

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 8, 2016

SANDY PARK – AVIVA PREMIERSHIP RUGBY

**GALLANT GLOUCESTER DENIED AS LAST-MINUTE TRY
SECURES DRAW FOR CHIEFS**

EXETER CHIEFS 27 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 27

Gloucester fully deserved the win at Sandy Park on Saturday and looked to have secured a memorable triumph only for a last-minute Damian Welch try to earn a fortunate draw for the home side in a 27-27 nail-biter.

It was another case of frustration at the final whistle, as the Chiefs rallied for 13 points in the final 10 minutes to snatch a draw. The home side never led on the day, but will head home with three points from the game compared to Gloucester's two.

The final outcome was so harsh on Gloucester who produced probably one of their most complete performances of the season. The bravery and commitment in defence was excellent, but it is still just one or two tiny errors that are proving to be crucial.

Not many sides will come to Sandy Park and come away with a draw, let alone a win, and Gloucester can take heart from that. But a victory would have been so good for morale.

However, it is a good result on the road against a very good team, one of last season's finalists. If the performances keep coming, then the results will surely follow soon – hopefully next weekend in Bayonne.

Gloucester made two late changes to the team that had been announced on Friday. Billy Burns and Gareth Evans both dropped out and were replaced by Mark Atkinson and Ben Morgan respectively.

In perfect conditions at Sandy Park, the game was fairly fast and loose in the opening few minutes. There were errors on both sides – Chiefs lost an attacking lineout and both teams threw interceptions – it was frenetic fare!

The home team enjoyed the majority of the possession in the first 10 minutes, but Gloucester's defensive line was coming up fast and putting in some really big hits to halt the Exeter runners behind the gain line.

However, Gloucester made the most of their first trip into the home 22. A gimmick lineout saw Jacob Rowan peel around the front and almost make the line. Recycled ball saw Gloucester stay patient and Atkinson slipped the ball to Matt Scott for the game's opening try. Greig Laidlaw converted for 0-7 after 13 minutes.

The Cherry and Whites had a good chance from an attacking lineout shortly afterwards. The catch and drive was well set, but control of the ball was lost at the back of the maul to halt the attack.

Gloucester were then put on the back foot as a James Hook kick went out on the full. The pack halted the catch and drive and looked to have withstood the worst of the attack, only for Thomas Waldrom to slip a tackle and rumble over. Steenson converted to level the scores.

However, Gloucester came straight back, amidst some controversy. James Hook gathered a high kick and the home crowd thought he had a foot in touch. Laidlaw hoisted an up and under, Charlie Sharples climbed highest, gathered and sprinted clear to score. It was some way to mark his 100th competitive appearance! Laidlaw added the extras as the Sandy Park faithful vented their disapproval.

Once again, the lead didn't last long. The home forwards again did the softening up job, before Sam Hill produced a diagonal run that took him beyond Tom Savage and the centre found Ian Whitten with the scoring pass. Steenson converted for 14-14.

The arm wrestle continued and Gloucester edged their way back into the lead on 38 minutes when Billy Twelvetrees landed a monster penalty from halfway after the Cherry and White pack forced a penalty at scrum time.

That was it for the first half and, heading into the dressing rooms, could reflect on a job well done thus far. They'd come under pressure, but the defensive work had been pretty solid, the missed tackle on Waldrom notwithstanding.

The crucial thing for Gloucester now was to back up a good first half with a good second. The complete performance has been an elusive thing so far this season. Could today be the day?

The Chiefs were quickly back on the front foot as they gathered the restart via a slightly lucky bounce. However, the defence was brave and Jacob Rowan won a vital turnover near the line to save the day – for now.

It was battling stuff from Gloucester and, although Greig Laidlaw was narrowly off target with a 49th minute penalty, he made amends two minutes later after a good break from Ross Moriarty to extend the lead to 14-20.

And Sandy Park was silenced as the hour mark approached as Gloucester extended their lead. Ben Morgan burgled possession, went blindside and linked with David Halaifonua who made good ground before returning the pass for Morgan to score. Laidlaw added a magnificent touchline conversion into the wind for 14-27.

Crucially, Gloucester then couldn't capitalise on an attacking five metre scrum when they lost control at the base, and were made to pay the price when Ian Whitten crossed for his second on 70 minutes after a period of sustained pressure.

When Steenson thumped over a 73rd minute penalty to narrow the gap to 22-27, nerve ends were jangling again as the home crowd finally found their collective voice.

The Gloucester defence was a key component of today's performance, and in the final stages, the Cherry and Whites were frustrating the home side with a number of turnovers and bravery up front.

However, there was one final cruel sting in the tail as, with play stagnating on halfway, a streetwise move from Chiefs' scrum half Dave Lewis caught Mariano Galarza returning into defensive line and, with a cleverly aimed pass, the Puma was struck by the ball and duly penalised.

Gareth Steenson's kick to the corner was excellent, and despite a good counter drive from the Cherry and Whites, Damian Welch broke off and was able to dot down in the corner, and Sandy Park was jubilant.

The jubilation could have been extended long into the night, but Steenson was off target from the touchline and the points, on this occasion were shared.

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