

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

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AJ BELL STADIUM – AVIVA PREMIERSHIP RUGBY

**LIDLAW'S FOUR PENALTIES PAVE WAY FOR GLOUCESTER
TO NICK 12-11 WIN AT SALE**

SALE SHARKS 11 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 12

Four penalties from the boot of skipper Greig Laidlaw were just enough to see Gloucester dog out a tense 12-11 win at Sale on Friday evening and thwart the home team's attempts to finish the season unbeaten at home.

It was a win that was based on guts and character. Consider that Gloucester finished the game with three scrum halves, four centres and three number eights on the pitch as an already depleted squad were further hit by injury as the game progressed.

They were also up against an opponent looking to sign off an unbeaten home campaign and maintain their push for a top four finish. It's never easy to win at Sale, the last time Gloucester had achieved that feat was 2001.

However, as a collective, the Cherry and Whites rolled up their sleeves and simply refused to admit defeat even when they trailed 11-6 going into the final few minutes.

Greig Laidlaw will capture the headlines, and rightly so, because of his four penalties as he played out of position at fly-half. But it's slightly unfair to single out individuals on an evening where every single man played his part.

It may not do too much for Gloucester's league position but, following the win over Exeter last time out, it's a victory that will breed self-belief amongst this group of players.

One last push for now for Gloucester. The physio department will be working overtime again at Kingsholm this week, but a similar performance against Northampton next Saturday will see the season end on a high note.

It was a positive opening for the Cherry and Whites as Matt Kvesic pounced on a loose tap back from the kick off to get Gloucester moving forward. A penalty followed at a ruck just outside the Sale 10 metre line and Greig Laidlaw slotted an excellent kick.

The following few minutes saw both sides striving to get into their rhythm. Mark Atkinson produced a couple of canny touch finders as did Willi Heinz, while Sale almost profited from slack defence around a ruck only for the Gloucester defence to get back.

However, Sale did draw level on 17 minutes when the Gloucester backs came up too quickly and were ruled offside, Cipriani kicking an easy penalty.

Gloucester then almost gifted the home side a score when Willi Heinz misjudged a high kick and was then penalised for holding on. Sale had great field position, but good maul defence and great work from Kvesic at the breakdown saved the day.

It was physical stuff at the AJ Bell even if the points weren't flowing, and Gloucester were dealt a blow on 26 minutes when Rob Cook limped off. Elliott Creed came on to make his Premiership debut.

A great line break from Atkinson then so nearly opened up the home defence, Ollie Thorley showing great feet as he took the ball on in support.

It led to a penalty as Sale killed the ball and Laidlaw made it 3-6.

It had been a committed display to this point from Gloucester who, despite being beaten up and reshuffled, were really fronting up in the North-West. However, a harsh penalty against Matt Kvesic allowed Danny Cipriani to level the scores with the last kick of the half.

6-6 at half time and all to play for, but Gloucester were certainly looking well up for the task in hand. The set-piece and defence were rock solid and there was promise in attack. The Cherry and Whites had it within themselves to win this.

Gloucester came out and started the second half brightly, moving dangerously into the Sale 22 on a couple of occasions, only to be turned over. A cutting edge was all that was lacking.

But it was the home side that showed that cutting edge as they moved into Gloucester territory for the first time, patiently set up a position right on the line and Johnny Leota burrowed over from close range. 11-6 to the Sharks.

It was a bitter blow for Gloucester who had dominated up to that point and had then been hit by a real sucker punch.

However, Gloucester dug deep and refused to throw in the towel. Try scoring chances were few and far between but the Cherry and Whites managed to spend enough quality time in the Sale 22 to eke out a couple of kickable penalties for Laidlaw, and the skipper didn't waste them.

Having worked so hard to gain the lead, Gloucester just had to hang onto it. And, with a scrum with less than a minute to go, it looked done and dusted.

However, even then there was a scare as Sale turned possession over. But a handling error in the Gloucester half brought the game to a close and Gloucester were able to celebrate a rare win in the North-West.