

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, MARCH 7, 2015

KINGSHOLM – AVIVA PREMIERSHIP RUGBY

GLOUCESTER AND NORTHAMPTON PLAY OUT THRILLING DRAW
AT KINGSHOLM

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 33 NORTHAMPTON SAINTS 33

Gloucester produced probably their best performance of the season against the reigning champions, Northampton Saints, but it wasn't quite enough as a last-minute try snatched a draw for the Saints.

The initial feeling as the referee blew the final whistle was one of real disappointment – Gloucester had come so close to defeating the Premiership's best season[*sic*].

But, after even just a few minutes of reflection, Gloucester could look back on so many positives from this encounter which shows just how much progress they've made as a group this season.

Indeed, had Henry Purdy not had a try disallowed as the game went into the final ten minutes, the game would have been done and dusted and Saints would not have had the opportunity to snatch two points.

The first 40 minutes were definitely Gloucester's. However, Northampton showed their class after the break and slowly worked their way back into the game. In hindsight, a draw was probably a fair outcome although Gloucester will look back ruefully on several missed chances in the first half.

For now though, Gloucester should focus on the positives. They played some very good rugby against a very good team. Things are moving in the right direction and it's now a question of maintaining that momentum.

On a sunny afternoon at Kingsholm, the visitors actually got off to a good start, holding Gloucester up in the tackle and then winning a penalty from the ensuing scrum. Stephen Myler had little difficulty opening the scoring.

Gloucester were then indebted to the pace of Jonny May as he chased down Ken Pisi who had blocked a kick through from James Hook. However, Saints had the territory, won another penalty and Myler promptly made it 0-6.

It had been a frustrating start for the Cherry and Whites, giving up six relatively easy points. But Greig Laidlaw opened their account on 9 minutes with a penalty as Saints transgressed at a ruck.

Gloucester were playing with pace, using the quick tap and go to good effect to keep Saints on their toes. It paid off on 13 minutes as the visitors coughed up another penalty and Laidlaw levelled the scores.

The scrum half then so very nearly scored the game's first try as James Hook and Matt Kvesic secured loose ball, but Laidlaw couldn't hang on to Kvesic's offload with a clear run to the line.

However, the Scotland skipper was flawless with the boot thus far and, following a deliberate knock on by Saints, slotted another excellent penalty to nudge Gloucester into the lead after 21 minutes.

It provoked a good spell from the visitors, but the defence was savage and forced a turnover which led to a superb try. James Hook found a gap and took the ball on well before threading a beautiful kick through for Charlie Sharples to gather and score. Laidlaw converted for 16-6.

Sharples then latched onto a superb offload from Steve McColl to speed clear, only to slip at a key moment. Gloucester recycled and Hibbard was dragged down just short before Saints James Wilson was yellow carded for a deliberate knock on.

Gloucester kicked to the corner, set up the catch and drive and, with the help of a few backs, drove over with Hibbard touching down for his first try for the club. Laidlaw converted brilliantly for a 23-6 lead.

Saints are champions for a reason, however, and duly piled on the pressure. It was a key phase of the game and the Cherry and Whites did well to hold in defence.

Hook then very nearly inspired another try with a moment of individual brilliance only to be called back for crossing, but Saints had the last word of the half with Myler's third penalty.

So, the teams went in to half time with Gloucester enjoying a well-earned 23-9 lead. They'd played with energy and had taken the game to the champions who, frankly, looked a bit rattled.

It had been probably Gloucester's best 40 minutes of the season. The challenge now was to make it their best 80 minutes.

However, the Saints got off to a flyer. A huge clearance from Wilson gave them field position before the full back then latched onto a lovely grubber from Stephen Myler to score. The fly half converted for 23-16 and it was game on.

The Cherry and Whites duly countered in brilliant style. Slick hands put Meakes into room down the left and he was dragged down just short. But Gloucester stayed patient and worked an opening for Dan Murphy to touch down. Laidlaw converted.

However, Saints hit straight back for the third try in nine pulsating minutes. Nothing looked on as they attacked from their own 22, but brilliant offloading kept the ball alive and Wilson cantered in for his second.

Myler's conversion made it 30-23 and he then had a penalty chance to narrow the gap still further, only for his kick to hit the upright and stay out. But he made no mistake on 57 minutes for 30-26.

No points were added for the next 15 minutes but it was enthralling stuff. Neither team could quite get the crucial score, but Kingsholm erupted as the Cherry and Whites seemed to have clinched the win.

A flowing build up saw Bill Meakes shrug off a tackle and float out a long pass for Henry Purdy to score. However, referee Garner brought play back as the TMO spotted a knock on in the build-up.

Greig Laidlaw did make it a seven point game on 76 minutes with his fourth penalty of the afternoon and the win got that little bit closer.

Crucially, Gloucester couldn't claim the restart. A couple of key decisions went Northampton's way and they had a 5 metre lineout. Samu Manoa scored as the visitors executed a well-rehearsed catch and drive and Myler held his nerve to secure the draw.

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