

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, APRIL 9, 2016

KINGSHOLM – EUROPEAN RUGBY CHALLENGE CUP

**GLOUCESTER'S PROUD EUROPEAN RECORD SHATTERED
AS DRAGONS POUNCE LATE**

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 21 NEWPORT GWENT DRAGONS 23

Charlie Davies's late close-range try earned the Dragons a narrow 21-23 European Rugby Challenge Cup win at Kingsholm on Saturday, sending Gloucester crashing out of the tournament and ending their title defence.

Speaking to the media after the game, Director of Rugby David Humphreys described it as the lowest point of his two seasons at the club, and his disappointment was obvious as Gloucester's 15-match winning streak in the tournament was ended.

Even more frustrating is the hard work put in to get to this point, winning six out of six matches in the pool stages to secure the home quarter-final only to come up short on the big day.

In truth, the Dragons were worthy winners. However, even the most ardent Gloucester fan will admit that their side made it easier than it should have been for the Welsh region.

Big mistakes at key times, poor indiscipline, it all helped the Dragons keep the scoreboard ticking over, and the longer they stayed in the game, the more their self-belief grew.

Gloucester actually started well, but then failed to adapt to the referee's interpretation and the visitors were able to turn a deficit into a decent lead purely by kicking penalties.

The Cherry and Whites then seemed to have rescued the situation through Steve McColl's try and a 71st minute penalty from Greig Laidlaw which gave his team the lead.

However, more key errors gifted the Dragons key possession in the Gloucester 22 just when a good exit was required. Charlie Davies sniped his way over from close range and Gloucester's goose was cooked.

It's a desperately disappointing situation considering where the team were just a few short weeks ago. The win over Wasps seemed to set up a possible push for a top six spot and, of course, the Challenge Cup defence was still on at that point.

However, five defeats in a row, some because of poor performances, some after good displays have left Gloucester's season drifting towards a disappointing conclusion.

The pain of today's outcome will be raw for some time to come. Supporters will be angry and understandably so. But next week brings another game and everyone in Cherry and White needs to stand united.

Gloucester actually started well on the day and tried to turn early pressure into points by kicking penalties to the corner, but the Dragons defence stood up to the early examination.

And the visitors profited by kicking a 10th minute penalty from Dorian Jones from their first visit to the Gloucester half.

The Cherry and Whites were stung into a response; one break from Mark Atkinson going unrewarded. However, a similar line break from Trinder opened up the visitors again on 14 minutes, a superb offload from Matt Kvesic sending Ben Morgan rampaging over for the game's first try.

However, the visitors immediately re-took the lead. A slightly forward-looking pass sent Taulupe Faletau steaming into the Gloucester 22.

Ben Morgan brought him down, but Gloucester killed the ball and Jones kicked his second penalty.

It was real end-to-end stuff at this point. Morgan made a line break and Atkinson was on his shoulder to take it on. The visitors were penalised at the ruck on this occasion and Greig Laidlaw slotted the penalty for 8-6 after 20 minutes.

The visitors were then dealt a blow as scrum-half Sarel Pretorius was yellow carded for an early tackle after Tom Marshall inspired a counter attack from deep and Laidlaw extended the lead to 11-6 with his second penalty of the game.

Gloucester were then indebted to Jones missing two penalties within the space of a minute as the away crowd found its voice, but he found his range at the third time of asking and narrowed the gap to 11-9.

The frustration level was growing, both on and off the field, as Gloucester continued to concede penalties. Greig Laidlaw was sinbinned for handling the ball on the floor as half time approached and Jones gave his team the lead with his fourth penalty.

So, the Dragons were edging it at half time in what had been a pretty forgettable half of rugby. The visitors hadn't really threatened with ball in hand, but they didn't need to, given the number of kicks at goal they were being given.

The first 10 minutes of the second half would be crucial. With Laidlaw in the sin-bin, Gloucester would have to dig deep to still be in a position to mount a comeback upon his return.

But the Dragons started the better, monopolising possession and quickly earning another penalty for not rolling away at the tackle area. Jones promptly made it 11-15.

And, as Gloucester struggled to make any inroads into the Dragons defence, things got worse on 55 minutes as Carl Meyer booted his side's sixth penalty, from well inside his own half.

It looked grim for Gloucester, but there was still hope and they finally drew level albeit due to a stroke of luck. Hook's grubber was mishandled by Pretorius and Steve McColl pounced to score under the posts. Laidlaw's conversion levelled matters.

After being outshouted by the Dragons support, the home crowd were suddenly back in the game and the momentum seemed to be with the Cherry and Whites. Certainly so when Yann Thomas won a crucial penalty and Laidlaw bisected the uprights for a 21-18 lead.

Had the tide turned? Had Gloucester snatched a win from the jaws of defeat? That idea was quickly quashed.

The restart was fumbled and then handled in an offside position. The Dragons could have levelled matters by kicking the penalty but chose to go for broke and kick to the corner.

Gloucester strove every sinew in a bid to keep the Dragons at bay. A second penalty followed and again went to the corner. All the backs piled into the rolling maul but, just as it was halted, Charlie Davies darted around the fringes to score.

The Dragons still had some defending to do but, somewhat predictably, the game ended with Gloucester being penalised.

Referee Gauzere's whistle brought the game to an end and, seemingly, the curtain down on Gloucester's season.