

# **GLOUCESTER RUGBY**

**THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 19, 2015**

**STADE MARCEL DE FLANDRE – EUROPEAN RUGBY  
CHALLENGE CUP**

**GLOUCESTER HAVE TO WORK HARD TO DOG OUT HARD-FOUGHT  
WIN IN LA ROCHELLE**

**LA ROCHELLE 20 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 33**

It's never easy to win in France, and that was certainly the case in La Rochelle on Thursday evening as Gloucester were indebted to late tries from Steve McColl and Charlie Sharples to snatch a 33-20 European Rugby Challenge Cup win.

It looked as though an indifferent spell either side of half time would cost Gloucester dear, but Gloucester hung in there and snatched the win in the final few minutes.

It's a win that keeps Gloucester very much in control of their own destiny in the group, and the double header with Worcester in December now has huge significance.

But it had to be done the hard way. Every time Gloucester opened up a decent gap, they were immediately pegged back. And, backed by a vocal and passionate crowd, Stade Rochelais very nearly took a decisive hold of the game in the second half.

The Cherry and Whites were rocked at that point, but they rolled with the punches, absorbed some real pressure and then pounced with purpose in the final few minutes.

Steve McColl and Charlie Sharples were the men who crossed late on, Sharples' try in particular a real gem, but they'll be the first to pay tribute to a fantastic effort up front from the pack.

They were up against a La Rochelle side who possessed some huge units in their pack. When they got moving, backed up by a slick offloading game, they were difficult to stop.

But, as was the case in Europe last year, Gloucester found a way to win in testing conditions and head home with a valuable four points after a hectic few days of rugby.

After a minute's silence in memory of those who died in Paris last Friday evening, and a rousing rendition of La Marseillaise, the action got underway in front of a nearly full Stade Marcel De Flandre.

The Gloucester side wore tricolore armbands on the evening, a gesture appreciated by the home support.

And they quickly took a 3-0 lead when La Rochelle committed an offence at one of the game's first rucks, and Greig Laidlaw had no problem kicking the penalty. However, Gloucester fumbled the restart, then came in at the side of a ruck and Fabien Fortassin duly levelled the scores.

The response was immediate. Ben Morgan, who had bobbed the kick off, took the ball at first receiver, smashed his way through the home defence, took on the full-back, and just had enough reach to make the line. Laidlaw added the conversion. The number eight had made amends in some style.

The home side quickly hacked away at the deficit. Greig Laidlaw had a box kick charged down, Charlie Sharples got back bravely to snuff out the danger but conceded a penalty and Gloucester were pinned back deep in their own 22.

Gloucester repelled the maul, but a lovely grubber from Fortassin got in behind the defensive line, Roudil swooped and popped it up for scrum-half Audy and he scooted over. Fortassin converted to restore parity again.

The home side were looking lively, and their offloading style of play was causing the Cherry and Whites some problems, with Gloucester simply unable to slow them down in attack. It was a key phase of the game and Gloucester had to hold out.

The home side were then awarded a bizarre looking penalty as their pack stood up when going backwards on their own put in at a scrum. But Gloucester were let off the hook as the kick held up in the breeze and came up short and wide.

Referee Mitrea then balanced things up by penalizing La Rochelle, and Laidlaw made no mistake off the tee to nudge Gloucester in front by 13 points to 10 after 25 minutes.

However, the referee was generous to the home side just minutes later when hooker Benjamin Geledan tackled his opposite number, Richard Hibbard, late. The TMO was called for, but a penalty was the only punishment and Laidlaw slotted his third penalty for 16-10.

The Cherry and Whites then showed their class behind the scrum as Hook and Purdy combined, the latter kicking through to force the home team to carry over. The five metre scrum was collapsed and Laidlaw landed a beauty for 19-10.

Just as Gloucester looked set to enjoy a decent half time lead, they lost possession on halfway and were pinned back by another testing kick from Fortassin. The catch and drive was dangerous and was halted illegally, and the fly half narrowed the gap to 13-19.

It had been a decent half for Gloucester, who had largely managed to take the home crowd out of it. And, with Laidlaw kicking well, there was always the chance of points.

But there was the nagging feeling that the massive home pack still had a drive or two up their sleeves and La Rochelle would now play with the benefit of the wind at their backs.

And there was a real let off at the start of the second half, as the defensive line was breached down the blindside but left winger Alex Northam couldn't hold on to a potentially scoring pass.

It was only a brief reprieve for Gloucester though. Right wing Gabriel Lacroix broke clear as he took a neat offload and, although he was halted, Fortassin floated a kick across for the unmarked Jason Eaton to catch and score. Fortassin converted to give the home team a 20-19 lead.

The game had turned on its head in the few minutes either side of half time, and the Cherry and Whites had to have their wits about them to deny La Rochelle shortly afterwards.

Gloucester weren't helping themselves with some basic errors. Lineout ball wasn't always clean, kicks went out on the full and penalties conceded were all playing right into the hands of the home team.

Fortune smiled as Fortassin, who had been teasing Gloucester mercilessly with his classy kicking out of hand, missed with a long-range penalty attempt but the momentum was still very much with Stade Rochelais.

Gloucester rang the changes in an attempt to regain the initiative, but the feeling of frustration was growing as the game moved into the final quarter with nothing much coming off and precious little possession in the La Rochelle half.

That feeling of inevitability certainly seemed to grow when a grubber kick through from James Hook forced La Rochelle to concede a five metre scrum only for possession to be fumbled away.

However, sometimes these games turn on small things and Gloucester snaffled vital possession, courtesy of great work by Jacob Rowan, from a La Rochelle ruck on 70 minutes.

Willi Heinz came away with the ball. Twelvetrees and Hook shipped it wide before Rob Cook sent Steve McColl powering over on the left. Even then, the TMO took an age to determine whether there had been a forward pass or not.

But eventually the try was given and Billy Twelvetrees added an excellent conversion, under real pressure, to open up a 26-20 lead. There was a mixture of elation and relief.

There was still time for La Rochelle and the nerve ends were still jangling, but Charlie Sharples finished things off in style. Receiving a loose kick, Sharples looked up, beat the chasing men before embarking upon a weaving run which left several would be tacklers grasping at air before having the strength to ride the final tackle and touch down.

It was a try that was worthy of finishing a contest and Twelvetrees' second conversion was just the icing on the cake as the Cherry and White clad followers started to celebrate.

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