

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

FRIDAY, MAY 1, 2015

TWICKENHAM STOOP – EUROPEAN RUGBY CHALLENGE CUP

**IT'S EUROPEAN GLORY FOR GLOUCESTER IN A THRILLING
ENCOUNTER AT THE STOOP**

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 19 EDINBURGH RUGBY 13

Once again for Gloucester, it went right to the very last whistle, the 14 men in Cherry and White hanging on heroically to win the European Rugby Challenge Cup by 19 points to 13 over Edinburgh at the Stoop on Friday evening.

It's Gloucester's first European title since 2006 and their first Cup triumph since lifting the LV= Cup in 2011.

But it had to be done the hard way. After completely dominating the first half, Gloucester came under real pressure in the second 40 minutes as they were reduced to 13 men at one point, following a yellow and red card, and ended up having to hang on to their well-earned lead.

It required some outstanding defence as the nerve ends of every Gloucester supporter were jangling in those final few minutes. Players had to stand up and be counted; and that they did.

It was quite some turnaround. Edinburgh had hardly threatened until the final quarter, relying mainly on Sam Hidalgo-Clyne's box kicking and goalkicking. However, once Gloucester were reduced in numbers, they sensed blood and went for the kill.

The Cherry and Whites had dominated the first half and could easily have been a country mile clear but for some heroic Edinburgh defence and one key tap tackle on a flying Jonny May.

Had May skated over after a scintillating break, Gloucester would have been well clear and sitting on a comfortable lead.

And, as it turned out, Gloucester very nearly paid a dear price for not cashing in when they were on top as the game turned on its head in the second half. Credit to Edinburgh, they had refused to cave in when up against it and they very nearly battled their way back into it.

The win ultimately came down to Gloucester's sheer guts and determination and sheer refusal to give in. In defence, they bent but they didn't break and, when the final whistle finally blew, massive celebrations started.

It takes Gloucester into a play-off for the final spot in the European Rugby Champions Cup and the 2014-15 season remains very much alive and with silverware in the bank.

At a near capacity Stoop, Gloucester kicked off in front of a crowd dominated by Gloucester supporters. It felt like a game at Kingsholm.

It was first blood to the Scots, however, as Gloucester failed to release the tackled player. Sam Hidalgo-Clyne stepped up and held his nerve to kick a testing penalty.

There was an impressive response from Gloucester, based on a searing break from Charlie Sharples. James Hook almost made the line but Gloucester had to settle for a penalty from Greig Laidlaw to level the scores.

Better was to come. From a lineout on halfway, Jonny May came around on the loop and scythed through the Edinburgh defence. Timing his pass to perfection, he drew the final man and Billy Twelvetrees was under the posts for a great try. Laidlaw's conversion was a formality and made it 10-3.

Edinburgh dug deep in an attempt to get back into the game, Hidalgo-Clyne using the box kick to good effect but it was Gloucester who enjoyed the better of the possession and territory.

Jonny May then almost scored one of the tries of the season. Collecting a loose ball just outside his own 22, he set off on a weaving run and looked dead set to cross the line until a despairing tap tackle halted him. It was so close to a stunning score.

The Cherry and Whites had the bit between their teeth. Antone Bresler was yellow carded and Gareth Evans was held up over the line, before Edinburgh won a morale-boosting penalty at the ensuing five metre scrum. It was some escape.

And they made the most of it, producing their most cohesive spell of rugby to put Gloucester under pressure, the Cherry and Whites conceding a kickable penalty and Hidalgo-Clyne narrowing the gap to 10-6.

Laidlaw promptly responded in kind to restore the seven point advantage, although Hidalgo-Clyne had another shot at the posts as time expired but was off target.

So, Gloucester enjoyed a 13-6 lead at the break, but will be wondering how on earth they hadn't scored more points.

However, to their credit, Edinburgh were hanging in there. Their set-piece was giving Gloucester a few things to think about and Hidalgo-Clyne's kicking game was on the money. There was everything to play for.

Both teams made half-time changes. Tom Palmer made way for Mariano Galarza while Tom Brown replaced Greig Tonks for Edinburgh. But the second half began in a tense and cagey fashion.

However, most of the rugby was being played in the Edinburgh half and, after a spell of sustained pressure, Greig Laidlaw made it 16-6 with his third penalty of the evening and then 19-6 shortly afterwards.

So far so good for Gloucester. However, things changed rapidly. Ross Moriarty was yellow carded after a scrum broke up. That was enough of a blow but, when Bill Meakes was shown red for a high tackle, Gloucester were creaking.

The decision looked tough on Meakes. An Edinburgh decoy runner almost ran into him it seemed and Meakes looked to be trying to get his opponent out of the way. But he made contact with the head and, after checking with the TMO, referee Garces showed the red card.

Ross Ford then crashed over from close range after a period of Edinburgh pressure and the tide looked to have turned. The Scottish side proceeded to throw everything at Gloucester as they sensed an incredible comeback. Yann Thomas deserves a mention for winning a vital penalty in the Gloucester 22.

However, despite having real momentum behind them, Edinburgh hadn't reckoned on the Gloucester 'dawg' and that proved to be crucial. The forwards dominated the final few minutes with countless pick and goes and the time ticked inexorably away until referee Garces called time on proceedings.

Billy Twelvetrees lifted the trophy and the Gloucester celebrations really began.

The final word should go to the Gloucester supporters, however. They turned the Stoop into a small corner of Gloucestershire and their backing was simply magnificent. In the final stages, their backing was crucial and they deserve to savour the moment.