

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 15, 2016

STADE JEAN DAUGER – EUROPEAN RUGBY CHALLENGE CUP

**GLOUCESTER HOLD OFF A SPIRITED BAYONNE SIDE TO CLINCH
OPENING EUROPEAN WIN**

BAYONNE 27 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 47

In perfect conditions in the South West of France, it was job done for Gloucester Rugby at the Stade Jean Dauger on Saturday afternoon as they outlasted a battling Bayonne side to take the spoils by 47 points to 27.

The final score-line looks comfortable enough, but the home side didn't make life easy. On several occasions, Gloucester opened up a decent lead only for Bayonne to fight back and peg Gloucester back to within a score.

Bayonne's catch and drive in particular was a potent weapon, resulting in three tries, but in the final reckoning, Gloucester had just too much in the tank and eased clear in the final quarter.

It's a morale-boosting opening to this season's European Rugby Challenge Cup campaign and Gloucester will entertain Benetton Treviso at Kingsholm next weekend knowing that a win will give them pole position in the group.

On a glorious early Autumn day, just miles from the Spanish border, the Cherry and Whites took on the newly-promoted Top 14 outfit, holding strong ambitions as they embarked on another European adventure.

Buoyed by the return of England international Jonny May following a nine-month lay-off, his return was a welcome one on the wing, with Billy Twelvetrees assuming the fly half jersey for the first time this season.

The Stade Jean Daurer is a throwback facility, with daunting concrete stands kept away from the playing surface by a running track. With Bayonne at the foot of the Top 14 after the early rounds, focus easily could remain on domestic matters, but in proud Basque country, the home fans were boisterous and created a vociferous occasion throughout.

But, with typically colourful and equally vociferous support making the journey to the French border, the Cherry and Whites had a sixteenth man of their own and the good folk of Gloucestershire were able to enjoy a beautifully sunny late afternoon.

When the action got underway, Jonny May was in full swing in attack. Taking a slow ball in midfield, the winger lit the afterburners to scorch round the French defence, but the chance was gone as the ball went loose at the Bayonne 22.

The hosts were first onto the scoreboard though minutes later, a Julien Jane break yielded a centre field penalty which fly half Lucas Meret slotted.

Minutes later however, a strong platform from the maul saw the forwards break holes and then quick ball allowed Billy Twelvetrees to lay the first try of the afternoon on a plate for Mark Atkinson.

Twelvetrees and Atkinson drew a perfect angle and the centre strolled through untouched for a try converted by Hook.

Hook found himself with the kicking tee again minutes later. Gloucester were made to work in defence, but they forced the hosts back. A looping pass from Meret was picked off by Matt Scott, who had an easy run in under the posts. Hook again converting.

Scott was in the thick of the action again. Gloucester cleared well, then Scott swooped for the turnover. Hook called for the tee, but his long-range penalty was wide of the mark.

There was barely time to catch breath in the opening quarter. A break from scrum half Bastien Duhalde should have resulted in a try, but the half back ignored his support and Gloucester survived at the expense of a penalty which Meret kicked from in front.

In possession, the Cherry and Whites looked a threat with every pass, Hook opting to chip over the line for the onrushing May, who was brought down; the Cherry and Whites recycling well for Willi Heinz to tee up Atkinson on a brilliant line to notch up a double.

The Bayonne squad were tiring in the early exchanges, with the Cherry and Whites keeping the ball alive at every opportunity.

The home crowd were then given hope and something to cheer about. Despite a slow maul going sideways, the French pack regenerated and hooker Simon Labouyrie was driven over.

The French pack was wrestling some power and the home side were gaining the upper hand at the scrum, but in open play the Cherry and Whites were in control. Some smart hands from Richard Hibbard saw him pick a pass off his bootlaces and win a penalty on the floor.

Hook stepped up and sent the ball sailing high through the posts to give Gloucester an eleven-point advantage.

Possession was changing hands as the hosts took the attack to the red, black and gold visitors and a midfield penalty was driven to the corner.

Big French pack. Big French maul. Hooker Labouyrie driven over for the second time. Meret converting with aplomb from the left.

There was still time however for the Cherry and Whites to swoop for their fourth try, and send them into the changing room happy.

The bonus point was secured after good work from James Hook.

The Welshman feeding the ball down the touchline, his chase caught Meret in his own in goal area. Bayonne set up a break down, and with no offside line, fly half Twelvetrees swooped in to dot the ball down with referee Gary Conway perfectly placed to award the score.

Hook was just off target with the conversion in the final act of a bizarre first half that saw six tries; the Cherry and Whites surely looking for a little more control on the game in the second half.

The Bayonne maul would have been a cause for concern during half time. And it was on-form at the beginning of the second half, flanker Dion Oulai spinning off and over the line for Bayonne's third try, Meret converting and Gloucester had a real headache to contend with in the French maul.

Gloucester then regrouped, and Hook chipped over a fiftieth minute penalty to quieten the home side's charge.

Gloucester were then able to strike again and increase the lead to ten, Jonny May finishing off good work from first Heinz and then Joe Latta to race away for a popular and long-awaited score.

But the game was far from won. Bayonne worked the position back into the 22, and with referee Conway looking closely at Gloucester, the first maul went to ground and Motu Matu'u was shown yellow.

The second attempt was well defended and despite Bayonne's best attempts around the fringes, the Cherry and Whites won a penalty to survive the onslaught.

Bayonne again worked their way into the Gloucester half, but more good defence won possession back, and a super Twelvetrees kick drove Bayonne well into their own corner.

Frustratingly for the visitors, a soft penalty allowed the hosts to clear their lines, and Bayonne were then handed a golden chance as the visitors made a hash of a quick throw-in.

Jonny May almost weaved his way clear, but as Gloucester recycled with space ahead of them, the ball was lost forward.

It was to be May's last involvement as he was replaced by Charlie Sharples with Gloucester defending deep in their own 22.

But the Cherry and White scrum, anchored by John Afoa and Cameron Orr muscled their best set piece of the game. A big shove against the head splintered the hosts, allowing Matt Kvesic and Tom Savage the room to steal on the floor, Callum Braley completing the job with a strong box kick.

More good scrummaging from the Cherry and Whites meant that the hosts were always at arm's length. Fierce defence in the Bayonne 22 kept the pressure on as the Cherry and Whites hunted more points in the final 10 minutes.

More points came through the boot of Hook, as the Gloucester maul showed its class after being second best for the middle part of this open encounter.

As the game petered out as the sun began to set, the Cherry and Whites were focused on completing the job and more good set piece attack and pressure saw the red, black and gold swarm forward.

The final try with the final play then arrived. Motu Matu'u made the initial break, and Braley laid the scoring pass on a plate for Tom Savage to bounce through a tackle and dive over. A fine reward for a super individual display in the close contact.