

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

FRIDAY, JANUARY 9, 2015

KINGSHOLM – AVIVA PREMIERSHIP RUGBY

HOOK THE HERO AS GLOUCESTER SECURE SUPERB 24-23

SARACENS WIN

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Gloucester gave it everything in a bid to defeat Saracens at Kingsholm on Friday evening and James Hook's last gasp penalty secured a thrilling 24-23 win.

After the two teams had slugged it out for 80 minutes, the game ended in slightly bizarre circumstances.

Gloucester were seething that they hadn't been awarded a penalty at scrum time as they sought to overturn a 21-23 deficit. Saracens then seemed to have clinched the win as Chris Ashton chased a Neil De Kock kick to score.

However, Ashton was in front of the kicker and offside. Gloucester had their penalty opportunity. Up stepped James Hook. It was a long kick, from halfway, and the wind was swirling. However, the fly half kept his cool and clinched the win.

It was no more than Gloucester deserved in reality. They'd overcome a sickness bug in midweek which lingered long enough to rule out Tom Palmer and Greig Laidlaw.

During the course of the game, they also lost Ben Morgan and Nick Wood to serious looking injuries.

However, the Cherry and Whites steadfastly refused to throw in the towel. They hung in doggedly as Saracens muscled their way into the lead, took the lead with an absolute blinder from Callum Braley and then overcame the disappointment of Mako Vunipola crossing to give Saracens the lead again with 11 minutes to go.

So, when Hook kicked the penalty and Kingsholm erupted in a mixture of joy and relief, it was a significant moment.

Gloucester have now kicked off 2015 with two wins in a row, and two decent ones at that – away at Exeter and at home to Saracens. With two rounds of the European Rugby Challenge Cup now beckoning, there are real grounds for optimism.

Yet it didn't start well. Both teams made late replacements but Gloucester lost two starters to Saracens' one. And the visitors struck first.

As was the case last week at Exeter, Saracens chose to turn down an early kick at goal and opt for a kick to the corner to test the Gloucester lineout defence.

However, Saracens succeeded where the Chiefs failed. Twice the rolling maul was set and brought to ground. On the second occasion, referee JP Doyle decided to award the penalty try. Alex Goode added the easy conversion.

The home crowd spent much of the next few minutes screaming at the officials for what they perceived to be a number of defensive offsides. However, the officials saw nothing wrong.

Gloucester did have a chance when Ben Ransom was charged down. Kvesic linked with Twelvetrees who seemed to have Jonny May outside him, but the line of the pass was blocked by a defender and Gloucester had to settle for a James Hook penalty.

The fly half then lifted Kingsholm with a fabulous spin out of a tackle and break from his own half. Again Saracens got back, again at the expense of a penalty, and again Hook bisected the posts.

It had been a good spell for Gloucester, but they didn't deal with the kick and a penalty was soon awarded for not rolling away. Goode stepped up and made it 6-10 with ease and was on the mark again three minutes later as Gloucester went off their feet at a ruck.

The whistle continued to rule the day. Gloucester had a chance to narrow the gap but Hook's effort struck the upright, much to the annoyance of the crowd, incensed by the Saracens water carriers moving around in front of the kick.

A good old fashioned rolling maul got the crowd going, but it was a moment of genius from Dan Robson that finally broke the visitors' defence. The scrum half broke down the blindside, chipped ahead and won the race to score. It was a superb score.

With the tails up, Gloucester continued to pour forward and, to the delight of the home crowd, David Strettle was yellow carded for a deliberate knock on.

James Hook had a chance to give his side a half time lead, but his long-range penalty attempt held up into the wind and fell short.

Despite trailing at the break, Gloucester could take a lot of heart from the first half performance. The early penalty try had been a blow, but the Cherry and Whites had responded well.

They had also maintained their composure as a string of decisions went against them and, against the wind, worked hard to play as much of the game as possible in the Saracens half.

They'd created chances, they'd taken just the one. With the wind at their backs in the second half, could they do enough to earn a memorable win?

The visitors had other ideas though. They launched a series of driving mauls at the start of the half, eating up both ground and time. Tom Savage was sinbinned as Gloucester struggled to halt the charge and salt was rubbed into the wound as Billy Vunipola claimed the try.

The Cherry and Whites almost hit straight back. Slick hands in the backs saw James Hook cross the line but the fly half was held up and unable to ground the ball.

The five metre scrum was an opportunity, but it ended badly for Gloucester. Ben Morgan picked up and drove at the heart of the defence, but didn't get up. Referee JP Doyle blew up instantly and Morgan was stretchered off after a lengthy delay.

Minus the sinbinned Savage, and with Morgan now replaced by Evans, the Gloucester scrum held up well but the visitors produced a big defensive stand to keep their line intact.

Most of the game was now being played in the Saracens 22, Twelvetrees produced one beauty of a kick to pin them back but the defence was physical, as you'd expect.

Hook narrowed the gap with a penalty, but the try that immediately followed was world class. Jonny May inspired the breakout from the Gloucester 22, slick hands kept the ball alive, Gareth Evans made the key break and Callum Braley was on his shoulder to sprint home. Hook's conversion made it 21-18.

Perhaps rattled, George Kruis was then sinbinned for a tip tackle on David Halaifonua as the home side sought to press home their advantage. Sadly, the next incident of note was the sight of a second Gloucester player being carried off – in this case Nick Wood.

The visitors started to turn the screw. After the lengthy delay, they launched another series of driving mauls. Jonny May was the latest man to see yellow before the pragmatic tactic resulted in another try, this time for Mako Vunipola.

As this nail-biter of a game went into the final ten minutes, the visitors had edged back in front at 21-23.

Gloucester drove into the Saracens half and the pack flexed their collective muscle. On several occasions, the visitors seemed to buckle and Kingsholm roared for that crucial penalty.

It didn't come and Gloucester's chance looked to have gone. Only for Ashton to leave the blocks too quickly and Hook to earn the plaudits.

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