

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, AUGUST 20, 2016

TALLAGHT STADIUM – PRE-SEASON FRIENDLY

**GLOUCESTER SLIP TO NARROW DEFEAT IN OPENING PRE-SEASON
FRIENDLY AT LEINSTER**

LEINSTER RUGBY 26 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 24

Match Report By Duncan Wood

Four tries apiece at the Tallaght Stadium, but Gloucester's late comeback came up just short as Leinster hung on for a 26-24 victory in the Cherry and Whites' first preseason outing of 2016-17.

Finishing on the wrong end of the result was frustrating in the final reckoning, but there were plenty of positives to take from the game as the Cherry and Whites blew out some of the cobwebs of pre-season.

Indeed, had they made more of a long period of ascendancy when 5-0 up in the first half, this one could well have ended up in a morale-boosting away win.

As it was, having not really looked like scoring in the first 30 minutes, Leinster then hit Gloucester with three quick tries, two of them eminently avoidable as they came from Gloucester errors. It was a sobering lesson in having mistakes harshly punished.

Gloucester did keep battling until the very end, showing the excellent spirit that exists within the camp, and could easily have snatched a win in the closing stages but it wasn't quite to be.

The positives came from seeing the new signings acquit themselves well, Matt Scott in particular had a superb first 40 minutes. The young Academy prospects all did themselves proud in the second half and, crucially, there are no injuries to report.

The first 80 minutes of the season are out of the way. Glasgow are next up at Kingsholm next Friday and the Cherry and Whites will be seeking to take things up a notch ahead of the big Aviva Premiership opener against Leicester Tigers seven days later.

Conditions early in the day had hinted at a tricky afternoon at the Tallaght Stadium. However, the weather picked up as kick off approached and, despite a stiff breeze, it was almost perfect as the game got underway.

The home team enjoyed the greater of the possession in the opening exchanges and, positively, turned down an early kick at goal in favour of driving the ball into touch deep in the Gloucester 22 only to turn the ball over.

However, the Cherry and Whites struck first. Matt Scott made an incisive break, before offloading to the supporting Jacob Rowan and the flanker gave David Halaifonua enough room on the outside to ride a tackle and score.

Scott was impressing in these early stages, tackling well and winning a penalty for a fine jackal to halt a Leinster assault as the home team sought to get back on terms.

Gloucester were showing signs of getting into their stride though, several continued phases of possession causing real stress to the Leinster defence only to concede a penalty when well placed.

The rain duly returned and Leinster made Gloucester regret their lack of precision as the Cherry and Whites lost possession. Marshall was caught in the ruck, so a hack ahead had Halaifonua trying desperately to get across, but he couldn't handle the slippery ball and Adam Byrne gathered to touch down and level the scores.

And the home side quickly struck again. A missed tackle in midfield set up great field position, and scrum-half Nick McCarthy was able to dart over from close range. Cathal Marsh added the conversion for a 12-5 lead after 34 minutes.

And Leinster's sudden rich vein of form duly continued. Superb offloading out of the tackle prevented Gloucester from being able to slow down the attack, and McCarthy scampered over for his second as he gathered an offload from van der Flier with Marsh again converting.

It had been a purple patch of play for Leinster who had hardly threatened until striking slightly fortuitously for the first try, but the subsequent two had been well created and taken.

It was crucial that Gloucester steadied the ship, and they duly did. The pack launched a couple of powerful catch and drives, but it was Halaifonua to the fore once again as he hit a flat pass from Heinz at speed and crashed over. Burns converted for a half time score of 19-12 to Leinster.

It had been a curious 40 minutes. Gloucester had very much dominated for the first half hour or so, but then conceded three tries in nine minutes. Visibly rocked, it had shown character to hit back and end the half with a score of their own.

Numerous changes on both sides were now expected so the outcome was certainly in the balance. With Mat Protheroe a late withdrawal, David Halaifonua was the sole 'survivor' from the first half, with Lloyd Evans moving to full-back.

In worsening conditions, the re-jigged Gloucester side started brightly, scrummaging well and Darren Dawidiuk was almost in for a try only for the greasy ball to spill from his grasp.

And once again, Leinster made Gloucester pay. Nice hands in the tricky conditions saw Joey Carbery free Barry Daly down the left wing and his floated inside pass saw Rory O'Loughlin sprint home. Carbery added the conversion to extend the lead to 26-12.

Gloucester dug deep and didn't lack ambition but, as time ticked on, it looked as though their efforts would go unrewarded.

That was until a well-worked catch and drive took play close to the Leinster line and Ben Morgan powered over. James Hook converted and it was game on at 26-19.

Another similar opportunity quickly followed but Jack Conan came up with a vital interception near his own line to save the day for the home side.

Gloucester weren't to be denied though and Dan Thomas ran onto a grubber from James Hook and his hack ahead was touched down by Henry Purdy. Hook couldn't convert into the wind, but Gloucester were in with a sniff at 26-24.

Sadly, it wasn't to be. Gloucester got their hands on the ball in the final couple of minutes but couldn't quite get themselves within striking range and it was Leinster who hung on grimly for the narrow win.

Lineups Gloucester Rugby (first half):

Tom Marshall; David Halaifonua, Matt Scott, Billy Twelvetrees, Henry Purdy; Billy Burns, Willi Heinz (capt); Paddy McAllister, Richard Hibbard, Paul Doran-Jones, Mariano Galarza, Tom Savage, Ross Moriarty, Jacob Rowan, Gareth Evans

Gloucester Rugby (second half):

David Halaifonua; Elliott Creed, Andy Symons, Mark Atkinson, Lloyd Evans; James Hook, Callum Braley; Cameron Orr, Darren Dawidiuk, John Afoa (capt), Alex Craig, Joe Latta, Lewis Ludlow, Dan Thomas, Ben Morgan.