

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, JANUARY 3, 2015

SANDY PARK – AVIVA PREMIERSHIP RUGBY

GLOUCESTER JUST HAVE THE EXE FACTOR AT SANDY PARK
WITH NARROW WIN

EXETER CHIEFS 25 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 26

Games between these two teams always seems to go to the wire, and it happened again at Sandy Park on Saturday, with Gloucester shading a thriller by 26 points to 25.

If ever there was a game of two halves, this as it. Gloucester edged a tense but error ridden first half by six points to nil. But things really came to life after the break when the lead changed hands no fewer than six times.

A key factor was Gloucester's character. Having held the Chiefs at bay, they were hit by the double body blow of two Exeter tries in two minutes – both eminently avoidable, a missed tackle and a loose ball giving the home side a route back into the game.

But Tom Savage provided the key contribution, charging down Gareth Steenson and then re-gathering to score. It put Gloucester back in front and, importantly, gave them vital impetus and self-belief.

Crucially, Gloucester finished with their noses in front as the momentum swung this way and that. The result was in doubt until the very final whistle when James Hook hoofed the ball gleefully into touch.

In the end, the Cherry and Whites were indebted to Gareth Steenson's attempted conversion hitting the post and staying out. It was a strange reversal of the situation here a few weeks ago in the LV= Cup.

On that occasion, Aled Thomas hit the post and the Chiefs sneaked the win by a single point. Maybe it was karma?

What no-one can deny is that it was a key win for Gloucester after two Premiership defeats on the bounce. Laurie Fisher had called for his team to start to finish off these close games, and today his side did – just.

The win will send the travelling support home in good heart. On the day, they did the team proud – the support was magnificent as usual. And it was a welcome confidence boost for the team as they prepare to entertain Saracens before resuming their European campaign.

After the usual early tactical kicking duel, the Chiefs went off their feet in support of the ball carrier and conceded the penalty. Greig Laidlaw needed no second invitation and gave Gloucester a 3-0 lead after three minutes.

However, a knock on from the restart gave the home side excellent field position to work with and an immediate chance to hit back. Henry Slade rolled through a measured grubber but Matt Jess knocked on with a try beckoning.

Gloucester then had an escape as they knocked on and failed to cover the ball. Jack Nowell hacked on downfield, and appealed for obstruction as he chased the ball into the in-goal area, but swift consultation with the TMO resulted in a 22 drop out.

There was immediately more pressure from the home side, who kicked to the corner to test the Gloucester lineout defence. However, the Cherry and Whites dug deep to halt the maul and win a penalty and relieve the pressure.

Exeter tried to repeat the dose minutes later, turning down the kick at goal, but again Gloucester were robust in defence and forced a penalty from the home side when well placed.

And the hard work in defence paid off shortly afterwards. Charlie Sharples made a great catch of his own kick leading to a scrum on the home 22. The Chiefs folded and Laidlaw's second penalty made it 6-0 after 22 minutes.

The home team, unusually, looked a little out of sorts at this point. Things weren't quite clicking in the face of some physical Gloucester defence and there were murmurs of discontent from the home crowd.

One lapse of concentration nearly cost the Cherry and Whites dear on the half hour, though. A slight gap around the ruck saw the home side break clear, but the scramble defence just got back to kill the threat.

As half time approached, the Chiefs tried to up the ante and hit back. Again they turned down a kick at goal, but the Gloucester defence again held out, within sniffing distance of their own line, much to the frustration of the Sandy Park crowd.

It meant that the Cherry and Whites took a hard earned 6-0 lead into half time. It hadn't been a classic, the hosts had looked over eager and almost to be trying too hard.

Gloucester's lead was based on a good set-piece, solid defence and the ability to take points from the few chances that had presented themselves. Thus far, it was a professional job, but could they hold on?

The Chiefs did in fact have an immediate to half the gap[sic], only for Gareth Steenson to miss his penalty into the wind and Billy Twelvetrees made him pay with a monster of a drop goal to make it 9-0.

Gloucester were looking good for the lead, but one missed tackle saw the home side get straight back into the game.

Patient build up work took play into the Gloucester 22 and Jack Nowell slipped a tackle to score.

Worse followed. A loose pass from Twelvetrees in the Chiefs' 22 was pounced on by Matt Jess with the Chiefs seemingly stretched in defence, and the winger ran it back all the way. The conversion made it 14-9 and the game had changed in character.

Gloucester could have folded but there were more twists to come! The Chiefs couldn't clear the restart, Steenson was charged down and Tom Savage gathered to score. Laidlaw converted to restore the lead at 16-14.

Steenson immediately slotted a 57th minute penalty to nudge Exeter back in front, Laidlaw responded on 59 minutes before Steenson replied again three minutes later. 20-19 to Exeter after 63 minutes . . .

Gloucester held their nerve. They kept the Chiefs pinned back deep in their own 22, before Ben Morgan smashed his way over from close range. Laidlaw converted and it was 26-20.

Predictably, the outcome was straight back in the melting pot. Waldrom matched Morgan's effort and Steenson had the chance to edge Exeter back in front. The woodwork intervened and Gloucester still had the lead.

Still the home team attacked, but Gloucester weren't to be denied. A crucial turnover was won at a ruck on their own 22 and that was the game. A tense but memorable way to start the New Year.

JC