

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, JANUARY 21, 2017

KINGSHOLM – EUROPEAN RUGBY CHALLENGE CUP

**GLOUCESTER SWEEP ASIDE BAYONNE TO QUALIFY IN STYLE
FOR QUARTER-FINALS**

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 64 BAYONNE 19

Knowing a bonus point win would secure a home quarter-final, Gloucester completed their European mission in some style on Saturday evening, sweeping aside a spirited but outgunned Aviron Bayonnais scoring 10 tries on their way to a 64-19 victory.

The Cherry and Whites came into the game with the knowledge that they had to match whatever La Rochelle did at home to Benetton Treviso to maintain their lead at the top of pool one and clinch a home quarter-final.

The expectation was that the French side would take five points against the Italians, and the challenge would be to equal that. However, going into a game looking for tries ahead of the performance can be a dangerous thing, and Gloucester got it right on the night.

On a bitterly cold night at Kingsholm, early tries certainly helped the cause. But a youthful and enthusiastic Bayonne side, who had absolutely nothing to lose, made things interesting by throwing the ball around and pouncing on any errors Gloucester made.

However, Gloucester always seemed to have things under control and eased clear in the second half as Bayonne wilted under the onslaught and it ended up being a fairly comfortable win.

The Cherry and Whites go through as second seeds and the home quarter-final is now secure, but the opponent will not be known until Harlequins play Stade Francais in Paris tomorrow. But it looks to be either Quins or Cardiff.

That will all be put on the back burner for now though. A short turnaround sees Gloucester travel to local rivals Bath next Friday evening in the Anglo-Welsh Cup, a competition that they still have an interest in. That will be the focus for now.

The pitch was uncovered as late as possible on the evening to keep it warm as the temperature dropped towards freezing point in the hours leading up to kick off. A good surface was the result, credit to the Kingsholm ground staff.

But it was still bitterly cold, a challenge for both teams, and the quality of rugby was impressively. The Kingsholm crowd also got into it, and a cracking atmosphere was the result.

Gloucester got off to a flyer on the night. A quickly taken lineout caught Bayonne napping, presumably still dreaming of a warm dressing room. Yann Thomas came close, but quickly recycled ball saw Lewis Ludlow hit a great line at pace and dived over. Burns added an easy conversion.

The Cherry and Whites kept up the pressure and thought they'd scored a second on 14 minutes, as a catch and drive powered over. However, the referee was unsure and, without a TMO on duty, opted to award a five metre scrum.

There was then a setback as Charlie Sharples had to leave the field injured after taking a heavy tackle in midfield, but Gloucester shrugged it off as Willi Heinz dummied and sniped his way over under the posts from close range. Burns had a straightforward kick for 14-0.

With nothing to lose though, the visitors were playing with typical Gallic adventure and struck back straight away. There was a hint of blocking, but winger Martin Laveau took full advantage to break a tackle and sprint clear to score to quieten the mood slightly.

As if slightly stunned and affronted by the score, Gloucester were quickly back on the front foot and kicked for the corner. The catch and drive was brought to ground just short, but Heinz was sharp again and darted around the fringes for his second. Burns added his third conversion for 21-5.

Gloucester were looking confident, perhaps too confident, and they were architects of their own downfall as they attacked from deep from the restart; Twelvetrees' long pass picked off by Laveau who strolled clear for his second. Meret converted.

The open nature of the game continued. Heinz, Marshall and May combined well to exploit a gaping blindside and the winger finished with a typical burst of pace. The try-scoring bonus point was in the bag just after the half hour and Burns added the extras for 28-12.

Heinz then thought he had his hat-trick as Rowan made the initial break, Twelvetrees was up in support and the scrum-half took the offload to score. But referee Linto ruled that Heinz had lost control when grounding the ball and disallowed the score.

It only delayed the inevitable as Gloucester went for the jugular. Another penalty was kicked to the corner, the catch and drive was perfect this time and Darren Dawidiuk claimed the try for a 33-12 half time score.

Job done to this point, and complacency and lack of concentration would be the issues for Gloucester now. Maintain their focus and the home quarter-final would be secure.

And Gloucester started well. Andy Symons showed quick feet to stand his man up and go over for his first try for the club, while Willi Heinz completed his hat-trick as he ran onto Billy Burns' chip ahead, the fly-half blatantly obstructed, but justice done.

45-12 to the good, once again Gloucester switched off. A loose pass in midfield was gleefully scooped up by Laveau, who duly ran it home for his hat-trick and Meret had an easy conversion.

Again Gloucester responded in the best possible way. A Bayonne forward pass in their own 22 provided the field position, but it was a neat backs move that saw Henry Purdy break a tackle to score under the posts and the half century was up, Burns' conversion making it 52-19.

Bayonne's composure now started to slip a little and replacement hooker Ayarza was yellow carded for flying dangerously off his feet at a ruck. The territory gained proved crucial as Josh Hohneck stripped the ball in the tackle and then smashed his way over to score.

It was just as well that the prop outmuscled the final man to score under the posts, as the four unmarked men outside were screaming for the ball!

Gloucester still weren't done. Twelvetrees ran onto a sublime chip over the defence by Burns, gathered and kicked ahead. Jonny May looked set to win the race but was tackled without the ball. Twelvetrees was right behind him though and put Callum Braley over in the corner.

The Cherry and Whites kept going right until the very end and, to their credit, so did Bayonne. The visitors kept attacking right until the very final whistle and Gloucester's scramble defence had to be tip-top to prevent the visitors getting a fourth try.

However, there was no more scoring and, as the crowd drifted off into the freezing night, everyone could reflect on a professional job well done.

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