

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 28, 2014

KINGSHOLM – AVIVA PREMIERSHIP RUGBY

**GALLANT GLOUCESTER COMEBACK COMES UP JUST SHORT
AGAINST WASPS**

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 23 WASPS 30

A second half comeback, inspired by a magnificent effort by their pack, saw Gloucester come up just short against Wasps at Kingsholm on Sunday, the visitors hanging on for a 23-30 win.

It was a case of what might have been for the Cherry and Whites. The second half display hinted that the Gloucester 'Dawg' might just have made a timely return. Having trailed by ten points on a couple of occasions, it was a one point game at one point.

But, crucially, Wasps kept their line intact just when another score could well have swung the game decisively Gloucester's way. Andy Goode and Elliot Daly then booted penalties to ease the pressure somewhat.

Ultimately though, Gloucester left themselves with just too much to do and, frustratingly, the three Wasps tries were all avoidable. One came down to a missed tackle, the second featured a horrible bounce of the ball and the third saw a kicking duel go Wasps way.

The positives for Gloucester? Firstly, a phenomenal effort from the pack. The scrummage was the best it's been all season and every man fronted up manfully in the arm wrestle amongst the forwards.

The nature of the comeback also demonstrated that there's plenty of fight still in this line-up. Other sides may have rolled over after the soft scores and getting on the wrong side of a number of key refereeing decisions. Not Gloucester . . .

There's still plenty of work to do, but Gloucester are battling hard. It's a game of small margins and the Cherry and Whites are just on the wrong end of those margins at the moment. Things will turn around.

It was actually a fabulous start for Gloucester on a sunny but cold afternoon. Clean lineout ball off the top was spun into midfield. Atkinson moved it out to McColl who shipped the ball to Jonny May.

The winger had to cut inside, then took on Wade and Jacobs and had the strength to make the line. Laidlaw added a superb touchline conversion for a 7-0 lead. 49 seconds was the time recorded for the try.

It had been a bright opening for Gloucester, but the Cherry and Whites were brought down to earth by the twin wing threat of Varndell and Wade. The former slipped a tackle with seemingly nothing on and his inside pass put Wade over. Goode's conversion levelled the scores.

Laidlaw was just off target with a penalty as the Gloucester pack earned a morale boosting penalty at scrum time, but it was Goode who gave Wasps the lead after 17 minutes when he milked a penalty for a so-called late hit, much to the fury of the home crowd.

Goode then showed the class side of his game as his clever reverse kick bounced horribly for Charlie Sharples and into the arms of Tom Varndell, who had an easy job to score. Goode added the extras to open up a 7-17 lead after 20 minutes.

May's early try was rapidly fading in the memory with the visitors now enjoying a ten point lead, the canny Goode running the show and relishing his role of pantomime villain.

Gloucester's forwards duly rolled up their sleeves and tried to inspire a fightback. Winning penalties at the scrum and lineout, they powered their way into the red zone, where a catch and drive saw Matt Kvesic touch down. Laidlaw added a magnificent touchline conversion to narrow the gap to 14-17.

Just as Gloucester had the momentum, it was cruelly snatched away as Wasps pounced for their third try. Hook was inches away from pinning the visitors deep into their 22, but a couple of magnificent kicks downfield from Miller and Goode drove Gloucester back near their own line.

The visitors set up their own catch and drive and Nathan Hughes touched down. Goode's conversion restored the ten point gap at 14-24. It was a body blow.

Half time came with the visitors in the ascendant, but it was a score-line that was harsh on Gloucester. They'd genuinely played decently against a team full of confidence, but not enjoyed the bounce of the ball.

It's a game of small margins and Wasps' second try had a whiff of good fortune about it, while their third came from a kicking duel where the visitors definitely had the rub of the green.

There were plenty of positives for the Cherry and Whites from a pulsating first half, they needed to take heart from that and take the game to Wasps after the break.

Billy Burns was a half time replacement for Steve McColl, and made an immediate impact, producing a superb break from his own 22 but Tom Palmer couldn't hold on to the offload.

However, Greig Laidlaw narrowed the gap to 17-24 with a long-range penalty as the Gloucester pack fronted up and forced another penalty at scrum time.

It was game on as Gloucester enjoyed a good spell of possession, stretching the Wasps defence, and Laidlaw slotted his third penalty of the day to make the score 20-24 after 52 minutes.

The latest penalty came after more good work from the Gloucester pack, who then had to work hard at the other end of the field to keep Wasps at bay as the visitors went after the bonus point try.

The Gloucester eight then repeated the dose, forcing another scrum penalty and Laidlaw made it 23-24 on the hour, only for Wasps to hit straight back with a penalty from Goode.

A key moment followed. With their pack enjoying the upper hand, Gloucester decided to kick for the corner rather than for goal. A repeat of the first half catch and drive was called for, but the Wasps defence fronted up and held out.

Roared on by the passionate home crowd, Gloucester threw the kitchen sink at Wasps. However, for all the collective effort, they just couldn't break through and a couple of key decisions went the way of Wasps and halted the momentum.

None more so than when crossing was called in halfway, and long-range specialist Elliot Daly smashed home the penalty that opened up a 23-30 lead.

With little time left, it was effectively game over and Wasps secured their first away win of the season.

Gloucester were left to reflect on a much improved performance than the week before but also upon one that slipped away from them.

JC