

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, MAY 7, 2016

KINGSHOLM – AVIVA PREMIERSHIP RUGBY

**PLUCKY GLOUCESTER EFFORT NOT QUITE ENOUGH
AGAINST STREETWISE SAINTS**

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 20 NORTHAMPTON SAINTS 28

Gloucester's 2015-16 season came to a disappointing end at Kingsholm on Saturday afternoon, as clinical play either side of half time by Northampton Saints paved the way for a 20-28 Aviva Premiership victory.

It was a game that in some ways was indicative of Gloucester's season as a whole – close but not quite there.

Today saw a very inexperienced Cherry and Whites front up manfully against considerably more streetwise Saints side, and really took the game to the visitors, at one point actually leading by 20 points to 8.

There were two very good tries, an admirably physical commitment from everyone in a Gloucester shirt and, of course, fantastic support from another sell-out crowd.

However, the game slipped away either side of half time. Northampton struck with the very last play of the half and then took a grip of the game in the third quarter when the weather conditions took a turn for the worse.

Their battle-hardened players stepped up to the plate and helped their team gain the ascendancy as they've done so many times before. There wasn't much in it, but there was just enough.

There was plenty of effort in the final quarter as Gloucester fought to get back on terms, but Northampton showed the quality which has seen them in the hunt for so many trophies over the past few seasons.

It's a result which sees Gloucester finish eighth in the table, definitely not where they want to be, and everyone will look back ruefully on the number of games which were lost by small margins in the latter stages.

The key is to learn from these experiences and move forward. The flip side of so many injuries in the squad is that it's meant game time for some of the promising Academy players. Every cloud has a silver lining.

In lovely conditions, Gloucester got off to a good start. Jamie Gibson failed to roll away from the tackle area and Greig Laidlaw's penalty easily had the distance from a long way out and opened the scoring after only two minutes.

It so nearly got even better. Billy Twelvetrees produced a defence-splitting run, Matt Kvesic took it on in support before the ball was fired out to Elliott Creed who went over in the corner but put a foot in touch on his way there and the score was rightly ruled out.

Gloucester were looking good, taking the game to Saints and the crowd were well in the game. However, a turnover on 16 minutes let the visitors back into the game. Harry Mallinder counter-attacked, Ken Pisi was in support and his perfectly timed offload put brother George over in the corner.

It was a double blow for the Cherry and Whites who saw their injury jinx strike again – and it was another back! Tom Marshall limped off and Lloyd Evans came on for only his second Premiership appearance.

However, Gloucester shrugged off the setback, quickly getting back onto the front foot and Laidlaw nudged his team back in front with a 23rd minute penalty.

But Tom Savage was yellow carded straight from the restart for a hit off the ball, and Myler slotted his first penalty of the game for 6-8.

It was a time for consolidation for Gloucester and they managed the ten minutes well, successfully taking the pace out of the game. And, as Savage prepared to return, they struck for a well taken try.

Mark Atkinson made a searing break in midfield to slice Saints open. Quickly recycled ball came back for Twelvetrees who held his line, found Lloyd Evans and the replacement broke a tackle to score. Laidlaw curled home a touchline conversion for 13-8.

Amazingly, Gloucester pounced again for a second almost immediately. Laidlaw inspired the attack by switching back against the grain, but it was Ross Moriarty's superb sidestep and break that sealed the deal as the flanker had just enough reach to make the line. Laidlaw converted for 20-8.

There was one last sting in the tail, however, as Saints struck with the last play of the half. Gloucester lost their own lineout ball, Saints moved it wide and Mallinder made another telling break before putting George North over and Myler converted.

It had been a fine first half from a young Gloucester side who lost yet another experienced back early on in proceedings. However, the Cherry and Whites shrugged off the setback to take the game to a distinctly more experienced opposition.

The home crowd were responding well to the effort shown on the pitch, and Kingsholm was buzzing. Two really well taken tries were a decent reward for the enterprise shown, although Northampton had oozed menace themselves and scored two decent tries of their own.

The second was a real blow. Having carved out a decent lead, time was almost up on the clock when Gloucester lost their lineout ball which led to the North try.

It was all nicely set up for a cracker of a second half – it had certainly been entertaining up to this point!

The opening exchanges were predictably physical, but it was Gloucester who were mostly on the back foot. They defended solidly until caught napping at a ruck on 48 minutes; Tom Wood broke and put North in for a simple try.

Myler converted and then added two penalties, the second from a questionable decision when Lloyd Evans was ruled to have been held in the tackle, and Saints now held a decent 20-28 advantage.

It had been a clinical turnaround from the visitors, but they were certainly being helped by a number of refereeing decisions going their way, some of them distinctly marginal, and the Kingsholm crowd weren't slow to voice their disapproval.

The visitors were now content to play the game in the Gloucester half, especially with conditions worsening, and were also able to call upon a very experienced set of replacements as they turned the screw.

There were brief glimpses of a memorable comeback. Greig Laidlaw was narrowly off target with a long-range penalty attempt, and Gloucester came close enough to force a TMO ruling when they thought they'd forced their way over from close range.

However, a five metre scrum was as close as it got. The crowd tried desperately to roar Gloucester home but it wasn't to be.

JC