

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, MAY 9, 2015

KINGSHOLM – AVIVA PREMIERSHIP RUGBY

**14-MAN GLOUCESTER BATTLE TO REMARKABLE VICTORY
OVER LONDON IRISH**

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 35 LONDON IRISH 13

Having played for 57 minutes with only 14 men following the sending off of Matt Kvesic, Gloucester's remaining 14 men dug in to clinch an amazing 35-13 win over London Irish at Kingsholm on Saturday.

Victory by such a comfortable margin would have been unthinkable after the first half hour. By that point, Gloucester had been under the cosh almost from the first minute.

The visitors had almost scored two tries in the opening exchanges, only heroic defence preventing the Irish ball carriers grounding the ball as the visitors came out of the blocks firing on all cylinders.

Gloucester did seem to have weathered the storm as they took a 3-0 lead, but Kvesic's dismissal left Gloucester facing the prospect of playing the best part of an hour with only 14 men.

When Alex Lewington crossed for the Exiles' first try on 28 minutes, it looked as though the dam had finally broken and that Gloucester were looking at a tough day at the office.

But, if anything, the sending off seemed to galvanise the 14 men. Crucially, they hit back with a try of their own on 31 minutes and then dominated the game, extending the lead bit by bit through the unerring boot of Greig Laidlaw before tries from Dan Thomas and Henry Purdy sealed the deal.

Conversely, the visitors looked shattered to have dominated the opening half hour so much but only have five points on the board. And the game went Gloucester's way after that.

It showed how far Gloucester have come as a group as this season has progressed. Their sheer dogged refusal to throw in the towel reflects hugely on the team spirit that has developed in the squad.

With more wins, and more Aviva Premiership league points already in the bank compared to last season, progress has been made.

There's one more Premiership game left, and it's one of the biggest – away to Bath. Quite who will be on duty remains to be seen as today's was a bruising encounter.

However, everyone seems desperate to wear the Cherry and White of Gloucester, no-one wants to drop out and the season remains alive with a European play-off on the horizon.

It was very nearly a dream start for the visitors. Chris Noakes cut through the defence and found Blair Cowan on his shoulder. Brendan Macken produced a try saving tackle on the flanker and Tom Court knocked on as he tried to pick up and score.

However, Gloucester knocked on when trying to attack from their own line and endured a couple of uncomfortable looking scrums, conceding two penalties, before great defence forced a turnover and a clearance.

The Cherry and Whites were leading a charmed life, though. Slick hands across the Irish backs nearly produced a try from the very next phase of play, Andrew Fenby held up over the line. But, once again, Gloucester held out.

And Irish paid the price for not taking their chances as Gloucester moved downfield, won a scrum penalty after a bad kicking error from Noakes and Laidlaw opened the scoring with a 15th minute penalty.

But it was the Exiles who were straight back on the front foot from the restart, Gloucester scrambling desperately to defend their own line. It was a phenomenal effort to keep the visitors at bay. Irish would be wondering how they were pointless as the first quarter expired.

However, having weathered so much pressure, Gloucester were then dealt a real blow on 23 minutes as Matt Kvesic was adjudged to have committed a tip tackle on Tomas O'Leary and, after consultation with the TMO, referee Maxwell-Keys brandished the red card.

It was going to be an uphill struggle now for Gloucester, and the defence was finally breached on 28 minutes. Shane Geraghty made the initial break, Tom Guest was up in support and his offload gave the unmarked Alex Lewington an easy run to the corner. Noakes couldn't convert but the Exiles had their noses in front.

Remarkably, Gloucester struck next. Billy Burns spotted space behind the Irish defensive line and threaded through a lovely kick. Jonny May was on to it in a flash, broke a tackle and scored. Laidlaw added an excellent conversion.

Against the odds, Gloucester had their tails up. Twelvetrees made a sensational break following the restart and Brendan Macken was in support. The Irish cover got to him, but killed the ball. Eamonn Sheridan was sinbinned and Laidlaw kicked the penalty for 13-5.

As half time approached, the Cherry and Whites were denied a sensational score. Sharples made a searing break down the left, Laidlaw was in support but didn't have the pace so passed inside where Hibbard and Twelvetrees put Henry Purdy over.

However, referee Maxwell-Keys again went to the TMO who ruled that Laidlaw's pass had gone forward even though his hands appeared to have gone backwards. Only a close look at the video would suffice.

Despite this disappointment, Gloucester did hold on to half time with a 13-5 lead though, quite an effort given how under the pump they had been in the first quarter and also the loss of Kvesic.

Only time would tell if these efforts would take a toll. One thing in Gloucester's favour was that they would play with the wind at their backs in the second half.

The kickers ruled the roost in the early stages of the second half, Laidlaw and Noakes swapped penalties after 44 and 47 minutes although Laidlaw was off target for the first time with another attempt on 50 minutes.

However, Laidlaw readjusted his sights and extended the lead to 22-8 after 55 minutes with two long range penalties as Irish seemed to start to lose their patience and discipline.

Laidlaw struck again on 66 minutes to thrust another dagger in Irish's collective spirit before Dan Thomas, who was simply excellent throughout, finished off a well worked catch and drive. It was the flanker's first try on his first Premiership start.

The Exiles looked broken and, after two near misses, Henry Purdy finally got the score his attacking work merited. He was indebted to a lovely kick through from Callum Braley as he finished with glee.

Incredibly, Gloucester then sought a try scoring bonus point. Ironically, it cost them a score. Trying to move the ball from their own line, they only succeeded in losing possession and Andy Short finished in the corner for a consolation try.