

# **GLOUCESTER RUGBY**

**SATURDAY, OCTOBER 25, 2014**

STADE CHARLES MATHON – EUROPEAN RUGBY CHALLENGE CUP

GLOUCESTER MAKE IT TWO FROM TWO IN EUROPE

WITH TOUGH 25-15 WIN IN OYONNAX

OYONNAX 15 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 25

Six penalties and a conversion from the unerring boot of Greig Laidlaw, in addition to a try from Matt Kvesic, were enough to earn Gloucester a hard-fought European Rugby Challenge Cup win in Oyonnax on Saturday evening.

It's often said that it's never easy to win on French soil, and so it proved against Oyonnax at the Stade Charles-Mathon.

The home side have not been enjoying the best of seasons domestically, but got their European campaign off to a winning start in Zebre last weekend, and forced Gloucester to dig deep in order to clinch the win.

The victory wasn't clinched until the last few minutes. In fact, for a good hour or so, there was barely anything between the two sides. But, in the final quarter, Gloucester's pack took an iron grip and Greig Laidlaw kicked the crucial points.

It was a good day at the office for the Scottish scrum half, who contributed six penalties and a conversion. The only try of the encounter came from Matt Kvesic and it proved to be just enough.

The home side didn't threaten massively in attack. But they doggedly made life very tough for the Cherry and Whites. They defended with passion, fought tooth and nail at the set piece and kicked their goals when appropriate.

However, Gloucester didn't allow themselves to become frustrated. As time ticked by, they played the game in the right areas of the pitch and, as the forwards applied the squeeze, Laidlaw applied the coup de grace.

It leaves Gloucester in a good position in the pool, with two wins from their two outings. Europe now goes on the back burner for a few weeks, but the double header against Zebre in December has a lot riding on it.

The game kicked off in good conditions at Stade Charles-Mathon in front of a typically partisan home crowd, every decision against the home side provoking a barrage of whistle and jeers.

None more so than when Gloucester were awarded a penalty at the very first scrum of the game. Greig Laidlaw ignored the noise to open the scoring with a well struck penalty.

However, the silence was palpable a few minutes later as Riaan Smit lined up his first kick as Gloucester came in at the side of a ruck. The full back duly levelled the scores.

A superb take of a high ball by Charlie Sharples quickly got Gloucester on the front foot again. Henry Purdy made a strong break after a neat inside pass from Richard Hibbard, but was brought down just short and the Cherry and Whites had to settle for a second Laidlaw penalty.

The home crowd were up in arms again shortly afterwards when Smit pounced on a loose ball to break away and seemingly score the game's first try. However, an Oyonnax hand had knocked the ball loose and play came back.

With most of the play taking place in the home half, Gloucester had a chance to extend the lead, but Laidlaw's penalty attempt from distance dipped agonisingly under the crossbar.

The Cherry and Whites then got a break as the half hour approached. Laidlaw was tackled in possession to give Oyonnax superb field position, but the home side couldn't take advantage in the face of spirited defence.

However, Gloucester were penalised at the ensuing scrum as referee Vivarini continued to share the penalties around and Smit had an easy task to level the scores again.

Parity was short-lived though. Oyonnax went off their feet having fielded the restart and Laidlaw knocked over his third penalty only for Smit to immediately respond and make the score 9-9 after 39 minutes.

That was it for the first half action, with little to choose between the two sides. Neither outfit had managed to get the upper hand although Gloucester could claim to have won the territorial battle.

It was all to play for in the second half, with Gloucester having a tough task on their hands to silence the home crowd and emerge triumphant in the final reckoning.

The second half could have started better. Matt Kvesic went off his feet at a ruck and Smit's fourth penalty made it 12-9 to the home side.

However, Kvesic immediately atoned for the misdemeanour. Charlie Sharples worked hard to secure turnover ball deep in the home 22, and the ball was spun out to Kvesic in the fly half position. Not a lot looked on, but the flanker broke two tackles to score. Laidlaw added the extras for 16-12.

It was a bit of daylight, but only briefly as had been the case throughout this tight game. The Gloucester penalty was pinged immediately afterwards and Regis Lespinas kicked the penalty.

Both teams then lost a man after a sickening clash of heads. Rob Cook and Lespinas both left the field.

Billy Burns came on temporarily for Gloucester. The game was starting to open up with the victory on the line.

It was incredibly tense stuff and every refereeing decision was starting to have huge repercussions. Gloucester benefitted from a big one on 66 minutes as they won a penalty at a ruck and Laidlaw's penalty opened up a 19-15 lead.

Oyonnax's discipline started to desert them as Gloucester's pack started to turn the screw. Replacement prop Tichit was sinbinned and Laidlaw again punished the indiscretion.

The home crowd grew increasingly disgruntled at the number of penalties being conceded by their team and produced a cacophony of noise every time the scrum half went for goal.

It mattered not. Laidlaw was in the groove and added a late sixth penalty to deny the hosts even a losing bonus point.

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