

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

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STADE MARCEL DE FLANDRE – EUROPEAN RUGBY
CHALLENGE CUP

GLOUCESTER SWEEP ASIDE AS LA ROCHELLE TURN ON THE STYLE

LA ROCHELLE 42 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 13

A tough night at the European office for Gloucester who were simply second best on the evening to a pumped up La Rochelle side, backed by a raucous home crowd, the French team emerging winners by 42 points to 13.

Just over a week after defeating the same opposition so convincingly at Kingsholm, Gloucester found out the hard way just how formidable Stade Rochelais can be at home and the two teams are now level on points at the top of pool one after four rounds of action.

It leaves the destiny of the pool very much in the hands of the French team. If they secure 10 points from their final two pool matches, against Benetton Treviso and Aviron Bayonnais, Gloucester will not be able to overhaul them.

Disappointingly, everything was in Gloucester's hands at the start of the game. Having won last week's encounter, another victory this evening would have very much sealed the group. But it wasn't to be....

The Cherry and Whites have been on a decent run of form coming into the game, but it all came unstuck on an evening when pretty much everything the home team tried came off, whereas Gloucester just couldn't get going.

The first half was a case in point. It was reasonably close on the half-hour and Gloucester were very much in it. However, they failed to make the most of the pressure that they created in the La Rochelle 22.

By contrast, the French side clinically finished off two opportunities as half time approached and Gloucester found themselves behind the eight ball.

The half-time team talk seemed to have a galvanizing effect, and Gloucester battled their way into things with John Afoa's try giving a glimmer of hope.

However, once again, Stade Rochelais gleefully exploited a missed first-up tackle leading to Matt Scott's sin-binning and a further try. It was effectively game over from that point.

Gloucester now have ten days to regroup before taking on Quins at Twickenham followed by Northampton and Worcester. It's a key period in the Aviva Premiership and perhaps the best thing for Gloucester to do is to learn quickly from this one and then put it behind them. It was a chastening experience against a very good French side but Gloucester haven't become a bad side overnight.

Gloucester actually thought they had a dream start inside the first minute as a high Billy Burns kick went loose and Charlie Sharples gathered to sprint clear. However, Matt Scott had nudged the ball forward and play came back for a scrum.

La Rochelle were then penalised at the resultant scrum, however, and Billy Burns showed good composure to knock over the penalty and open the scoring.

The home side were back on level terms though four minutes later, as it was Gloucester's turn to be pinged at a set scrum and Brock James made no mistake from head on to the posts.

Gloucester then had a bit of an escape as a loose pass allowed the home team to hack downfield. Jonny May and Pierre Aguilon went shoulder to shoulder as they chased the ball down, and the home crowd roared for a penalty but none was given.

They did get what they wanted at the next scrum, as Gloucester infringed once again and James nudged the home side into a 6-3 lead after 12 minutes as his kick, though not cleanly struck, scraped inside the left hand upright.

The home side, with James pulling the strings, were now starting to enjoy the better of things and it took a try saving tackle from Jonny May on hooker Hikairo Forbes to keep the line intact but only for the time being.

Play came back for an advantage for a high tackle and Stade Rochelais went to the corner. The catch and drive was held out, but the ball was moved quickly to the right and Gabriel Lacroix squeezed in at the corner for an 11-3 lead after 21 minutes.

Gloucester tried to respond, and created a couple of half chances in the home 22. However, handling was proving to be difficult in greasy conditions and the ball squirted loose to let the home team off the hook.

The Cherry and Whites weren't panicking and stuck to their game plan. A high kick from Burns forced a home forward to go off his feet at the ruck, and the fly-half slotted the penalty for 11-6 on the half hour.

The home side hit back immediately. A crafty offload from James broke the Gloucester defensive line and La Rochelle were in behind them with some slick offloads and the big forwards joining in.

The scramble defence got back to halt the initial surge, but Kini Murimurivalu hit a brilliant angle near the line to take a short pass and scythe his way over. James added the conversion for 18-6.

As half time approached, La Rochelle had their tails up and these were dangerous times for Gloucester. The home crowd were getting right behind the team, and on Gloucester's backs, and all the 50-50's were going the way of the French team.

And it got even better for the home side. Gloucester, under pressure in defence, were penalised once again and James kicked to the corner. The catch and drive was spot on and hooker Forbes claimed the score.

James couldn't convert from the touchline, but Gloucester were well and truly up against it as they trailed 23-6 at the break.

It had been a strangely subdued performance from the Cherry and Whites who were struggling to get any meaningful possession to work with in the right areas of the pitch.

That said, there hadn't been that much between the two teams for 30 minutes, as evidenced by the 11-6 score-line. However, the double try salvo in the final few minutes of the half was a real body blow.

It had been a tale of taking chances. Gloucester had made some dangerous forays into home territory but came away with nothing. Stade Rochelais had capitalised virtually every time they got into the Gloucester 22.

The reaction at half-time was to replace Josh Hohneck and Jeremy Thrush with Yann Thomas and Mariano Galarza as Gloucester sought to battle their way back into this one.

Thrush, of course, was making his first appearance of the season after a lengthy injury absence and Matt Kvesic was also quickly into the action as he entered the fray on 45 minutes.

Gloucester started promisingly as they moved into the home 22. A missed home lineout helped matters as Hibbard drove for the line. Matt Scott went close and Gloucester were also held up over the line.

The Cherry and Whites stayed patient. A catch and drive was sacked and Atkinson went close, but it was John Afoa who powered his way over from close range for the first Gloucester try which was converted by Burns.

Once again, the home side came back strongly. Levani Botia made the initial break and the dangerous Lacroix took it on. Heinz and Hook halted the flying winger, but Matt Scott kicked the ball out of the ruck and was yellow carded.

In a potentially pivotal moment, the home side kicked for the corner but were held out by impressive defence from the Gloucester pack.

The euphoria was short-lived. La Rochelle took one against the head, scrum-half Bales scampered to the blindside and slid a measured grubber in behind Jonny May for Lacroix to gather and score the bonus point try.

There was no holding back the home side now. Taking advantage of the superiority in numbers in the backs, Murimurivalu sliced his way through. Sharples made the tackle just short of the line but Botia was on hand for the offload and the try. James converted for 35-13.

Bad went to worse as Mark Atkinson was helped off injured and, with no more backs amongst the replacements, second row Joe Latta took to the field. Matt Scott returned shortly afterwards to give Gloucester the full complement once more.

But the final word went to the home side, and it was a moment to savour for their pack who were rewarded for a powerful scrum in the Gloucester 22, referee Davies awarding a penalty as the Gloucester scrum splintered.