

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

FRIDAY, APRIL 3, 2015

KINGSHOLM – EUROPEAN RUGBY CHALLENGE CUP

GLOUCESTER EDGE TENSE THRILLER TO MAKE EURO SEMI-FINAL

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 14 CONNACHT RUGBY 7

There weren't many points, but there were plenty of thrills as Gloucester and Connacht slugged it out at Kingsholm on Friday evening, the Cherry and Whites hanging on for a tight 14-7 victory.

It's a win that takes Gloucester into their first European semi-final since 2006, but it had to be done the hard way as Connacht simply refused to go away, taking the game right to the wire.

In the end, Gloucester were hanging on somewhat and were indebted to some fantastic defence to get them over the line as they had to withstand a dogged comeback from the visitors.

It had all looked so different at half time when Gloucester took to the dressing rooms with a 14-0 lead, and looked to be well on top. After a tense opening quarter, they scored two good tries and certainly had the upper hand.

However, the second half saw the game turn on its head and Connacht deserve plaudits for the way they fought back.

However, it's Gloucester who progress and a semi-final against either Exeter Chiefs or Newcastle Falcons will be their reward. Friday night lights are rarely dull at Kingsholm!

Neither side could really gain the ascendancy in the opening stages, there was plenty of kicking from hand and plenty of good defence but not much in terms of cutting edge.

Despite the lack of red zone action, it was gripping stuff with the Kingsholm crowd fascinated by the action until they erupted in approval as Gloucester broke the deadlock on 21 minutes.

James Hook was the architect, fielding a kick and slipping a tackle to break the defensive line. Hook found McColl who offloaded at the perfect time to Sharples who had taken an inside line and the winger was over. Laidlaw converted to make it 7-0.

The Cherry and Whites were playing into what looked like a pretty stiff breeze at this point, and their tactic of keeping ball in hand and dominating possession was proving to be a profitable one.

And their patience paid off just after the half hour. More solid build up play set up great field position, Hook rolled through a sublime grubber and the ball stood up nicely for Bill Meakes to gather and score unopposed. Laidlaw had another easy conversion for 14-0.

It was ample reward for the dominance that Gloucester enjoyed at this stage. Connacht seemed to be relying almost exclusively on Robbie Henshaw in attack, and their tactical kicking was simply too long.

Half time came and Gloucester looked well on top, although Connacht were obviously still well in the game. One quick score and everything could change. Gloucester would now have the wind at their backs but why change what had been effective tactics?

Indeed, Connacht came out fired up and piled on the pressure in the first few minutes of the second half, perhaps boosted by Gloucester losing John Afoa briefly to a head injury assessment.

The Irish province had obviously set out their stall to throw everything at Gloucester in an attempt to get back into the game and, to their credit, piled on the pressure. However, Gloucester were in no mood to give anything away in defence.

And, as the hour mark passed, Gloucester had a chance to extend the lead but Greig Laidlaw's penalty drifted narrowly wide of the left hand upright.

The visitors made the Cherry and Whites pay a dear price, as they moved downfield to force a five metre lineout.

The catch and drive was well-set and Gloucester brought it down illegally. A penalty try was the logical decision and Connacht were well and truly back in the game.

Sensing a headline making comeback, the Irish side threw the kitchen sink at Gloucester. However, backed by a vociferous crowd, the Cherry and Whites dug in and defended their territory with pride.

It was a nervy last few minutes, the clock was in the red and Connacht were in the Gloucester 22 when the final mistake was made – much to the relief of the Kingsholm crowd!

JC