

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 13, 2014

STADIO XXV APRILE – EUROPEAN RUGBY CHALLENGE CUP

GLOUCESTER COMPLETE THE ITALIAN JOB WITH 32-15 WIN
IN ZEBRE

ZEBRE 16 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 32

After a tense opening half hour in Parma, the game turned just before half time as the home team had David Odiete red carded and Gloucester took full advantage, running in three second half tries to secure the bonus point and the victory over Zebre by 32 points to 16.

Gloucester Rugby took a step closer to the European Rugby Challenge Cup Quarter Finals with a hard-fought bonus point victory over Zebre.

The win sees Gloucester top pool 5 on 19 points with just two rounds left to play; Oyonnax the next visitors to Kingsholm in January.

The Cherry and Whites scored four eye-catching tries on the day, welcomed back some key names as key partnerships shone like a beacon in the fog in Italy.

In truth, the visitors will take a lot from the game, mostly the step off the gas in the dying embers of the game which allowed the Italians to score a pair of consolation tries. It was also a tough first half, Zebre opening up a 6-0 lead through two penalties from Orquera. However, once Gloucester took the lead, they didn't look back.

But maximum points on the road are a brilliant return, and a big confidence boost ahead of a massive clash with Bath Rugby at Kingsholm next Saturday.

The set piece was a ding-dong battle, but several moments of class behind the scrum saw four well-worked and dazzling tries notched up.

Straight away, it was the Italians on the charge as George Biagi forced a charge down and Zebre re-gathered to establish great field position. But a big hit from Hibbard forced the knock on and Glos. strangled a scrum penalty to clear.

It was a strong response following the shaky start from Gloucester. Ben Morgan, on his return to the starting line-up, impressed with one eye-catching break off the base of the scrum.

While Gloucester looked threatening, as was the case the last week, Zebre looked organised and composed in defence, and this rear-guard caused panic when Puafisi was stripped of possession.

But Van Schalkwyk's kick was blocked by Charlie Sharples to halt a scrappy phase of play.

The first boiling point came on the ten-minute mark. Callum Braley was sharp to disrupt opposite number Palazzani, and Jonny May swooped on the loose ball to hack ahead. As he looked odds on to gather, he was tackled. A call that was not well received by the travelling hoards of Cherry and White.

Zebre though opened the scoring after 14 minutes, diminutive pivot Orquera slotting a penalty as the visitors mis-behaved at the breakdown.

Orquera was then handed a chance on 23 minutes as Zebre timed their scrum to win a penalty, engaging slightly early perhaps, and the Italian playmaker did just that to double the lead.

Gloucester were looking threatening, but the final break and pass were missing, May skipping past three men before just running out of room as the visitors went on the hunt for territory and possession.

Then the visitors struck. Several half breaks were halted and Twelvetrees sent May through a gap. The winger's offload could only find Italian hands, but the slippery ball wasn't gathered and Steve McColl swooped to slalom his way under the posts for his third try in three games.

It was a much better second quarter from the Cherry and Whites, as Hook then stepped up to add a 35th minute penalty when the visiting pack won a comprehensive scrum against the head.

Scrummings were a key part of the first half, with the packs enjoying a good battle. As Zebre won a penalty, Puafisi was caught in the face. The Tongan reacted, the referee saw it, and Puafisi was shown a yellow card.

The numbers were then levelled up just minutes later. Replacement David Odiete was shown a red card as he upended Steve McColl in midair as the Gloucester full back soared to claim a box kick.

That was the final action of note in a scrappy first period, as again the Cherry and Whites were playing the rugby, but stubborn and determined Italian resilience was frustrating.

Zebre made the brightest start in the second period, but it was the visitors with the clearest chance, Morgan intercepting to set Purdy and Sharples away before Orquera covered and the chance was gone.

But, the next chance they had, the visitors wouldn't miss out on. Taking a quick line out, captain Twelvetrees had a lot to do, as he stepped past Bergamasco, then evaded Palazzani to offload to centre partner Purdy who had enough to race home. Hook improved the score, and the visitors had got the all-important first score of the second half.

It was a score created by the skipper, who ignored the obvious threat of May outside him, and youngster Purdy showed great support to collect and score.

Then Gloucester picked up a third score. Dan Robson spotted space down the short side, and James Hook bamboozled the outside man to find Charlie Sharples who stepped inside his man from 30 metres out to touch down.

The bonus point was then in the travel bag just before the hour mark. Ben Morgan was the scorer, but Hook will take all the credit. A stunning first-phase strike as Hook and Twelvetrees pivoted and the Welshman scorched through the gap to step inside and feed Morgan who had an untouched finish.

Zebre then tried to regain a foothold in the game, after a stunning third quarter blitz from the visitors.

Dan Robson, on for Braley was brave in defence as Gloucester defended resolutely and Elliott Stooke highlighted the determination with a steal at the lineout.

As Zebre came on the offensive again, Aleki Lutui was sin binned for hands in the ruck, and then the Italians scored the try their attack had been after, Gionbattista Venditti dotting down out wide.

That score definitely gave the Italians a new confidence; they were making good metres and Gloucester were quickly back in defensive mode. Filippo Cristiano was held up over the line after a strong break.

The Italians crossed for a second score on their next attack, a scrum penalty gave the platform for Andries van Schalkwyk to just about get over the line. A spirited consolation was turning into a threatening comeback, and Gloucester had to regain their composure after a raft of replacements.

They did just that, Zebre flew offside, and Billy Burns stepped up and coolly made no mistake from 30 metres.

That was how it ended in Parma, as the Cherry and Whites made it three wins in a row, and four out of four in the European Challenge Cup against a spirited and tough opponent.

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