

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, JANUARY 16, 2016

KINGSHOLM – EUROPEAN RUGBY CHALLENGE CUP

GLOUCESTER CLINCH TOP SPOT IN POOL 4 WITH VICTORY
OVER LA ROCHELLE

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 20 LA ROCHELLE 10

Gloucester had to overcome a resolute and physically superior La Rochelle at Kingsholm on Saturday afternoon, and had to work hard to do so before emerging with a 20-10 victory to clinch top spot in pool four and a quarter-final place.

It makes it five wins from five in the tournament so far for the Cherry and Whites and a quarter-final place is secure.

However, a home quarter-final has not yet been clinched and a win in Parma against Zebre next weekend may be required.

Today was all about beating La Rochelle, though, and that was no easy task. The visitors boast some massive units in the pack and aren't shy about sending them into contact on a regular basis.

Gloucester soaked it up nicely in the first half and enjoyed a reasonably comfortable 17-3 lead at half time. However, if they expected the French side to fade away after the break then they were sadly mistaken.

In fact, the visitors enjoyed some good spells of pressure in the second half and Benjamin Lapeyre's try meant that it was a tense final few minutes. Gloucester missed a couple of really good chances to wrap the game up but, in the end, had enough to spare.

It wasn't a perfect performance, but it does give the Gloucester coaches plenty of things to work on with the squad this week.

And the old adage says that the sign of a good team is one that wins when it's not playing well.

Gloucester actually started brightly, Mark Atkinson twice almost wriggling free, and forcing a 5 metre lineout only for the La Rochelle defence to dig in and force a knock on.

For the French, Fabien Fortassin had tested Gloucester in the first meeting with a series of neat kicks from hand, and one neat dink over the top created problems before a knock on let Gloucester off the hook.

It was the reliable right boot of Greig Laidlaw that opened the scoring after nine minutes to give Gloucester an early lead, Fortassin getting an immediate chance to respond only for his kick to fall short.

It was a scrappy first 15 minutes in all honestly, but Rob Cook then lit up proceedings with a great score. The full-back fielded a kick, chipped ahead, dribbled the ball towards the line and dived over near the posts. Laidlaw had an easy conversion.

The visitors then enjoyed a decent spell of possession, aided by some curious refereeing, and gave the Gloucester defence a good work out. Thankfully, the home side were up to the task and dealt with the immediate threat comfortably.

As the half hour approached, Gloucester pushed hard for a second try and La Rochelle second row Leo Cedaro was sinbinned after a series of penalty awards, but the home team couldn't press home the advantage.

In fact, La Rochelle moved downfield efficiently, taking time off the clock, and Julien Audy scored their first points of the afternoon with a 34th minute penalty as Gloucester offended at a ruck.

Seeking to regain the initiative, the Cherry and Whites thought they had a second try shortly afterwards as David Halaifonua battled his way to the line, but the pass from Mark Atkinson was ruled forward by the touch judge.

However, Gloucester got their reward and in a slightly bizarre fashion. The home defence stopped, thinking Charlie Sharples had knocked on, but the winger popped the ball inside and Billy Twelvetrees had a clear run to the line.

Replays showed the ball had hit Sharples' foot. Laidlaw added an excellent conversion and Gloucester had a 17-3 half time lead.

It had been a curate's egg of a first half, some good stuff played, but plenty of mistakes. La Rochelle had enjoyed some good moments and Gloucester would be looking long and hard at their first up tackling.

But the home side had carved out the better chances, taken two and been denied a third by a tough judge's decision. More of the same in the second half would be most welcome.

La Rochelle made two changes at half time, Fortassin and Northam taken off, but started the brighter. Gloucester were on the back foot in defence and Mark Atkinson saw yellow for playing the ball on the floor.

However, it was the calming boot of Laidlaw that extended the lead on 52 minutes with a penalty after a powerful rolling maul from the pack made a good 30 metres.

The visitors weren't done just yet though, continuing to send their massive ball carriers at the Gloucester defence. It finally paid off as, from close range, full-back Benjamin Lapeyre picked up to score from close range.

Audy's conversion narrowed the gap to 20-10, although Gloucester could have responded immediately when Billy Burns put David Halaifonua away down the blindside but the Tongan's inside offload was knocked on by Cook with the line at his mercy.

It could have put the game to bed and the Cherry and Whites may well have kicked on from there and clinched the bonus point.

But it wasn't to be and the two teams slugged it out for the final few minutes without really making much of an impact in the final quarter.

Job done this week for Gloucester, the challenge is to finish it off in Parma.

JC