

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, JANUARY 23, 2016

**STADIO SERGIO LANFRANCHI – EUROPEAN RUGBY CHALLENGE
CUP**

GLOUCESTER HANG ON TO EARN HARD-FOUGHT WIN IN ZEBRE

ZEBRE RUGBY 11 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 14

Billy Burns held his nerve to kick a late penalty to earn Gloucester a scrappy 11-14 win over Zebre in Parma on Saturday afternoon, their sixth win of the pool stages.

After a rocky first half, Gloucester looked to have turned the game as a Ben Morgan break inspired a try for Mark Atkinson.

But Zebre struck late as Andries van Schalwyck levelled matters. Burns kicked Gloucester back into an 11-14 lead but, even then, Ulrich Meyers missed a last-ditch penalty which would have earned a draw.

It wasn't pretty, but the Cherry and Whites did just enough on the day to secure the win and their sixth win of the pool stages.

With other results still to come in, it remains to be seen who they will take on at Kingsholm in the quarter-final but the title defence is very much alive.

Gloucester came into the game knowing that a bonus point win would see them go through to the quarter-final stages as the top seeds. Zebre, for their part, still had lingering hopes of going through as a best-placed runner up.

And it was the hosts who started the better. Gloucester went off their feet at a ruck following the opening kick-off and Edoardo Padovani made no mistake off the kicking tee.

The lead was doubled just a couple of minutes later. Billy Burns went into contact as Gloucester played from their own half and held on in the tackle. Padovani was head on to the posts and the kick was meat and drink to him.

It was a shaky start for the Cherry and Whites. The ensuing kick-off went out on the full, followed by a knock-on of a grubber kick to give the Italian side great field position. However, Bill Meakes put in some great work at the breakdown to earn a penalty.

Errors continued to haunt Gloucester, and it wasn't until the 20th minute that David Halaifonua enjoyed the first piece of possession in the home 22. Even then, the home side held out comfortably. A 5 metre lineout shortly afterwards was then lost as the sense of frustration grew.

There was very nearly a breakthrough on 26 minutes, however, as the Gloucester backs clicked into gear. Billy Burns worked a nice loop move but Steve McColl was tackled into touch at the corner.

But the Cherry and Whites did finally get some reward for their efforts on the half hour as Burns slotted a penalty from 30 metres out to get the scoreboard ticking over.

After a good spell of Gloucester dominance, conceding seemed to wake Zebre from a passive period of play and they were quickly back on the front foot, applying the pressure.

And they could even have extended their lead on the stroke of half time, but Padovani's ambitious long-range penalty was short and wide.

It had been a very disjointed first half from Gloucester and they were well and truly in a dogfight here in Parma.

The one consolation was that they had not played anywhere near best, but still only trailed by three points. There was everything still to play for.

The first few minutes passed without incident before Ben Morgan almost inspired a memorable score. Breaking from the base of the scrum, the big number eight made 50 metres, linked with McColl but Atkinson was hauled down a metre short.

It only served to delay the inevitable, Gloucester stayed patient and simply moved the ball nicely along the back line, where Atkinson strolled over. Burns couldn't convert but Gloucester finally had the lead.

The game started to open up as the sun grew ever lower in the sky. Gloucester took the opportunity to produce several replacements and, one of them, Darren Dawidiuk, nearly pounced upon a charge down by David Halaifonua but couldn't pick up the loose ball when well placed.

Gloucester proceeded to waste several good pieces of field possession and looked to have paid a dear price when Leonardo Sarto broke two tackles to send number eight Andries van Schalwyck over to level the scores at 11-11.

Crucially Kelly Haimona missed the conversion, before Burns slotted the penalty to edge Gloucester back in front. Ulrich Beyers had a chance to snatch the draw with a long-range chance of his own, but snatched at it and the Cherry and Whites breathed a sigh of relief.

The visitors can now toast a second 100% pool stage in a row, and then sit back and watch the rest of Europe wrestle it out for knockout qualifications.