

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 20, 2016

ALLIANZ PARK – AVIVA PREMIERSHIP RUGBY

**GLOUCESTER REGRET MISSED CHANCE AS INDISCIPLINE COSTS
THEM DEAR AT SARACENS**

SARACENS 25 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 12

Gloucester couldn't take advantage of Saracens being reduced to 14 men for 50 minutes after the sending off of Schalk Brits, Charlie Hodgson's six penalties helping the home side to a 25-12 win at Allianz Park on Saturday.

The home team got it spot on after Brits' dismissal, taking off a winger when they needed to send on their replacement hooker and relying on forward power to propel them onwards. Hodgson's boot did the rest.

It was a deeply frustrating afternoon for Gloucester, who were competitive for long periods, got within touching distance on a couple of occasions, but then saw Saracens ease away.

Credit to the home side. They lost Brad Barritt to a yellow card and Schalk Brits to a red on the half hour. They made a key decision in sacrificing winger Mike Ellery when they had to replace their hooker, which meant they maintained eight men in the pack.

And this paid dividends as the second half ticked by, as their pack turned up the heat in the second half, unleashing a series of energy sapping mauls and throwing everything into their scrummage.

It wasn't pretty, it was designed to eke out time and grind out penalties. But it was mightily effective and gave Charlie Hodgson all the chances he needed to kick his team to the win.

It was yet another instance of Saracens finding a way to win a game when their backs are up against the wall, and it's something that Gloucester would probably like to be more proficient at.

With their hosts down to 14 men, with the elements at their backs in the second half, Gloucester would have fancied their chances of going on to earn a memorable win.

However, Saracens strangled the life out of the game; Gloucester simply couldn't get hold of any possession and establish any field position.

So, Gloucester will leave Allianz Park thinking of the missed opportunity today. Newcastle lie in wait next week at Kingsholm and the Cherry and Whites will be looking to respond in the same way that Saracens did after their defeat at the hands of Wasps last week.

Attacking with a light breeze at their backs, Saracens dominated the early stages. The Gloucester tackling was initially first class, but they were undone by a moment of individual class.

Ben Ransom, faced with a wall of tacklers, dribbled a grubber through the defensive line, gathered his own kick and dived over to open the scoring. Charlie Hodgson added an excellent conversion to establish a 7-0 lead after only five minutes.

It was a pity for Gloucester who were fronting up well defensively, but they paid the price for not collecting the restart and were under pressure from that moment on.

A fairly even spell of play followed as Gloucester gained a foothold in the game. A couple of promising attacks led to nothing, however, and the lead could have been extended on 15 minutes but Hodgson was well short with a long-range penalty attempt.

As the first quarter drew to a close, there really wasn't that much to choose between the two side, but the penalty count was hurting Gloucester's efforts to get back on terms.

The first yellow card of the day went against Saracens though. Brad Barritt dumped Ross Moriarty onto his head and was shown yellow, only Saracens' second of the season. He was lucky, it could easily have been a red.

The next scrum produced a penalty as Rhys Gill was pinged for driving in at an angle and James Hook got Gloucester off and running with a well-struck penalty. But that was duly cancelled out two minutes later by one from Hodgson.

Gloucester continued to threaten – Twelvetrees, Hook and Atkinson all made half breaks, but the key scoring pass remained elusive as the Saracens defence held firm.

The game then erupted. Nick Wood cleaned Schalk Brits out at a ruck and was left prone on the pitch. Replays showed Brits punching the Gloucester prop and the Saracens hooker was red carded. James Hook kicked the resultant penalty.

To their credit, the home side hit straight back, taking play into the Gloucester 22, forcing a penalty and Hodgson had an easy task to make it 13-6.

Saracens had to regroup. Saunders replaced Ellery as a front row replacement while Wigglesworth and Gill both went off injured.

Sensing an opportunity, Gloucester finished the half strongly. Dan Murphy made an excellent break on the 10 metre line but James Hook couldn't gather the prop's offload and the home side held out for half time. A Gloucester score at that point and the final outcome could have been so different.

It had been a pulsating first half. Saracens have been noted for their discipline so far this season, so one yellow and one red card came as a real shock, although it could arguably have been two reds.

The second half presented a real chance for Gloucester. Could they take advantage of the superiority in numbers?

Things started the right way. Brad Barritt failed to roll away from an early tackle and James Hook stroked home the penalty from long range to narrow the gap to 13-9.

The next few minutes were all about the home side though as they opted to kick for the corner when awarded a more than kickable penalty. They were held up over the line on one occasion and turned down another kickable penalty before Gloucester survived.

However, having survived such a prolonged onslaught on their line, Gloucester were promptly penalised at a ruck on their 22 and Hodgson extended the lead to 16-9, only for Hook to immediately respond in kind with his fourth of the afternoon.

The home side's tactics were obvious. At every opportunity, they were trying to take time off the clock by keeping the ball amongst the forwards. And it was working. Two more penalties from Hodgson made it 22-12 going into the final ten minutes as his forwards gained ascendancy.

And those final few minutes produced more of the same. The home side kept Gloucester pinned deep back in their own 22 and, almost inevitably, another Hodgson penalty followed. It rubbed salt into some already raw wounds.

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