

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 12, 2016

FRANKLIN'S GARDENS – ANGLO WELSH CUP

**GLOUCESTER'S LATE ANGLO-WELSH FIGHTBACK COMES UP
JUST SHORT AT NORTHAMPTON**

NORTHAMPTON SAINTS 19 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 13

Despite a spirited collective effort at Franklin's Gardens, Gloucester couldn't make it two Anglo-Welsh wins in a row, struggling for meaningful possession and with their own indiscipline in a 19-13 reverse against Northampton.

It was always going to be a tough ask for Gloucester's young guns against a Saints squad packed with international talent, and they gave it their best shot. However, they simply weren't able to get their hands on enough ball to really trouble the home side.

They also suffered with their own indiscipline as they were penalised constantly throughout by referee Evans, sometimes due to struggles at the set-piece, sometimes seemingly harshly.

However, despite these issues, they refused to throw in the towel and, incredibly, another second half comeback was threatened as two late tries got Gloucester back to within losing bonus point range.

But this week there was to be no fairy tale ending. Last week a last-gasp try won the day. This week, they couldn't quite conjure one up.

It was another valuable learning experience for the Gloucester prospects, and they will take a huge amount from battling so bravely in front of a partisan home crowd. A losing bonus point was they least they deserved.

Kick off time came at Franklin's Gardens with the weather conditions damp and dismal. A steady drizzle had fallen for a couple of hours leading up to the game and, even though the surface was excellent, ball handling was bound to be difficult.

Gloucester's early efforts were hampered by difficulties getting their set piece going and a number of unforced handling errors, to the delight of the home crowd.

And said home crowd breathed a sigh of relief on 7 minutes, when a Callum Braley kick had James Wilson in trouble. Lewis Ludlow pounced on the loose ball but lost it in contact as he stretched for the line.

However, Billy Burns opened Gloucester's account three minutes later as Northampton were penalised at a set scrum and the fly-half made no mistake off the kicking tee.

A good spell followed for Gloucester as they played the conditions well, fronting up well in defence and Braley producing some intelligent kicking in the conditions to pin Saints back when possible.

However, Saints drew level after 24 minutes when they forced Gloucester to concede a scrum penalty on their own put in and Sam Olver had the easiest of tasks from head on to the posts to make it 3-3.

The Cherry and Whites continued to have some good moments, but were made to pay for not making more of their possession and territory when the home team moved downfield and Olver added his second penalty on 29 minutes.

As half-time approached, Saints tried to turn the screw, applying pressure through a series of 5 metre line-outs. Gloucester held out manfully, but kept falling foul of the referee and the try was finally awarded as the Saints pack rumbled over at the third attempt.

Clare was awarded the try, Olver added the conversion and the home team were 13-3 up. Burns had a last-ditch penalty attempt from halfway but his kick fell short.

So, despite being more than competitive, Gloucester trailed at half-time and could feel slightly hard done by at the extent of the margin as they'd enjoyed some decent spells of possession.

However, the set-piece was creaking a bit and catching the eye of the referee. This was allowing Saints to gain valuable territory and come away with points whenever they visited the Gloucester 22.

Saints' tactics weren't complicated – up-and-unders from Kessell, long kicks downfield from Wilson, apply the squeeze and wait for the error. But it was mightily effective in the conditions particularly given their slight advantage up front.

However, Gloucester were still in the game and a lot closer than they were last week against Saracens – could they repeat the second half performance from that day?

However, the second half started with the majority of the refereeing decisions continuing to go the way of the home side. Ludlow was pinged for a marginally late hit on Sam Olver before Dan Thomas was sinbinned as referee Evans lost patience with Gloucester's infringements.

Joe Latta was rapidly becoming the pantomime villain for the home crowd as Paul Hill collapsed like a puppet whose strings had been cut after a shove by the big second row. Latta was then penalised at a ruck which led to Olver's third penalty and a 16-3 lead.

Saints' approach to this development tournament was then demonstrated as they threw two England internationals into the fray in Harrison and Dickson, closely followed by a third in Foeden as they sought to finish the job.

The next score came from Olver though as he dropped a goal to extend the lead. It seemed a strange option at the time but, in the final reckoning, they were three valuable points.

The Cherry and Whites finally got a reward for their endeavours on 66 minutes as Ollie Thorley climbed highest to catch a Saints cross kick and then had the ambition and strength to back himself and power his way to the line. It was a very good finish.

And when Dan Thomas won the race to touch down after a Northampton hand slapped down a Gloucester lineout into their own in goal area, there were nervous murmurs throughout the Franklin's Gardens stands.

Crucially, Evans' conversion hit the post and stayed out so Gloucester trailed 19-13 going into the final two minutes.

They gave the home side a scare, powering into the home 22 and stretching the home defence. However, it wasn't quite to be, a penalty was conceded for holding on and it was the home side who had held on for the win.

JC