

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 1, 2014

SANDY PARK – LV= CUP

LAST MINUTE PENALTY TRY DENIES GLOUCESTER AT EXETER

EXETER CHIEFS 28 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 27

A gut-wrenching 79th minute penalty try snatched victory away from Gloucester at Sandy Park, Aled Thomas' last ditch penalty hitting the post and staying out as the Chiefs hung on to win 28-27.

It was a game where Gloucester will wonder how on earth they lost. They dominated the first half, could have scored at least four tries yet, due to an interception, actually went in level at 10 points apiece.

But, with the wind at their backs in the second half, they would have backed themselves after the break, such had been their superiority in the game to that point.

And the reshuffled Cherry and Whites produced a solid enough second half display, going into the final 15 minutes holding a nine point lead.

However, a couple of key errors resulted in an Exeter penalty followed by a penalty try which saw the game swing decisively the Chiefs way.

Even then, Aled Thomas, who had kicked superbly, had a kick to win the game. It was the final action of the match and was a long way out. The fly half struck it well, but the ball glanced the post and stayed out.

It was harsh as the home fans celebrated a win which had seen them well and truly use their 'Get out of jail free' card.

But it will be a learning experience for a young Gloucester side for whom there were so many bright spots. The two centres carried powerfully, the back row was everywhere and the pack certainly gave as good as they got.

The positives outweigh the negatives, even if the hurt of defeat is prominent at the moment.

Gloucester played into the teeth of the wind in the first half, Aled Thomas' opening kick hanging in the air for what seemed like an eternity. To back that up, the Chiefs' first kick downfield easily ran dead.

The Cherry and Whites showed ambition from the off, kicking to the corner when presented with a penalty chance before a good Mark Atkinson break led to Billy Meakes being halted just short of the line.

The home side killed the ball, and there was a thought that a yellow card might have been issued, but Gloucester had to settle for an Aled Thomas penalty and a 3-0 lead. However, this was swiftly matched by a 9th minute penalty by Ceri Sweeney.

Atkinson was starting strongly, and the centre made another superb break after 12 minutes. He had options either side, but his long pass to Tom Isaacs forced the winger to control the ball with his foot and the chance was gone.

A pleasing early aspect of the opening exchanges was Gloucester's physical defence. On several occasions, powerful counter rucking drove the home side off the ball and relieved the pressure.

For all Gloucester's intentions to play an open game, it was the boot of Aled Thomas that offered the next scoring chance, but the wind came to Exeter's rescue and pushed the penalty attempt wide.

Another opportunity then came and went as Steve McColl's powerful burst took him into the Exeter 22, but Tom Isaacs was shackled as soon as the ball came his way.

However, the pressure was building, and Brett Sturges was sinbinned for pulling down a Gloucester maul as the penalty count grew. Gloucester took advantage, keeping the ball tight, before Gareth Evans touched down under the posts. Aled Thomas added the easy conversion.

Gloucester were well in control, but disaster struck on the stroke of half time. The pack were driving powerfully towards the Exeter line, before releasing the ball to the backs.

However, home centre Adam Hughes picked off Dan Robson's pass and ran it all the way back for a try from 80 metres. Ceri Sweeney converted to make the half time score 10-10.

It was a blow for the Cherry and Whites who had taken the game by the scruff of the neck in the first half. Indeed, with time up on the clock, they had looked set to add to their lead rather than concede.

The home team would obviously have been boosted by the gift, but Gloucester would have to go back to the tactics which had served them so well in the first half and take the game to their hosts again.

However, the second half began poorly as the Chiefs collected their own restart and moved downfield to earn a penalty. Ceri Sweeney made no mistake to give his side a 13-10 lead.

Gloucester's response was immediate. Former Gloucester favourite Dave Lewis was caught in possession, lost the ball and Billy Meakes scooped it up to score. Aled Thomas then curled home an excellent conversion to edge his team back in front at 17 points to 13.

Thomas then extended the lead to 20-13 with a 48th minute penalty as the Gloucester pack forced a penalty at a set scrum in the home 22. The momentum was with the Cherry and Whites again.

A bizarrely reversed penalty then gave the initiative back to the Chiefs, and a powerful forward drive took them to within inches of the line. However, superb defence held the ball up over the line.

It only served to delay the inevitable. Gloucester were penalised at the ensuing 5m scrum, Lewis took a quick tap and found Fetu'u Vainikolo who forced his way over from close range. 20-18 to Gloucester after 56 minutes, and all to play for still.

Once more, Gloucester responded well. Aled Thomas and Mark Atkinson executed a nice wrap around move, and an inside pass saw Dan Robson almost make the line. However, the pack were in support, firstly in the shape of Sila Puafisi, before Yann Thomas powered over. Aled Thomas added another conversion for 27-18.

Shane Monahan then nearly put the game to bed after a break from Aleki Lutui, but couldn't hold on to the ball and Exeter took advantage to narrow the gap with a Ceri Sweeney penalty.

It was still a six point lead, but it was a slender one. Gloucester looked comfortable, but a crooked feed gave the home side the territorial position they needed to strike back in decisive fashion.

A series of dropped scrums near the Gloucester line saw Yann Thomas lectured, before referee Harding decided enough was enough and awarded the penalty try. Sweeney added the conversion to give Exeter a crucial one point advantage.

To their credit, Gloucester didn't panic. They won possession after the restart and stayed patient even with no time left on the clock. The Chiefs finally transgressed, coming in at the side of a ruck, and Aled Thomas had a chance to win it.

However, the upright played the decisive role, the ball glancing off the post and staying wide and the Chiefs stole the points.

JC