

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SUNDAY, MARCH 29, 2015

A J BELL STADIUM – AVIVA PREMIERSHIP RUGBY

**SALE CONTINUES TO BE AN UNHAPPY HUNTING GROUND
FOR SUBDUED GLOUCESTER**

SALE SHARKS 23 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 6

Gloucester's quest for a first win at Sale since 2001 continues as a try in each half for the home side proved to be enough in a scrappy 23-6 win at the AJ Bell Stadium on Sunday afternoon.

Following the recent high scoring try fests that have been a feature of both the domestic and international game, this was a bit more of a prosaic encounter. Weather conditions weren't fantastic but certainly no excuse for what was a low-key affair.

Gloucester will be bitterly disappointed at their performance. Director of Rugby David Humphreys said after the game that they'd spoken about the need to play with energy against Sale. But it just didn't happen on the day.

Frustratingly for the Cherry and Whites, there wasn't really that much to choose between the two teams. Both sides enjoyed brief spells of superiority amongst the overall mediocrity, but Sale took their chances when they presented themselves and that proved to be the real difference.

Gloucester did have their opportunities. Indeed, for long periods of the second half they were camped in the Sale 22. But they didn't have the cutting edge today, and that's something they'll be looking to rectify ahead of Friday's European Rugby Challenge Cup quarter-final at home to Connacht.

It's a short turnaround and a big challenge. But the Kingsholm factor could prove to be crucial if Gloucester are to progress in Europe. And two men who may have given the coaches food for thought in terms of selection for Friday are Mariano Galarza and Brendan Macken. Both made their Gloucester debuts today and showed up reasonably well. They were amongst the positives on a disappointing day.

After a fairly uninspiring start to Sunday's encounter, Gloucester had the first chance of points as Sale failed to roll away from the tackle area, but James Hook was off target with his ninth minute penalty attempt.

Hook had another long-range opportunity six minutes later, Matt Kvesic winning the penalty after some great work at the breakdown. It was a tough kick but it just had the distance and Gloucester had a 3-0 lead.

However, the next few minutes were all about the home side as, with excellent ball retention, they kept Gloucester pinned back in their own 22.

The pressure told. Sale kicked to the corner, were held out initially, but recycled and forced their way over near the posts. It wasn't clear cut, but after consultation with the TMO, Johnny Leota was awarded the try and Danny Cipriani converted for 7-3.

The Cherry and Whites tried to shrug off the setback and played possession rugby ball in the Sale half. Patient play set up a good position, but Tom Savage knocked on the greasy ball in contact just metres short of the home line.

The Gloucester pack duly put in a massive shove at the ensuing scrum and forced a penalty. It wasn't an easy kick, from out wide and with the wind swirling, but James Hook made no mistake.

Half time was rapidly approaching and perhaps Gloucester switched off mentally as they were caught napping by a gimmick lineout, hooker Taylor making good ground down the 5 metre channel only for a knock on to kill the chance.

But Sale did have the final word of the half, disrupting the Gloucester scrum and winning a penalty which Cipriani duly dispatched. 10-6 to the home side at half time.

In truth it hadn't been a classic up to this point. Neither side could really claim to have got the upper hand and scoring chances had been few and far between. Sale's catch and drive looked dangerous; Gloucester had enjoyed some good moments in the backs. It was all still very much to play for.

Gloucester began the second half well but couldn't get any reward for decent possession. Sale soaked up the pressure and extended their lead on 48 minutes with a Cipriani penalty after Kvesic was penalised for coming in at the side of a ruck.

The 50/50s were definitely going the way of the home team and, although Tom Arscott missed a long-range attempt, referee Carley's whistle soon gave Cipriani another chance and he duly made it 16-6 as the penalty count started to rise.

It was a decent lead for Sale and it soon got better. A rolling maul made good ground before Tom Arscott came in off his wing and cut a good line to almost make the line. The ball came back quickly and Josh Beaumont romped over. The extras from Cipriani were a formality.

The Cherry and Whites tried to battle their way back into it – a couple of five-metre lineouts were halted illegally – but they couldn't force their way over as time ticked relentlessly away.

The home team, understandably, were happy to soak up what Gloucester could throw at them and their first up tackling and line speed in defence was excellent.

At times they chanced their arm, and Nathan Hines and Danny Cipriani were both yellow carded in the final quarter, but Gloucester couldn't take advantage.

Charlie Sharples so very nearly made the line in the final few moments, but the Sale cover defence was in no mood to concede even a consolation score and got across to halt the flying winger to pretty much sum up the second half.

It proved to be the last real chance and Gloucester were left to think about where they need to make improvements ahead of the long drive home.

JC