

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 27, 2016

TWICKENHAM STADIUM – AVIVA PREMIERSHIP RUGBY

**GALLANT GLOUCESTER'S BRAVE COMEBACK COMES UP JUST
SHORT AGAINST QUINS**

HARLEQUINS 28 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 24

Gloucester looked dead and buried on the hour mark in Big Game 9, trailing 28-10, but launched a heroic late comeback which came up just short as they went down 28 points to 24, pressing hard for the winning score as time expired.

It was another case of '...so close but yet so far...' for Gloucester, who once again threatened to clinch an impressive victory against a notable opponent, only to leave the stadium with just a losing bonus point to show for their efforts.

Frustration was the foremost emotion in the Gloucester dressing room after the game, but also a sense of injustice with television replays showing that Harlequins had transgressed on a couple of occasions as Gloucester sought the winning score in the final moments.

Director of Rugby David Humphreys refused to be drawn after the game when quizzed about the matter after the game, but the expression on his face spoke volumes as he chose the path of diplomacy.

For Gloucester to be that close as the final whistle approached showed the resilience that exists in this squad. Trailing 28-10 going into the final quarter, their goose looked cooked.

But a scintillating fightback followed. A try from Motu Matu'u, converted by Billy Burns, made it 28-24 with nine minutes to play and Quins also had a man in the sinbin.

It often comes down to fine margins at this level and so it proved. A floated kick from Burns so nearly found Henry Purdy for the winning score before Quins stretched the law book to very near breaking point.

But the home team hung on and headed off into the cold Twickenham night with four points to show for their efforts.

The Cherry and Whites will know that they didn't deliver an 80 minute performance; also that a couple of errors contributed directly to tries for the home side. There is still more to come from this group and the desire to get there is evident.

For now, though, Gloucester will lick their wounds and look to bounce back next weekend. With two home games in six days, against Northampton and Worcester, the backing of the Kingsholm faithful may prove to be crucial as the Cherry and Whites seek a top six spot.

On the day, Gloucester so nearly got off to a dream start. Matt Scott made an incisive break, well supported by Jonny May and Billy Burns. However, as Burns' team-mates drove him over the line, the ball was lost forward. A real escape for Quins.

After the dramatic start, the next few minutes saw both teams focusing on kicking for territory. Gloucester did have a couple of five-metre lineouts, but Quins held out, although James Chisholm appeared to halt one illegally by coming in at the side.

The first quarter came and went with no score forthcoming for either side. In truth, the early stages had been scrappy with neither team really able to gain the upper hand and plenty of handling mistakes.

However, Quins almost made the breakthrough in 25 minutes. Tim Visser came in off his wing to break a tackle and Jamie Roberts took it on. The Quins forwards took over and came within inches of making the line but Jeremy Thrush cannily got his body in the way.

The five metre scrum was an ideal platform to strike from though, and quick hands gave Joe Marchant enough room to glide over on the left. Ruaridh Jackson couldn't add the conversion but the home side had the initial advantage.

Gloucester responded well with Jonny May producing one dangerous break in the Quins half. But it was the reliable boot of Greig Laidlaw that got the Cherry and White off and running, with a 33rd minute penalty when the ball was kicked out of his hands at a ruck.

Quins promptly hit back with a penalty of their own. Burns dropped a high kick, the pack were penalised at the following scrum and Ruaridh Jackson made no mistake from almost head on to the posts.

And the half ended on a negative note for the Cherry and Whites when Jonny May was yellow carded for playing the ball in an offside position. Jackson compounded the offence by knocking over the penalty.

So, it was the home team who took an 11-3 lead into half-time. There had, in all honesty, been very little to choose between the two teams. But Quins had come away with points when they had got into the Gloucester 22, and the Cherry and Whites could look back on a couple of missed chances.

Great accuracy and a more clinical edge would be needed in the second half, and Gloucester would of course need to weather the loss of Jonny May for 10 minutes.

But disaster struck straight from the kick-off. A high kick went loose, Mike Brown grubbered it forward and a wicked bounce completely eluded the covering Charlie Sharples. Jack Clifford gathered the gift to score. Jackson converted from the touchline for an 18-3 lead.

Greig Laidlaw almost inspired a quick response. His superb show and go saw him scamper down the blindside into the Quins 22. Billy Burns fired a cross-kick which Marland Yarde dropped for James Hook to pounce. However, the full-back was in front of the kicker and the score was ruled out.

It was a temporary reprieve for the home side. Play came back for a penalty and the Gloucester pack kept it tight, with Gareth Evans eventually muscling his way over. Laidlaw added the extras.

But some of the good work was immediately undone. Gloucester couldn't handle the restart, knocked on and it was picked up in an offside position. Jackson's penalty made it 21-10.

And the home side looked to have made the game safe as the hour mark approached. Quins went to the corner but spun the ball into midfield instead of driving it. Joe Marchant, a danger throughout, slipped Matt Scott's tackle and dived over for his team's third of the day. Jackson converted.

Gloucester weren't quite done yet though, and great continuity between backs and forwards ended up with James Hook going over after 63 minutes, Laidlaw adding an excellent conversion.

And the Cherry and Whites so nearly pounced for another from the next passage of play after more superb handling, but Willi Heinz was bundled into touch near the corner.

Credit to Gloucester though. They refused to throw in the towel, and a powerful catch and drive resulted in a try for hooker Motu Matu'u. Billy Burns had taken over kicking duties from the replaced Laidlaw and knocked over a superb conversion for 28-24.

The tide had turned and Gloucester had their backs up with Quins clearly rattled. Burns almost found Purdy with a cross kick in the 22 but the ball didn't quite behave itself and the winger couldn't gather on the run.

Still the Cherry and Whites fought back. Driving deep into the home 22, they had superb field position and then came the skullduggery.

Firstly, a Harlequins forward, lying prone on the ground, kicked the ball out of Willi Heinz's hands. Then Danny Care seemed to be a country mile offside as he intercepted Heinz's pass.

Small margins, big implications....

JC