

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, APRIL 18, 2015

KINGSHOLM –EUROPEAN RUGBY CHALLENGE CUP

**NEVER SAY DIE GLOUCESTER DEFEAT CHIEFS AND MAKE EUROPEAN
FINAL**

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 30 EXETER CHIEFS 19

Recent meetings between these two teams have often been thrillers, and this was no exception. It went down to the final few minutes, but Gloucester produced the goods when it mattered to qualify for the European Rugby Challenge Cup Final, beating Exeter 30-19.

This was possibly Gloucester's most complete performance of the season. They played with an intensity that befitted the occasion, taking the game to the Chiefs from the off.

And, make no mistake, this was not an opponent who had their mind on other things. Exeter, enjoying possibly their best ever season, came to win, and they battled splendidly throughout. Their defence at times was simply outstanding.

Indeed, the more gloomy Gloucester supporter could be forgiven for thinking that this was going to be one of those days when their team gave it everything, only to be caught by a sucker punch.

The visitors refused to throw in the towel. In fact, they actually got to within one point at 13-12 midway through the second half, and the momentum was arguably with Rob Baxter's side.

It was to be Gloucester's night though as Tom Savage smashed his way over from close range, before a Laidlaw penalty made it a ten point game.

The Chiefs still weren't done as Elvis Taione scored his side's first try as time began to run out for the men from Devon, but Jonny May had the final word, diving over to complete the night's scoring.

Kingsholm celebrated long and hard, and so they should. The support has been unwavering all season and they deserved an evening like this one.

However, it's not all over yet. There is still a Premiership game to play before the final. But Gloucester's season is very much alive.

Gloucester began well and dominated possession for the few minutes, taking play deep into the Chiefs 22.

However, a turnover gave the visitors a chance to break and only desperate defence from Billy Twelvetrees prevented a shock score.

The visitors were then held up over the line following a well-drilled attack. A 5-metre scrum followed but Gloucester won the penalty to clear their lines to the delight of the home crowd.

The pack then drove the Chiefs off their own ball in their 22 to set up a great attacking platform but Gareth Evans lost possession in contact. It was a heavy tackle, Evans stayed down and was then replaced by Ross Moriarty.

It was an encouraging start for Gloucester although the Exeter defence was giving nothing away. However, after more good attacking play, Greig Laidlaw opened the scoring with an 18th minute penalty.

It came as something of a disappointment therefore when Exeter promptly levelled the scores through a long-range Henry Slade penalty after a Gloucester transgression at a ruck following the restart.

The Cherry and Whites went straight back to business and threw the kitchen sink at the Chiefs, whose defence was superb in the face of wave after wave of attack.

It needed a touch of genius to unlock the defence, and it was the same combination that struck against Connacht in the last round. James Hook threaded through a grubber and Bill Meakes pounced to score. Laidlaw converted for 10-3.

Gloucester followed that up with a superb penalty from inside his own half from Hook to open up a 13-3 lead, but the Chiefs hit back with one from Slade with the last kick of the half to send the teams into the break with the home side edging it by 13 points to 6.

It had been a pulsating half of rugby. Gloucester had played as if their season were on the line, and it was only stern defence by the visitors that had prevented further scores.

The Kingsholm crowd were also playing their part, roaring their approval as their men put their bodies on the line. Gloucester had their noses in front but could they keep it up?

Gloucester started the second half well, Sharples and Kvesic carrying well. However, another turnover saw Exeter go the length and only desperate defence after a handling error from Meakes saw Dave Ewers held up over the line.

The goal line stand came at the expense of a penalty, however, and Henry Slade's third successful kick of the evening narrowed the gap to 13-9.

Gloucester responded almost immediately, Hibbard bursting through powerfully before Hook jinked clear of a tackle in a somewhat more elusive manner. However, with the line just a few metres away, Exeter secured a crucial turnover.

Slade then narrowed the gap to 13-12 with his fourth penalty of the evening and it looked as though Gloucester were wobbling a bit.

However, just as it seemed as though the Chiefs were going to kick on and try and move in front, Gloucester dug deep and struck from close range. It was one for the pack, who pummelled away at the line before Tom Savage burrowed his way over.

Laidlaw converted and then slotted a long-range penalty to give Gloucester a decent ten point lead but the drama was far from over.

Just as it looked as though they were running out of time, Exeter hit back. Elvis Taione touched down from a metre out, Steenson converted and it was game on again.

Cometh the hour, cometh the man. As Exeter looked to counter from deep, under pressure from the Gloucester defence, a desperate pass found only Jonny May's hands and the winger broke clear of a tackle to gleefully dive over in the corner.

Finally, Gloucester had secured their spot in the berth and the celebrations were able to begin.

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