

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 16, 2014

KINGSHOLME – EUROPEAN RUGBY CHALLENGE CUP

**GLOUCESTER SECOND HALF BLITZ TOO MUCH
FOR BATTLING BRIVE**

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Gloucester took their time to go through the gears in Thursday's European Rugby Challenge Cup opener but turned on the style in the second half to emerge 55-0 winners and get their campaign off to a winning start.

After a first half when Gloucester struggled to get into their stride, the second half was a completely different affair as the Cherry and Whites ran in 45 unanswered points.

Some of the issues in the first half were, of course, down to the battling qualities of the visitors. Brive made life far from easy in the first 40 minutes. They missed two kicks at goal and had a try disallowed.

Gloucester were guilty of wasting a few chances before the break, but the French side had to work incredibly hard in defence and the feeling was that, if Gloucester kept up the tempo, the visitors would struggle to keep up.

And so it proved to be. The fairytale ending was Charlie Sharples scoring a hat-trick on his 150th competitive appearance, but the win on the night was all about the team performance.

It gets Gloucester off to an ideal start in the pool. The challenge now is to follow up this win and get a result in Oyonnax next weekend – no easy task.

Gloucester had the honour of hosting the first match of the new European Rugby Challenge Cup, and did so with Charlie Sharples making his 150th competitive appearance and, conversely, Billy Meakes making his first start for the club.

The visitors had the first chance of points when Gloucester failed to release the ball in the tackle, but Riaan Swanepoel was well short of the target with his long-range penalty attempt.

With their first spell of possession, Gloucester did their best to move the ball around and stretch the Brive defence. Rob Cook very nearly wriggled clear but was just stopped by a despairing tackle.

Sharples' first touch was a promising one as he broke two tackles to wriggle clear down the right. The inside scoring pass was on but Alfi Mafi saved the day with a timely interception.

However, somewhat against the run of play, it was Brive who broke downfield after they overthrew their own lineout ball and earned a second penalty, only for Swanepoel to push the attempt wide.

But fittingly, it was Charlie Sharples who opened the scoring. Jonny May came in off his wing on a pre-planned backs move to open up the defence, and his long pass found Sharples who shrugged off a high tackle to score. Laidlaw added a superb touchline conversion.

Gloucester dodged a bullet though moments later, as Rob Cook's inside pass went to ground and Guillame Namy ran it back untouched to score. However, replays showed a Brive knock on and the score was ruled out.

In bizarre fashion, Gloucester then had a try disallowed themselves when Matt Kvesic charged down a clearance in the Brive 22. John Afoa picked up the loose ball to score but the prop was clearly offside and seemed to know it!

It was all a bit frenetic from Gloucester as the half hour approached.

Too often good possession was turned over which, combined with some good defence from the visitors, was leading to some frustration around the ground.

Perhaps feeling the need to settle down a little, Gloucester opted to kick for goal when awarded a penalty on 32 minutes and Greig Laidlaw duly made it a 10-0 lead.

As half time approached, the second try so nearly came. A half break from Hook saw another potential scoring pass find Brive hands, while Twelvetrees couldn't hang on to a Hook pass when set to score.

Brive just led out though and made it into half time with no further damage on the scoreboard. The French side had flirted with danger at times but were still very much in the game.

Gloucester, on the other hand, would be wondering how exactly they had only scored the one try so far. They were creating the chances but just not finishing them off.

The second half started brightly. The crisp handling still wasn't quite there, but Brive were stretched enough to concede a penalty and Laidlaw had an easy task to slot his second of the evening.

Gloucester then scored a peach of a second try. Jonny May made the initial inroads before Ben Morgan made good yardage into the Brive 22 in typically powerful style.

Staying patient, Gloucester moved the ball right where John Afoa popped up in midfield and offloaded superbly out of the tackle for James Hook to score his first try for the club. Laidlaw converted for 20-0.

The score seemed to knock some of the stuffing out of the visitors, and the third try quickly followed. Greig Laidlaw's kick over the top into space stood up beautifully for Charlie Sharples who had no trouble gathering and scoring his second. The conversion from Laidlaw was a formality.

Brive promptly threw several replacements into the fray, but confusion then followed as Yann Thomas and Damien Jourdain were both yellow carded at a scrum without a penalty being awarded.

The game really started to open up, and Gloucester began to thrive in the conditions. Dan Robson almost jinked his way over but was held up over the line before Darren Dawidiuk smashed his way over from close range to clinch the bonus point.

Robson turned provider when Sharples latched onto his chip over the top to complete his hat-trick, before benefitting from Jonny May's quick wits, a quick tap from the wing committing the defence for the scrum half to scamper over for the sixth as Brive's defence started to fall apart at the seams.

The final word went to the Gloucester pack though as they ensured that they finished on a high with a last gasp penalty try as the Brive eight splintered from the pressure applied at a 5 metre scrum.

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