

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 19, 2013

THOMOND PARK – HEINEKEN CUP

**BATTLING GLOUCESTER FAR FROM DISGRACED
IN MUNSTER DEFEAT**

MUNSTER RUGBY 26 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 10

Gloucester put in a courageous effort at Thomond Park against Munster and were still in the game at 16-10 in the final quarter. But a couple of key decisions, and some Munster ruthlessness in the final few minutes, gave the final score-line an unfairly lopsided look at 26-10.

Gloucester may not have earned any match points, but they'll have earned a ton of respect in an inspired fighting display in Limerick.

It was an evening when every man in a Gloucester shirt stood up to be counted.

Many critics had made much of Director of Rugby Nigel Davies' decision to make so many changes to the team that defeated Perpignan last weekend. Davies was confident in his reasoning, and his players backed him up.

A 26-10 score-line looks a comfortable win for Munster. However, Gloucester made their opponents scrap for every point, and the Thomond Park crowd sounded distinctly concerned as the second half progressed with their opponents still within a score.

Gloucester defended like demons throughout, and visibly rocked their illustrious opponents who were raucously backed by a home crowd baying for blood.

However, a couple of key moments went the way of the home side in the final fifteen minutes or so, and that was when the game sadly slipped away from Gloucester.

It was a shame not to take anything away from the game, because Gloucester's players on the night deserved more. The level of commitment and intensity couldn't be faulted.

Both Munster tries had an air of fortune about them. The first was a TMO call that looked generous to say the least, the second came after Rob Cook was taken out trying to collect a high ball.

However, these things happen when you're on the road in Europe. Gloucester will take great heart from the performance and Nigel Davies now has more selection questions to ponder.

The win though leaves the pool wide open, and the back-to-back games against Edinburgh in December take on huge importance.

Gloucester even had to overcome late disruption ahead of the game and make a late change. Replacement hooker Dan George was unfortunately taken unwell on Saturday morning, and replaced by Tom Heard.

At a Thomond Park where the atmosphere was building by the second, Gloucester were led out proudly by Will James, making his 150th competitive appearance for the club.

The home crowd were quickly behind their team. Amidst the cauldron, Martyn Thomas showed great concentration to take a high ball but was penalised for holding on.

A spell of intense pressure followed as Munster sent their big runners battering into the Gloucester defensive line. A penalty followed, and Ian Keatley opened the scoring with a fourth minute penalty.

Gloucester shrugged it off, and quickly earned their own chance of points. The unlikely figure of Jonny Bentley won the penalty at a ruck, but was just off target with his penalty attempt.

This was swiftly followed by the introduction of Rob Cook. Martyn Thomas had been limping since taking that early high ball, and finally had to make way.

The home side quickly moved back downfield and, when Ryan Mills was penalised for going off his feet at a ruck, Keatley made the score 6-0.

Munster were absolutely dominating possession at this stage, with Gloucester not helping themselves with a series of handling errors. Another Keatley penalty opened up a 9-0 lead after 13 minutes.

Charlie Sharples then provided the travelling support with one moment to shout about, as he scooped up a loose ball and drilled it downfield, making the follow up tackle on Johnie Murphy.

It forced a five metre lineout. The forwards were held out, but Dan Robson scampered blindside and popped it up to Sharples who dived over in the corner. Bentley added a superb conversion.

Some more solid defence followed, before a quick lineout again saw Sharples find more running room. Gloucester had great field position, but Mike Tindall was caught in possession and the chance was gone.

The crowd was at near fever pitch, and superb lineout ball was giving Munster ample chance to launch their runners, but Gloucester's defenders were giving it 100%. One hit from Lua Lokotui halted a flying Keith Earls in midfield and jarred the ball loose to force a turnover.

However, the game took a big swing Munster's way on 35 minutes. A 5-metre lineout rumbled over and, although TMO replays looked inconclusive, the try was awarded to hooker Damien Varley. Keatley's excellent conversion opened up a 16-7 gap.

Once again, Gloucester dug deep. The forwards carried powerfully to force the home team to concede a penalty, and Bentley made no mistake for a half time score of 16-10.

Nigel Davies' side could take great heart from the way they had stood up and fought against the rampaging red masses. Not just that, but they had also shown the audacity to try and take the game to Munster on occasion.

In fact, had it not been for the Television Match Official being unable to find any reason not to award the try, Gloucester may even have taken an unlikely lead into half time.

To be fair, Gloucester had done a lot of defending. Munster's lineout looked nigh on untouchable, and their backs constantly dangerous.

But Nigel Davies' side were giving their vocal travelling support something to shout about. Could they keep it up?

The second half picked up where the second had left off[sic], with Munster trying to ride on the back of the tremendous support they were receiving, throwing everything at Gloucester.

The defence was still committed; a five metre scrum threat repelled as Dan Robson caught Peter O'Mahoney in possession as he picked up at the base.

With the Thomond Park crowd starting to sound a bit worried, Munster received another home town call when Charlie Sharples was ruled to have taken Johnne Murphy late. It was a marginal call, but Keatley missed the kick.

If anything, the intensity of this pulsating match seemed to have gone up a notch with the two teams slugging it out like a pair of punch-drunk heavyweights.

As the game went into the final quarter, it was still anyone's game at 16-10 although only tremendous defence kept Munster at bay on 63 minutes as Keith Earls almost broke clear.

Munster kept it tight, their pack earning a penalty from a scrum near the Gloucester line. This time Keatley didn't miss, and it was 19-10 with 15 minutes to play.

Finally, Munster broke through and it was controversial. Rob Cook was smashed as he tried to take a high ball but referee Garces waved play on. The pack took it on, before Keatley floated a cross kick for Johnie Murphy to catch and score. Keatley's conversion rubbed salt into the wound.

Still Gloucester battled bravely, pressing for the score that would get them back into the game.

Several times they moved into promising positions. However, a combination of stern Munster defence, and some curious refereeing decisions denied Gloucester even that consolation.

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