

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 7, 2014

KINGSHOLM – EUROPEAN RUGBY CHALLENGE CUP

**GLOUCESTER LEAVE IT LATE BUT SECURE CRUCIAL BONUS POINT
WIN OVER ZEBRE**

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 35 ZEBRE 10

On a largely frustrating afternoon at Kingsholm, Gloucester found Zebre an incredibly tough side to break down, but kept at it until late in the second half to secure the win and a try scoring bonus point. 35-10 the final score.

In the face of spirited opposition, it was a day when Gloucester had to stay patient and keep to the game plan. In the final reckoning, a 35-10 in Europe is not to be sniffed at, nor is securing a try scoring bonus point.

It gives Gloucester a six point lead in Pool 5 going into next weekend's reverse game in Parma, a game about which there will be no complacency given the nature of today's test.

Zebre provided determined opposition, particularly in defence, and kept the game in the balance until the final few minutes. And they did just enough in attack to score two tries which kept them very much in the game.

They were a different proposition from some of the Italian sides that have capitulated here at Kingsholm in the past. Perhaps the greatest compliment you could pay them was that they made the home crowd nervous.

But Gloucester did eventually wear them down, although it proved to be very hard work. The Zebre defence was admirable, they defended their line with real passion and their commitment is to be applauded.

The challenge for Gloucester now is to repeat the performance next weekend and take a real stranglehold on the group.

On a chilly but sunny afternoon, from the outset it was apparent that the visitors were keen to use the box kick as a tactic, and several rained down on the Gloucester back three in the first few minutes.

Meanwhile, the Cherry and Whites kept things tight in the opening exchanges, testing the Italian side out up front. A good driving maul led to a lineout penalty and Greig Laidlaw kicked the penalty.

However, Gloucester didn't deal with the restart which gave Zebre great field position. The referee was already playing advantage when Luciano Orquera floated a high kick to the corner. Charlie Sharples and Michele Visentin couldn't handle it, and Hennie Daniller dropped on to the loose ball to score.

Kingsholm was momentarily silenced, but Greig Laidlaw helped to settle things down with a 17th minute penalty after the Gloucester pack produced a great scrum and forced the Zebre eight to crumble.

It was a strangely nervy period from Gloucester who were making some uncharacteristic errors which Zebre were thriving on.

But things clicked on 21 minutes as Gloucester kept possession and stretched the defence. A lovely flat pass from Twelvetrees put Steve McColl through a gap, and the full back had the power to slip a tackle and score. Laidlaw converted.

The pack then turned it up a notch again, forcing Zebre to concede another penalty at scrum time and Laidlaw duly made it 16-5.

As the half hour approached, Zebre started showing signs of tiring in defence and fell off a few tackles. Gloucester stayed patient, waited for a gap and James Hook skated over for the second try to open up some breathing space.

Gloucester continued to try and attack as the half drew to a close, but were doing so from deep and conceded a penalty for holding on in the tackle with no time left on the clock. To the relief of the crowd, Orquera missed a very kickable effort.

So, Gloucester went into half time with a decent 21-5 advantage, but it hadn't been a vintage display. Zebre were competing well, but Gloucester wouldn't have been happy with the error rate. Tidy that up and further scores would surely follow.

However, the Italians struck next. Gloucester coughed up possession in their own half to give Zebre the initiative. The Italians moved the ball from side to side to stretch Gloucester and, eventually, a long miss pass found Visentin for the second try. At 21-10, this game was still very much alive.

And Zebre continued to be a tough nut to crack. Defensively they were well drilled and physical, and Gloucester found themselves forced back in the tackle time and again.

Turnover ball nearly led to the third try as Dawidiuk made the break, supported by Purdy and Puafisi. But, once again, the Zebre defence got back, much to the frustration of the home crowd.

It really did look as though the third try would never come. Chances came and chances went. Some were lost as a result of Gloucester errors, passes or offloads being forced, some were down to superb defence.

However, patience was finally rewarded and it came from another fine solo score from Matt Kvesic. Similar to the try he scored in Oyonnax, Kvesic broke several tackles before scoring. Billy Burns converted to clinch the game.

With just seven minutes left to play, it was now merely a question of the bonus point. And, sadly for Zebre, after so much sterling work in defence, it came courtesy of an error.

The ball was dropped in midfield, Gloucester countered through Henry Purdy who threw the ball inside for Mark Atkinson to control the ball and dive over to complete the scoring. Kingsholm breathed a collective sigh of relief as the job was completed.

JC