

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 9, 2013

FRANKLIN'S GARDENS – LV= CUP

PLENTY OF EFFORT BUT NOT ENOUGH PRECISION AS GLOUCESTER
SLIP TO SAINTS DEFEAT

NORTHAMPTON SAINTS 33 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 6

Ill-discipline and not taking chances have haunted Gloucester in recent weeks, and so it proved again as the 2013-14 LV= Cup campaign started with a 33-6 defeat at Northampton on Saturday evening.

The final score line doesn't perhaps totally reflect the balance of play, as Gloucester gave it everything on the heavy going at Franklin's Gardens.

But it was one of those evenings that very little seemed to go right for Gloucester, despite a fairly bright opening.

Despite having more than their fair share of possession, Gloucester simply couldn't take their chances when they came about, whereas the Saints pounced whenever there was a sniff of the try line.

The penalty count, an Achilles heel of late, was also critical as Gloucester fell foul in particular of the refereeing of the scrum.

Northampton, to be honest, played the conditions. They weren't shy of hoisting the high ball up into the night sky and playing for territory, and clinically exploited the outcome of the scrummaging battle.

At half time, it was still very much in the balance. Ken Pisi had crossed twice for the home side, one of which would perhaps have benefitted from a TMO being present.

However, Gloucester could look at several try scoring opportunities, when they moved menacingly to within striking distance of the try line, only to come up short.

The second half wasn't much of a spectacle. The pitch was heavy, the ball was wet. Expansive rugby was all but out of the question.

Gloucester gave it a go – in fact, they were probably a little too expansive when playing in Saints territory might have been more advisable.

In fact, only a Glenn Dickson penalty had troubled the scoreboard operator until the last few minutes, until two late tries from Alex Day clinched a try scoring bonus point for the home team.

It rubbed salt into some already raw wounds for Gloucester. They battled bravely on the evening, but ended up with little to show for their efforts.

Senior players such as Freddie Burns, Will James and Mike Tindall certainly stood up to be counted and did their best to inspire the many young guns around them.

But, at the end of the day, it simply wasn't enough against a confident Northampton side who were backed by a more than decent 12,870 crowd.

The youngsters who made their first appearances in a senior shirt may have left disappointed, but they will hopefully emerge better and stronger for the experience.

Gloucester, sporting their change strip, fielded a number of players making their first starts of the season including 17 year-old Ollie Thorley, who became the club's youngest player in the professional era.

After an open start, with both sides looking to spread the ball wide, the Saints took an early lead as Glenn Dickson slotted a 5th minute penalty after a Freddie Burns clearance was charged down.

Gloucester duly hit back with some powerful ball carrying in midfield, Mike Tindall leading the way. The home side transgressed at a ruck, and Freddie Burns levelled the scores.

One promising sign in the opening ten minutes was a couple of powerful driving mauls from the Gloucester pack, with the home eight conceding penalties to bring them to a halt.

This created good field position, and Burns was able to nudge his team into the lead with a 13th minute penalty after another Saints offence.

From the restart, however, the officials seemed to miss Charlie Sharples being taken out blatantly in the air as the winger climbed high to take the high ball.

It proved to be a key call. Northampton moved downfield, forced a penalty at a set scrum, and Dickson made it 6-6 after 18 minutes.

Gloucester very nearly scored the game's opening try from the restart. Charlie Sharples tapped it back, Matt Kvesic gathered and spun clear but was hauled down just a couple of metres short.

The game then swung decisively the way of the home side as Matt Cox was sinbinned for tripping Saints scrum half Ryan Glynn.

Momentum continued to go the way of the home side. Burns almost intercepted on halfway, but it created a gap for Dom Waldouck to break clear. A hack ahead saw Ken Pisi and Steph Reynolds dive for the ball.

The try was immediately awarded with no TMO available. However, replays immediately cast doubt upon the grounding and even Pisi's hand being the one that touched the ball . . .

As the half hour approached, the home team had the upper hand, with Gloucester's penalty count becoming a real area for concern, even though it was still close on the scoreboard.

Saints then scored out of the blue. A rolling maul looked to be going nowhere, but Ryan Glynn went blindside, Steph Reynolds was caught infield and Pisi sprinted home for his second try. Dickson added the conversion for 18-6.

Nothing was going Gloucester's way. A break from James Gibbons looked as though it would pave the way for a first try, but Reynolds lost the ball in contact with numbers outside him.

It had been a tough first half for Gloucester, although there hadn't been that much between the sides and there was no shortage of endeavour or spirit. Where Gloucester were suffering was at scrum time, where they seemed to be penalised incessantly, and, crucially, in terms of taking chances.

Northampton had had two real scoring chances and both had resulted in tries, albeit the first controversially. Gloucester had moved into the red zone several times, but came up empty handed.

Andrew Stanley didn't take long to make his first change, sending on Yann Thomas to replace James Gibbons while Gloucester followers also pondered how a Saints defender escaped a yellow for tackling without using the arms.

Another fine Kvesic break also went unrewarded, as a cunning grubber kick from Burns was superbly dealt with on his own line by Ken Pisi. With half an hour still to go, Gloucester had started running penalties, when playing for territory may have been the better tactic.

Koree Britton had also been sent on, but the scrummaging woes continued and led to another Dickson penalty on 54 minutes to extend the lead to 21-6, following which Ross Moriarty came off the bench to make his first senior appearance of the season.

Gloucester's fortunes were typified moments later. Matt Cox broke from the base of a scrum, shed a tackler and set off for the corner. He looked to have made it, but the decision was that he'd lost the ball forward.

Still Gloucester battled, but they continued to fail to get the rub of the green in terms of the decisions and, as time ticked away, it was difficult to see where a comeback might come from.

Gloucester were forced to try and play from deep in their own half, but succeeded only in conceding a third try when Will James was stripped of possession and Alex Day finished off the counter. Sam Olver converted.

With a couple of minutes to play, Day then secured the bonus point as the home side lost control at a 5 metre scrum, only for the ball to fall kindly for the replacement scrum half, who picked up and darted over.

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