

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, JANUARY 11, 2014

KINGSHOLM – HEINEKEN CUP

BRAVE GLOUCESTER PICKED OFF BY CLINICAL MUNSTER

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 7 MUNSTER RUGBY 20

Gloucester gave it everything against Munster on Saturday evening, producing one of their best performances of the season, but were given a lesson in taking chances by a ruthless visiting side.

It was a pulsating night of European rugby which showed that you don't need bags of points scored at both ends to make a good game.

Gloucester gave it everything. They went toe to toe with one of the heavyweights of European rugby, and may well wonder how they finished on the losing side, such was their dominance in terms of possession and territory.

However, one area of the game where Munster shaded was taking chances. In both halves, the visiting side absorbed so much Gloucester pressure that they seemed destined to break, only to move downfield and accumulate points at the other end.

The start of the second half was a case in point. Trailing by only three points, Gloucester threw the kitchen sink at their opponents for a good fifteen minutes.

But they simply couldn't break down the resolute Munster defence. The visitors defended like demons, not always legally, then moved efficiently downfield and pounced through skipper Peter O'Mahony.

Gloucester can take massive credit from a performance which restored so much pride. The Kingsholm crowd acknowledged the terrific team effort and backed their team to the hilt.

It all added up to an evening which fizzed and crackled with intensity. Gloucester may have been defeated on the scoreboard, but they weren't beaten.

The key now is to replicate that level of performance as often as possible for the rest of the season.

Kingsholm was absolutely buzzing as the game kicked off, filled to the rafters and supporters of both teams creating an electric atmosphere.

Both teams were clearly testing each other out in the opening stages, but Munster were indebted to fly half Ian Keatley who smartly covered a kick ahead with a horde of Gloucester chasers bearing down on him.

It was a passionate start for a fired-up Gloucester side, every man throwing himself into the fray against a Munster side battle hardened from so many of these sort of encounters.

The first chance of points came from a thrilling counter attack from Charlie Sharples and Jonny May. Munster conceded the penalty but Twelvetrees was off target with his long-range effort.

It was shaping up to be a titanic tussle up front. Both packs were pressuring the other's set piece ball, but Sila Puafisi won a moral battle with a powerful run and offload.

But it was Munster who took the lead on 21 minutes. Dan Robson was forced to carry into touch near his own line, Gloucester sacked the maul and Ian Keatley slotted the penalty.

Twelvetrees had an immediate chance to level the scores, but dragged his second penalty attempt wide of the uprights. Shades of 2008 and the crucial misses from Chris Paterson already?

Gloucester were playing some great stuff at this point though, stretching play left and right. Unfortunately, they were up against one of the best defences in the business and Munster were holding firm.

And the Irish side then showed the ruthless touch of champions. Patient build up work took play into the Gloucester 22, before Keatley threaded through a gem of a grubber for Keith Earls to gather and touch down.

The fly half converted the score to open up a 0-10 lead and twist the knife. It was clinical and it was brilliant. The visitors had soaked up a ton of pressure and then pounced when given a glimmer of a chance.

But Gloucester weren't to be discouraged. As half time beckoned, Martyn Thomas gathered a high kick, launched the counter and Shane Monahan then Elliott Stooke rumbled in to the Munster half.

Dan Robson scampered right, Matt Kvesic found Sharples on the right wing, and the winger stepped inside superbly off his right foot to shred the Munster defence. Freddie Burns added the conversion and we had a game on our hands.

It had been a pulsating first 40 minutes. The visitors had looked on the ropes at times, but then swooped to score whenever a chance presented itself.

The Earls' try could have been a real body blow, Gloucester having worked so hard to take the game to Munster. Sharples' try came just at the right time and a heck of a second half was in prospect.

The Cherry and Whites came out firing on all cylinders in the second half, and the Kingsholm faithful were loving it. Munster seemed to be getting away with all sorts at the breakdown and a blatant high tackle on Twelvetrees was ignored.

The visitors were under real pressure, but they didn't buckle and a turnover gave them a crucial chance to clear downfield and relieve the pressure. They were bringing all their experience to the table.

It was scintillating stuff, with Gloucester stretching Munster to the max. Jonny May was almost away, but a despairing James Downey tap tackle brought him down in full flight.

But, once again, Munster soaked up everything Gloucester could throw at them before moving through the gears themselves.

Their pack disrupted a Gloucester scrum to set up a 5-metre attacking scrum. The first shove was impressive, before Peter O'Mahony forced his way over from close range. Keatley again converted for 7-17.

Still Gloucester fought, and still Munster resisted. Monahan and May were both close to crossing, but dogged defence held them out when tries looked sure to come.

Keatley added a penalty to extend the lead to 7-20 on another fleeting foray into Gloucester territory, before the game finished in the same manner as much of the previous 80 minutes – Gloucester hammering away but for little reward.

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