

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 27, 2016

ALLIANZ PARK – AVIVA PREMIERSHIP RUGBY

GLOUCESTER BATTLE TO THE END BUT STREETWISE SARACENS
TAKE THE SPOILS

SARACENS 24 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 20

Gloucester led at half-time at Allianz Park, but couldn't quite hold on as three second-half penalties from Alex Lozowski earned Saracens a battling 24-20 Aviva Premiership victory on Sunday afternoon.

A frustrating afternoon at Allianz Park as Gloucester will head home wondering what might have been. On the day, there was precious little between the sides, but key moments went the way of Saracens and resulted in the home side edging the contest.

This was certainly the case in the second half when Gloucester defended like men possessed. They then moved downfield and created a couple of half chances but, crucially, came away with nothing.

A few key calls then went Saracens' way and Alex Lozowski held his nerve to kick three important penalties. Even then, James Hook kicked two of his own to keep the Cherry and Whites[sic] and it was game on going into the final couple of minutes.

Then, Gloucester were awarded a penalty on the Saracens 10 metre line, trailing 24-20. It was a tough kick and into the wind, but the call was to go for the posts and not kick into the 22 and look for the go ahead try.

The tricky kick drifted wide on the swirling wind and the chance was gone. It's one to reflect on as the team heads home.

But such are the fine margins at the highest level and, on this occasion, Saracens showed just how adept they have become at edging these tight encounters.

Gloucester will also be furious with themselves for conceding two scores straight after scoring themselves, one from a charged down kick. Restarts and exits is a mantra amongst Premiership coaching teams and this will no doubt be an area for focus this week.

For Gloucester, it's another narrow loss and shows just how close this team are to being really competitive in the Aviva Premiership. They more than punched their weight for long periods of this game against a top side, a week after defeating Wasps.

In a way, it's even more galling to be so close to a team such as the Premiership and European Champions. But the Cherry and Whites aren't far away.

Gloucester got off to a real flyer on the day as Saracens fumbled the game's opening kick-off. The forwards carried powerfully around the corner, inching closer and closer, until Ben Morgan blasted his way over. Hook converted to complete an excellent start.

The home side then got a break as a long kick from Willi Heinz ran dead, taking a huge bounce forward off the artificial turf, giving prime field position to the Men in Black.

Gloucester defended superbly and looked to [have] weathered the storm, only for Brad Barritt to charge down Mark Atkinson's clearance and gather to score under the posts. There was a suspicion of offside but the TMO saw nothing wrong and Lozowski converted to level the scores after 11 minutes.

Both scrum-halves were using the high kick to good effect at this point and it resulted in Gloucester's second try. Alex Goode spilled the ball, Billy Burns hacked on and gathered to score. James Hook converted again.

But, Gloucester concede straight from the restart to let the home team back into the game. Saracens claimed possession from the restart, moved the ball right and Mike Ellery danced over untouched. Lozowski couldn't convert from the touchline.

However, the fly-half was on target after 22 minutes as Gloucester conceded a couple of penalties and then pulled down a maul. The penalty nudged the home side in front at 15-14.

Gloucester came close to going back in front as Ellery couldn't field a cross-kick from Burns. Henry Purdy caught the deflected ball and set off for the corner, but Alex Goode just got across to force him to put a foot into touch. Play came back for a penalty and Hook made it 15-17.

As half-time approached, it all got quite attritional with neither team able to gain the upper hand. There were plenty of box kicks, lots of chasing and tackling. Hook had a chance to extend the lead with the last kick of the half but, from several metres inside his own half, was well short.

But Gloucester were good value for their narrow half-time lead. Their two tries may have come from errors, but you have to force the errors in the first place and then take advantage of them.

The wind was playing a big part in proceedings and Saracens would now appear to have that advantage in the second half but it was pretty even up front, the backs looked sharp and the defence fairly solid. All to play for.

Saracens came out firing on all cylinders at the start of the second half, and Gloucester's defence had to be at its best. However, they held out the initial onslaught.

Indeed, the Cherry and Whites could even have extended the lead as Billy Burns made a sparkling break into the home 22, but couldn't quite find his support and the ball went loose. Moments later, Charlie Sharples went close but lost the ball near the line.

And Gloucester paid the price for not making the most of their chances as Lozowski knocked over a long-range penalty as the home team forced Gloucester to concede a penalty on their own scrum put in. Saracens were now edging it 18-17.

The game then potentially swung decisively the way of the home side as John Afoa was yellow carded as another scrum disintegrated, before Lozowski extended the lead to 21-17 with his third penalty of the afternoon when Josh Hohneck seemed to be harshly penalised for counter-rucking.

Saracens now had Gloucester where they wanted them – down to 14 men and having to chase the game. It was a classic opportunity for them to apply the squeeze.

Things appeared to be slipping away from the Cherry and Whites, but Hook narrowed the gap to 21-20 with nine minutes left to play only for Lozowski to respond in kind four minutes later.

There was one final chance though as Saracens were penalised on their own 10 metre line. There was a thought that kicking into the 22 to look for the winning try was the correct call, but Hook was instructed to go for the posts and the kick drifted wide.

Not many teams leave Allianz Park with a losing point, but that's little comfort for Gloucester in the hours after the game.

The challenge is to take that frustration and channel it into a positive performance in the big derby match against Bristol next Saturday.

JC