

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 27, 2015

TWICKENHAM STADIUM – AVIVA PREMIERSHIP RUGBY

**GLOUCESTER SO CLOSE AT TWICKENHAM BUT QUINS SNATCH
LAST GASP DRAW**

HARLEQUINS 39 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 39

Harlequins and Gloucester played out a real end to end thriller at Twickenham on Sunday, sharing ten tries on their way to a humdinger of a 39-39 draw in Big Game 8, Nick Evans missing a last ditch drop goal which would have won it.

It was a cracker of a game from start to finish, the lead changing hands several times. Gloucester had to roll with the punches throughout, absorbing a huge amount of pressure from Quins and also having to overcome the loss of three key players to injury.

But the Cherry and Whites hung in there and with ten minutes left to play, held a ten point lead and looked set to well and truly crash the party.

But, credit to the home side, they never threw in the towel. A ten point game became a seven point game and Nick Evans held his nerve to level the scores as he converted Ross Chisholm's second try.

As time expired, Evans then had a chance to snatch the win. However, his drop goal slid wide of the right hand upright. Perhaps justice was done – defeat would have been harsh on Gloucester.

In truth, had you offered Gloucester three points before the game, they probably would have taken it. Even so, to have come so close to taking five points is incredibly frustrating.

Quins supporters will argue that they gifted Gloucester some points. Gloucester fans will counter that they almost scored a number of other tries.

What Gloucester can take from the game is the knowledge that they can go toe to toe with the top teams in the Aviva Premiership. They finish 2015 in sixth place in the table and will be looking to build from there.

First of all though, they'll have to assess who is still standing. John Afoa, Jonny May and Henry Trinder all limped off injured. Fortunately, the depth in the Gloucester squad is better than it has been for some time and will need to be against London Irish on January 2nd at Kingsholm.

Gloucester had to make four changes to the matchday squad from the one named on Christmas Eve – injury and illness saw Meakes, McAllister, Morgan and Doran-Jones ruled out and replaced by Trinder, Murphy, Moriarty and Nicky Thomas respectively.

Gloucester threatened early, a good catch and drive followed by a neat grubber from James Hook which Billy Twelvetrees just couldn't touch down.

The first score wasn't long in coming though. Sharples and Brown competed for a high ball which ran loose. Afoa hacked it forward, it hit a Quins hand and Sharples re-gathered before Thrush kicked on and the big lock just beat Jack Clifford to score. Laidlaw added a superb touchline conversion for a 7-0 lead.

Predictably, Quins responded quickly. A neat chip from Nick Evans caused concern, but it was the fly-half's right boot that contributed his team's first points, a penalty, after Gloucester lost their own lineout then offended at the next ruck.

The home team had the momentum and made it count. A line break from Jack Clifford set up great attacking field position, Gloucester tried gamely to defend their own line but an overlap was created on the right and Marland Yarde dived over in the corner.

It was important that Gloucester got the next score to stem the flow, and they duly did. James Horwill was penalised at a ruck on the home 22 and Greig Laidlaw slotted the penalty.

However, the next incident of note was a serious one for Gloucester. John Afoa stayed down after a scrum and, following treatment, went off to be replaced by Nicky Thomas.

But, against the odds, Gloucester struck next. Matt Kvesic burgled ball at a Quins ruck, Twelvetrees offloaded to James Hook and the fly-half sprinted in from 50 metres. Laidlaw again converted superbly. The home crowd booed, thinking Kvesic was offside. But, as the tackler, he was entitled to play the ball. It was well refereed by Wayne Barnes.

Gloucester needed to consolidate as half-time approached, but simply couldn't clear or get decent distance from the restart. It gave the home side prime attacking position and, despite some good tackling – one hit from Sharples halting Mike Brown in his tracks – Danny Care scooted over near the posts and Evans converted for 17-15.

There was an opportunity to extend the lead on the stroke of half-time as the home team were again penalised at the breakdown but, on the edge of his range, Laidlaw was a whisker off target.

It meant that Gloucester went into the dressing rooms with a narrow 17-15 lead and everything to play for. Neither team really had the upper hand, and two tries apiece seemed to be a pretty fair reflection.

Both outfits were looking dangerous with ball in hand, and the defences were working overtime. Gloucester needed a massive second half performance with a lot depending on Nicky Thomas' efforts at scrum time.

The home side came out strongly and a break from Care and Lowe seemed to have opened up Gloucester. However, Clifford spilled the ball with the visitors on the ropes, Henry Trinder scooped it back and ran it back from 80 metres.

Laidlaw converted to give Gloucester a 24-15 lead. It was potentially a huge moment – somewhat against the run of play – but possibly significant. Christmas gifts cannot be turned down.

Once again, though, Gloucester couldn't build on that advantage as Quins hit straight back. Nick Evans made the line break before Nick Easter scored from close range.

And a second followed almost immediately as Quins went from their own 22. Roberts made the key break and replacement Ross Chisholm sprinted home. Evans converted both and a nine point lead became a five point deficit in the blink of an eye.

Once again, though, Quins were the victim of an ill-advised offload. Trinder intercepted and was away for his second. Sadly, his hamstring seemed to give way en route to the line – his poor luck shows no sign of stopping.

Laidlaw's conversion hit the post, but he nudged Gloucester back in front at 32-29 with a penalty when Mike Brown was caught behind his own line and then held on to the ball in the tackle.

Gloucester threw the kitchen sink at Quins in a bid to put the game to bed. James Hook thought he'd scored but Charlie Sharples was adjudged to have knocked on. Sharples was then a fingertip away from gathering his own kick near the home team's line.

However, Rob Cook then scored a Try of the Season contender. Gathering a kick near halfway, he weaved his way through a wall of defenders and had the strength to ride a tackle and score.

The conversion made it a ten point game, but Gloucester's Achilles heel on the day was their exits following restarts. They immediately surrendered a penalty and Evans had no problem narrowing the gap.

Gloucester tried so hard to hold out but a magnificent kick from Evans pinned them back near their own line. Hibbard saw yellow as he helped to pull down a maul, before Quins outflanked the undermanned defence and Chisholm scored his second.

Evans kept his cool to convert from out wide, but his accuracy deserted him with the final drop goal attempt.

It was close, but perhaps a draw was the fairest possible result.

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