

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SUNDAY, JANUARY 1, 2017

KINGSHOLM – AVIVA PREMIERSHIP RUGBY

CONTROVERSY REIGNS AS LATE PENALTY SNATCHES WIN
FOR SAINTS

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 12 NORTHAMPTON SAINTS 13

2017 kicked off with a real kick in the teeth for Gloucester as a combination of the TMO and referee Matthew Carley awarded a controversial late penalty try to Northampton which snatched a 12-13 win from a game Gloucester dominated.

Gloucester finishing on the wrong end of a close result has become something of a theme this season – six losing bonus points from twelve games in the Aviva Premiership so far.

But this one really hurts, Gloucester having played the conditions so well for so much of the game. Speaking following the game, Director of Rugby David Humphreys spoke of the real disappointment and hurt in the dressing room at seeing another tight one slip away.

Conditions on the day – rain teemed down for hours before kick-off creating heavy going underfoot – meant that a kicking game was the only real sensible tactic and Gloucester's half backs in particular executed it superbly.

Saints, to their credit, were competitive and started to ask some questions as the second half progressed but it all came down to two or three key moments, and they all went against the Cherry and Whites.

Ben Morgan was adamant that he'd scored in the second half, but camera angles were inconclusive. Then George North appeared to knock on in the build-up to the second Northampton penalty.

Finally, the decisions that initially led to the field position that featured in the moments before the penalty try were marginal. The joint call by the TMO and Mr Carley to go under the posts and effectively decide the game in Northampton's favour was like a dagger to the heart.

Even more frustrating, if possible, is the fact that other results had gone Gloucester's way and that a win would have seen the Cherry and Whites climb into sixth place, so tight is the table at the moment.

Gloucester are coming so close on so many occasions, yet such small things are proving to be the difference at the moment. They pretty much dominated today but couldn't quite put the game underway[sic].

At some point soon, the luck will turn and a run of decent results will surely follow? All the team can do at the moment is keep their heads up and keep doing what they're doing. They're not a million miles away.

The opening exchanges, as you'd expect with the two teams so close in the table, were edgy. The two biggest cheers were reserved for a huge defensive hit by Andrew Symons and a penalty well won at a ruck by Matt Kvesic.

Gloucester had a dart at the Saints line, but left empty-handed following a handling error. However, they took an 11th minute lead via a Billy Burns penalty after a Saints misdemeanour.

The Cherry and Whites then thrilled the crowd as Billy Twelvetrees gathered the kick-off, escaped Ken Pisi's tackle before offloading to Matt Kvesic. The flanker made 40 metres before Burns found an intelligent touch.

Saints regrouped though, and a clever chip over the top by Stephen Myler forced James Hook to carry over his own line. The defence held, but at the expense of a penalty, only for Myler to unexpectedly miss a straightforward kick.

In tricky conditions, kicking was very much the order of the day and both back threes were getting plenty of catching practice. Saints did manage to drive their way close to the Gloucester line as the half hour approached, but a big hit from Hibbard forced a knock-on from Brookes.

A perfect box kick from Heinz then forced an error from Pisi, and Twelvetrees kicked through to force North to carry over his own line. The Gloucester pack forced a penalty and Burns duly extended the lead to 6-0.

The Cherry and Whites promptly kept up the pressure, a Jonny May break followed by a Willi Heinz kicking pinning the Saints back once again. The visitors disrupted the Gloucester maul illegally and Burns knocked over his third penalty for 9-0.

Half time came without further addition to the score and Gloucester were good value for their lead. The Saints had looked dangerous on occasion, but the Cherry and Whites had played the conditions well with both half backs kicking sensibly.

Everyone at Kingsholm would have been well aware though that Saints had a lot of weapons at their disposal, and a big second half would be required.

As expected, the visitors came out of the traps quickly, taking the game to Gloucester. The home defence was pretty solid but eventually conceded a penalty in front of the posts and Myler made no mistake for 9-3.

The Cherry and Whites responded well, Burns again pinning Northampton back with a neat grubber. Gloucester refused to let Saints clear, regained possession and thought they'd driven over.

However, the TMO decided otherwise. It proved in hindsight to be a key moment. The Gloucester players around the incident looked adamant that it was a try. Morgan himself seemed bemused it wasn't given.

The five metre scrum resulted in a penalty as the Saints scrum buckled, but Burns was off target for the first time on the day to let Saints off the hook. And the gap was quickly narrowed as the visitors moved downfield and Myler's second penalty made it 9-6.

You could feel the tension around Kingsholm and, in the circumstances, the kick that Billy Burns nailed on 64 minutes to extend the lead to 12-6 was a cracker.

The game was on a knife-edge and, unfortunately, the key moments went the way of the visitors.

After 75 minutes of kick tennis, referee Carley controversially pinged Gloucester on halfway for being within ten metres of a kick downfield. It was the first time such a decision had been given all day.

It gave Northampton a chance to set up camp in the Gloucester 22. They got no joy in and around the fringes so flung the ball wide where David Halaifonua stuck out an arm, seemingly trying to intercept, but knocked the ball on.

Advantage was already being played so it looked as though play would come back for the penalty. However, the call was referred upstairs and, to the astonishment of the home crowd, a penalty try was awarded. The simple conversion for Myler gave Northampton a lead they weren't to relinquish.

Would a try certainly have been scored? Would the recipient of the pass have caught the ball? Would he have stayed on his feet in the tricky conditions? Would he have made the line? Who knows...

All we know that is that the penalty try award decided the game and Gloucester now face a huge game against local rivals Worcester Warriors next weekend at Kingsholm on Saturday.