadium, looking to bounce back after last weekend's setback at home to Sale Sharks.

It was a disastrous start for Gloucester though. Promising work from the pack had set up great field position, when Nick Wood was shown a red card for use of the boot at a ruck in the Saracens 22.

The first contact was clearly with Jacques Burger's body, but the flanker then moved and the second struck his head. Wood realised what was happening and didn't rake the Saracen, but referee Wayne Barnes acted swiftly. Less than two minutes had been played...

The Cherry and Whites had a chance to take the lead a few minutes later when Saracens failed to clear the tackle area, but Freddie Burns was narrowly off target with his penalty.

Burns was then the victim of a horrendously late challenge from Alistair Hargreaves, requiring lengthy treatment to his knee as the second row escaped punishment.

The fly half promptly dusted himself off, then embarked upon a weaving run leading to a penalty, which he slotted confidently to give Gloucester a 3-0 lead after 12 minutes.

It was now going to be a case of dogged defence for Gloucester. Akapusi Qera was sacrificed so that Dan Murphy could restore numbers in the front row.

Saracens sought to make the most of the superiority of numbers up front, turning down two kicks at goal in favour of kicking for the corner.

Gloucester dug in, but were finally undone on 22 minutes, as Duncan Taylor made a good break through the inside centre channel. Saracens were over the gain line and Joel Tomkins profited, taking a good angle off Richard Wigglesworth to break clear and score. Farrell converted for a 7-3 lead.

That lead should have been extended to 10-3 five minutes later as Gloucester dropped a scrum, but Farrell dragged his kickable penalty left of the posts.

Burns duly showed his rival for the England 10 shirt how to do it, as he stroked home a long-range effort to narrow the gap to 7-6.

Farrell's next effort was as straightforward as his previous one, and he duly restored the four point advantage at 10-6, only for Burns to land another huge effort on 38 minutes.

As half time approached, Burns added his fourth penalty when Matt Kvesic won a penalty at the breakdown and Gloucester had an unlikely 12-10 lead at the interval. It had been a tale of guts and determination following the early red card, and Gloucester were showing the resilience of which Nigel Davies talks so often.

The one area of concern was the rolling maul, which Saracens were seeking to exploit at every opportunity. Gloucester were just about keeping it at bay, but there was bound to be more of the same in the second half.

It was going to take a huge effort in the second half. But, if Gloucester could carry on defending as they had done up to this point, and Burns could carry on kicking his goals, anything could happen.

The lead was unfortunately short-lived. Billy Vunipola made a powerful burst after good pressure from the home forwards, forcing Gloucester to concede a penalty near their own line, and Farrell made it 13-12 with ease.

The home side then struck a key blow. A 5 metre lineout tied in the fringe defenders, before two cut out passes created an overlap on the left, and David Strettle was over for the second try. Farrell's conversion glanced in off the post for 20-12.

When Farrell added his third penalty two minutes later, the gap was widening and Gloucester were up against it.

Sione Kalamafoni was yellow-carded on 57 minutes for pulling down a maul as bad went to worse for the Cherry and Whites, and it was no surprise when the third try came courtesy of a catch and drive. Schalk Brits was awarded the score.

Nigel Davies's team continued to fight, and looked to have denied Saracens the fourth try until a fluky kick downfield, apparently touched by a Gloucester hand, rolled dead and gave the home team an attacking 5 metre scrum. Billy Vunipola crashed over from close range and Farrell converted.

With time up, Gloucester sought in vain to score a consolation try but only succeeded in spilling the ball in midfield. David Strettle hacked on to score and rub some salt into some already angry wounds.

JC