

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 5, 2021

KINGSHOLM – ANGLO WELSH CUP

GLOUCESTER STUN SARACENS WITH INCREDIBLE SECOND-HALF
PERFORMANCE

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 36 SARACENS 32

It was a humdinger of an Anglo-Welsh Cup tie at Kingsholm on Saturday, Gloucester scoring six tries to overturn a 5-25 half-time deficit and snatch victory with a last gasp try from David Halaifonua, 36-32 the final score.

It was a result that never looked on the cards after a first 40 minutes which was very much dominated by Saracens. They fielded a side which featured some canny operators and it very much showed.

A young Gloucester side gave it everything in that first half, giving it everything[*sic*], but they were definitely second best at that point despite a brave showing.

However, the second-half saw the game turn on its head. Early second-half tries gave the Cherry and Whites real belief that they could get something out of this game and the Kingsholm crowd responded with real passion.

Even then, the visitors had enough about them to seemingly thwart the comeback as fly-half Whiteley darted over for a late try which could have well and truly taken the wind out of Gloucester's sails.

But a penalty try got Gloucester back to within a score, and with the Kingsholm faithful roaring them on, they fashioned one final chance for David Halaifonua on the right flank and the Tongan international made no mistake.

Jubilant scenes at the final whistle as Gloucester deservedly took a lap of honour before turning their attentions to round two next weekend at Northampton. With eight players making their full debut for the side, this was a significant win and the young players in particular will have learned massively from it.

The visitors were quick to start sending their big runners at the young Gloucester defenders, Joe Mullis bravely chopping down Samu Vunisa early on and David Halaifonua stopping Kelly Brown in his tracks with a massive hit.

Lewis Ludlow threatened a long breakaway score as he scooped up a loose ball but was tracked down by the chasers, before Saracens struck first as Tom Griffiths jinked through when nothing seemed to be on to score under the posts. Whiteley converted.

Gloucester hit back immediately. Bravely turning down a kick at goal to go for the corner, the catch and drive was well executed and Joe Mullis touched down to score on his debut.

Evans was wide with the conversion, and Saracens duly extended their lead as Gloucester couldn't field the restart, were penalised at the resulting scrum and Ben Spencer slotted an easy penalty for 5-10.

It was mostly Saracens on the attack as the first quarter drew to a close and, although the Cherry and Whites were defending bravely, it came as no surprise when eventually an overlap was created on the left and Griffiths coasted over for his second.

It was tough going at this stage for the young Gloucester side, who were struggling to hold onto possession. Conversely, Saracens looked dangerous whenever they entered Gloucester territory and Spencer extended the lead to 5-18 on 25 minutes with his second penalty.

There was plenty of bravery from the Cherry and Whites, but the Saracens juggernaut was going through the gears and dominating physically.

But the next score came from some classic scrum-half play, Spencer dummying at the ruck and breaking clear to score before converting his own try.

Gloucester had been getting little change out of some typically suffocating Saracens defence, but Mat Protheroe lifted the crowd as half-time approached with an elusive run from his own 22, followed by an offload out the back to Henry Purdy.

Nothing came from it unfortunately, and half-time came with no further addition to the score-line. It had been a clinical performance from the visitors and a real learning experience for Gloucester's youngsters. The second half would be a test of character.

And credit to Gloucester, they started well. Taking the game to the visitors, they quickly established a foothold in the away 22 before creating numbers on the left where Dan Thomas showed good strength to power over in the corner.

The visitors had replaced Ben Spencer at half time and it was seemingly a different game. Ollie Thorley outpaced Mike Ellery shortly afterwards and a third try almost came, but Gloucester were held up over the line.

It was a brief reprieve. Gloucester stayed patient near the line as they hammered away at a seemingly impenetrable black wall, only for Henry Purdy to spot a slight gap, lower his shoulder and drive over. Lloyd Evans converted for 17-25.

The crowd were loving this and really starting to find their voice, especially when a long miss-pass from Purdy gave David Halaifonua just enough room to force his way over in the right-hand corner. Evans converted superbly for 24-25 on the hour mark.

Seemingly suddenly aware they were in a game, Saracens stepped it up a gear as fly-half Tom Whiteley threw a dummy and darted over. There was an element of fortune to the try as the visitors looked to have knocked on in midfield in the build-up. Whiteley duly added the conversion.

Still Gloucester weren't done. Henry Purdy forced Saracens to carry into touch near their own line with a crafty kick. Gloucester threw everyone into the maul, pulled it down illegally[*sic*] and the referee awarded a penalty try. Kelly Brown was sinbinned, Evans converted and it was 31-32 with 14 minutes to play.

An unlikely and remarkable comeback was on the cards, but time was against Gloucester. However, they timed things perfectly!

It did look as though it wasn't going to happen. Lloyd Evans had a tricky penalty chance four minutes from time, but his well-struck penalty rapped the left hand upright and bounced clear.

But Gloucester didn't panic, they regained possession and slowly established an attacking position in the Saracens 22. Ben Vellacott's cut out pass found Halaifonua and, although the winger had plenty to do, his raw power took him to the line despite a couple of despairing tackles.

The Shed celebrated, for once forgetting to stay quiet as the kicker lined up the conversion. Evans was off target, but no-one cared as the clock was showing zero and the celebrations began.

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