

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 22, 2014

KINGSHOLM – AVIVA PREMIERSHIP

GLOUCESTER EDGE HARLEQUINS IN KINGSHOLM NAIL-BITER

GLOUCESTER 25 HARLEQUINS 20

Trailing 7-13 at half time, Gloucester produced a strong second half performance to just pip Harlequins by 25 points to 20 in a see-saw encounter.

It's a fixture that has set the pulse racing often in recent times, and this afternoon's encounter was no different.

With the wind at their backs, Harlequins held the lead at half time despite Gloucester dominating possession and territory.

The Cherry and Whites hit back after the interval and deservedly opened up a 25-13 lead. At that point, with about ten minutes left to play, it seemed as though all that was left to do was clinch the try scoring bonus point.

However, the visitors weren't quite done. A late Dave Ward try set the alarm bells ringing, and they spun with ball around in an attempt to secure a remarkable win.

However, a late steal at the breakdown ensured that Gloucester held on and sent their supporters home relieved and happy.

It was a big win for Gloucester, albeit with both sides missing key players, having come close in recent weeks without quite getting over the line.

Perhaps most pleasing was the mental strength shown to stick to the game plan and refuse to panic even when things weren't going their way. It could be a significant 80 minutes.

For now, however, it's all about enjoying the win but without getting too carried away – a testing trip to Northampton lies ahead next week.

Gloucester had to make a late change before kick off as Martyn Thomas failed a late fitness test on a hamstring injury. Shane Monahan took his place on the left wing.

Quins, for their part, lost Harry Casson to injury. Ugo Monye came into the centre with Paul Sackey lining up on the wing.

It was an emotional entrance to the field for Gloucester as Andy Hazell led the team out, accompanied by his two daughters, while Mike Tindall skippered the side on his 200th Premiership appearance.

However, it was the visitors who had the better start as Ben Botica slotted a second minute penalty to open the scoring.

Gloucester came back well, forcing several penalties out of Quins, who had Mark Lambert sent to the sin bin. The Quins defence dug in, however, and kept Gloucester at bay whilst actually extending their lead with a second Botica penalty.

The Cherry and Whites responded superbly. Evans climbed high to claim the restart and the pressure was on as the pack carried strongly into the Quins 22.

Gloucester hammered at the line, before a sublime carry and offload from James Hudson put Sione Kalamafoni over for the game's first try. Rob Cook added an easy conversion. It had been a breathless opening.

The game settled down, but it was the visitors who struck next. Karl Dickson caught Gloucester napping with a swiftly taken tap penalty, and his offload put Ollie Lindsay-Hague in for the try. Botica's conversion made it 7-13 on the half hour.

Again Gloucester bounced back well after a setback, and drove to within a metre or so of the Quins line, but Tindall couldn't hold on to a sharp, flat pass and knocked on near the posts.

The half finished with Gloucester on the front foot once again as Karl Dickson just beat Shane Monahan and Charlie Sharples to touch down a kick through.

So, the Cherry and Whites trailed at half time, but the scoreboard didn't reflect the balance of play. Nigel Davies' side, despite playing into the wind, had dominated territory and possession but had not been able to turn it into points.

Gloucester had to remain patient in the second half. They looked dangerous and Harlequins seemed to be hanging on at times. The visitors, though, had shown how quickly they could accrue points when given a chance.

Gloucester came out fired up, and Shane Monahan almost burst clear down the left flank. But a 44th minute penalty from Rob Cook moved Gloucester closer at 10-13.

And the Cherry and Whites duly took the lead as they looked to build on the momentum they'd created.

Dan Robson's pinpoint grubber forced Quins to carry into touch near their own line. The much-maligned Gloucester pack licked their lips, flexed their muscles, set up the rolling maul and drove over. Matt Kvesic claimed the try, his first for the club.

And it was almost via the same route that Gloucester scored again on 58 minutes.

This time Quins just about held the 5 metre scrum, but Shane Monahan carried on and was halted just short of the line before Dan Robson's neat reverse pass put Dan Murphy over. Cook added the conversion for a 22-13 lead on the hour.

The full back then added a penalty as Quins replacement Louis Grimoldby was sinbinned for a deliberate knock on, Nick Easter seemingly losing his temper completely as he remonstrated with referee Greg Garner.

Gloucester piled forward looking for the bonus point try. It seemed on the cards as Shane Monahan burst clear down the left, but the potentially try scoring pass inside to Jimmy Cowan was too low while Freddie Burns was just denied by Paul Sackey.

And there was a sting in the tail as, let off the hook, Harlequins regrouped and scored themselves. It was a well-executed catch and drive, and Dave Ward touched down with Gloucester a man down in the pack; Yann Thomas sinbinned for coming in at the side of a maul. Botica's conversion made it 25-20.

It was a tense final few minutes as a result, but Matt Kvesic, a titan on the day, secured a textbook turnover at a ruck just a minute from time to secure the win.

Kingsholm breathed a collective sigh of relief and everyone was able to reflect upon what had been a rollercoaster of a day.