

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, JANUARY 2, 2016

KINGSHOLM – AVIVA PREMIERSHIP RUGBY

**GLOUCESTER OUT-WRESTLE IRISH IN THE KINGSHOLM MUD
FOR KEY WIN**

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 27 LONDON IRISH 14

It was just like the old days at Kingsholm, a blood and guts encounter played out in the mud and rain. James Hook contributed 17 points from the boot but the pack should take the plaudits for a superb second half display in a 27-14 victory.

Irish provided spirited resistance and led until the hour mark but melted away as the Gloucester forwards took a grip as the second half progressed.

It was a phenomenal effort from the Gloucester forwards who simply took control more and more as the half progressed. It was absolutely necessary because, at half time, the Cherry and Whites were struggling to get on terms.

Frustratingly, the Exiles hadn't had to create that much to eke out their 14-6 lead at the interval. Although they had enjoyed the majority of the territory, their two tries had come from a missed tackle and Alex Lewington winning the aerial battle for a high ball.

However, it was a different story in the second half. Gloucester started to play more in the opposition half, Hook kept chipping away at the lead with penalties before the pack started to dominate on the back of a well-executed kicking game and the tries duly came.

The first, of course, came from a catch and drive with Matt Kvesic claiming the try. The second was a fine effort – Billy Twelvetrees made the key incision, Rob Cook scampered down the touchline and passed inside for Billy Burns to complete the scoring.

It's an important four points for Gloucester to maintain their place in the top six of the table as they prepare for a testing trip to Exeter next weekend. It's also significant in terms of maintaining a winning habit and building momentum and emphasising the character of the team.

And it was all done in really testing conditions. Torrential rain left the Kingsholm pitch boggy well before kick-off, and rain throughout only made matters worse. But, four points is four points.

Predictably, Gloucester kept it tight in the opening few minutes. A great kick from Twelvetrees created an attacking position, and the rolling maul was illegally halted. James Hook confidently made it 3-0.

However, the Exiles hit back in impressive style. Pinning Gloucester back as Hook was forced to carry into touch, the visitors tried the catch and drive but it was a missed tackle in midfield that allowed Ciaran Hearn to score under the posts. Chris Noakes converted.

Not surprisingly, the boot continued to dominate, box kicks galore raining down from the damp Kingsholm atmosphere before James Hook narrowed the gap to 6-7 with a 13th minute penalty.

Very little of note happened in the next 20 minutes. Lots of ball carrying for short yardage by the forwards, lots of big hits in defence and lots of kicking.

Unfortunately, all the play was taking place in the Gloucester half with the Cherry and Whites unable to get any real foothold in the Irish half.

And this came back to haunt Gloucester just after the half hour. A penalty was kicked into the Gloucester 22, Irish mauled but, with an advantage being played, Noakes kicked wide where Alex Lewington out-jumped Rob Cook and claimed the ball to score. Noakes converted for 6-14.

That was it for the first half as frustration grew both on and off the field. It had been a pretty poor half, which was to be expected in the conditions, but Irish had made the most of their chances.

The Exiles were definitely edging the territorial battle, and the conundrum from Gloucester was how were they going to spend enough time in the Irish half to accumulate points?

Hook quickly narrowed the gap with a well struck penalty, before Gloucester laid siege to the Irish line for what seemed like an eternity. Two potential tries were ruled out by the TMO, Lewington was yellow carded but the Cherry and Whites only came away with a fourth penalty for Hook.

The tension mounted as Irish strove to come back at Gloucester. They enjoyed some good moments, but it was Gloucester who edged into the lead as the hour mark approached, courtesy of Hook's fifth penalty.

In hindsight, this was where the game was won. Irish had put so much into their defence and then failed to come away with any points when they tried to respond. It seemed to deflate the visitors.

The tide had now well and truly turned. The Gloucester lineout and catch and drive assumed complete control, making lots of metres, seemingly at will. Irish suddenly looked like a beaten outfit.

And that was certainly the case as Gloucester finally made their possession count. They had a couple of goes at the catch and drive from close range and, eventually, Matt Kvesic was the man to touch down. Hook added the conversion.

It was all Gloucester now and the best try of the day was yet to come. Billy Twelvetrees sliced his way through the defence, Rob Cook made good yards down the touchline before finding Billy Burns with the key inside pass.

With both teams now virtually indistinguishable due to the mud turning both sets of kits brown (pity the respective kitmen), it was game over.

The Kingsholm crowd set off into the night satisfied with the outcome.

JC