

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 14, 2015

KINGSHOLM – EUROPEAN RUGBY CHALLENGE CUP

**GLOUCESTER FORCED TO BATTLE FOR WIN IN EUROPEAN OPENER
BY STUBBORN ZEBRE**

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 23 ZEBRE RUGBY 10

As was the case in this fixture last season, Gloucester were made to work very hard for victory by Zebre, but got their European Rugby Challenge Cup defence off to a winning start with a 23-10 win.

It was quite literally a game of two halves. Gloucester had the win pretty much in the bag by half time, with two of the tries real crackers, but couldn't kick on and close the game out completely after the resumption.

Zebre upped their game, conditions worsened and the inevitable flurry of replacements took their toll on the momentum of the game. In hindsight, not clinching the try scoring bonus point may be considered a disappointment, but a win's a win.

But there were still plenty of positives for Gloucester's much-changed side. The youthful line-up delivered an excellent first half performance and will be better for the experience.

The young back row of Ludlow, Moriarty and Rowan in particular hunted as a pack while Billy Burns had an encouraging game at fly half and was voted Man of the Match.

And, of course, there was the second half appearance of Henry Trinder from the bench. His return inspired possibly the loudest cheer of the afternoon, and the sight of him taking on defenders at full tilt was good to see.

The challenge now is to back it up. A testing trip to La Rochelle lies in wait next Thursday. A host of first team regulars may return for that one, but a win will be important given that Worcester defeated the French side today.

It took Gloucester a little while to settle but the first score was worth waiting for. Billy Burns was the creator with a lovely chip over the top in midfield. Callum Braley was on his shoulder to take it on, before Ross Moriarty fired the ball out to Henry Purdy who sprinted over in the corner.

The pack then flexed their collective muscle, driving to within a metre or so, Jeremy Thrush halted just short. Gloucester stayed calm, moved it blindside to Ross Moriarty and the flanker had the power to slide over. Billy Burns converted for 12-0.

Burns added a 21st minute penalty as Gloucester, playing in their European strip, kept up the pressure with Zebre creaking in defence every time the home team moved into their half.

A superb steal on the deck from Jacob Rowan almost led to a third try, Steve McColl making good ground and forcing Zebre to concede a five-metre scrum, but Gloucester had to settle for a second penalty from Burns and an 18-0 lead.

The game went into a bit of a lull as Gloucester strived in vain for the elusive third try and Zebre seemed to settle for damage limitation. However, as half time approached, the next try was worth waiting for.

Attacking down the blindside, the ball was kept alive by superb handling from Atkinson, Ludlow and Braley before Billy Burns found the flying Steve McColl who had the pace and power to steam over in the corner.

It gave Gloucester a 23-0 lead at half time, and it was a case of job done so far. The vastly reshuffled Gloucester side had gelled nicely after an understandably disjointed start with two cracking tries to date.

Zebre hadn't looked as useful as they had at this ground almost 12 months ago, and the next priority would be to get the try scoring bonus point to put this one to bed.

Gloucester certainly went for it at the start of the second half, Billy Burns pinning Zebre back with a beautifully weighted kick. However, the chance was lost due to a knock on.

The first real setback of the afternoon then came as Lewis Ludlow was yellow carded for a no arms tackle. Minus the flanker, Gloucester were outgunned up front and conceded a penalty try as a scrum went down as Zebre advanced towards the line.

It seemed harsh. Ludlow's yellow card didn't look too bad with the benefit of television replays, the flanker seeming to try and wrap his arms, and Zebre seemed to lose control of the ball as the scrum broke up.

The visitors continued to make the most of their superiority of numbers, forcing a scrum penalty and Padovani narrowed the gap on the hour with a straightforward penalty.

However, perhaps the biggest cheer of the afternoon then came as Henry Trinder, who has worked so hard to recover from injury, took the field. His first contribution was a jinking run.

Back up to 15 men, Gloucester strained every sinew in an attempt to get the bonus point try. On several occasions, they established good field position in the Zebre 22, but anxious hands and wrong options taken saw the fifth point slip away from them.

However, Gloucester's defence of the European Rugby Challenge Cup is off to a winning start. It's now all to play for.