

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

FRIDAY, JANUARY 27, 2017

RECREATION GROUND – ANGLO WELSH CUP

DRAMA AT THE REC AS VELLACOTT'S LATE TRY SNATCHES DRAW
FOR GLOUCESTER

BATH RUGBY 17 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 17

It wasn't a classic at the Rec on Friday evening, but Ben Vellacott's late try snatched a 17-17 draw for Gloucester just when Bath looked to have secured a come-from-behind win in round three of the Anglo-Welsh Cup.

Rain fell throughout the 80 minutes and, although the playing surface at the Rec held up admirably, it was never going to be a classic full of running rugby despite the efforts of both sides.

Gloucester had led at half-time, courtesy of a Darren Dawidiuk try, but Bath came out strongly after the resumption and very much won the battle for field position in the second 40 minutes.

This gave Rhys Priestland ample opportunity to play for position, and then kick the penalties which nudged Bath into a late 12-10 lead. And when Aled Brew crossed with five minutes to go, Gloucester looked dead and buried.

Fortunately, Priestland missed the conversion and there was still just enough time for Gloucester to launch one last attack. Ben Vellacott darted over from close range and James Hook held his nerve to convert to level the scores.

The two points keep Gloucester alive in the Anglo-Welsh Cup, just one point behind Leicester. However, the Tigers have a game in hand so events at Welford Road against Northampton tomorrow will be closely scrutinized.

In hindsight, Gloucester deserved their share of the spoils. They fought hard and showed ambition by turning down kickable penalties and kicking for the corner. They'll regret some missed chances and some ill-discipline, but they kept Bath in check by and large and out-scored their hosts by two tries to one.

And, importantly, there was the togetherness and self-belief not to let heads drop in the final few minutes and the late score was deserved.

In rainy conditions, there was an early scare for Gloucester as Tom Marshall couldn't hang on to an up and under from Rhys Priestland. Harry Davies kicked ahead, but the ball went dead at the Gloucester end.

It was first blood to the Cherry and Whites though. Concerted pressure led to a penalty in the Bath 22 which was kicked to the corner. The catch and drive looked to have been splintered by the Bath pack, but Darren Dawidiuk spun out of contact and scored. James Hook added an excellent conversion from the touchline. 0-7 after 11 minutes.

Predictably in the conditions, the next few minutes were all about kicking for territory with neither team really gaining the upper hand tactically. Bath lost skipper Guy Mercer briefly for a head injury assessment, but that was about it.

Gloucester did create an opening on the half hour as Callum Braley broke clear after a good maul by the pack. Halaifonua and Dan Thomas were in support but the flanker was hauled down by Aled Brew just as he looked to be clear.

Bath were looking dangerous at times, however, and neat hands down the left took play into the Gloucester half where a penalty was conceded at a ruck, head on to the posts. Rhys Priestland stepped up and nailed the kick for 3-7.

Gloucester had the better of the territory as the half drew to a close, but couldn't make the most of it and the referee seemed to have had enough and blew up a few seconds early with Gloucester still in front.

In truth, there was very little in it at this stage and one moment of skill could be decisive. However, the Cherry and Whites were good value for their narrow lead. They just needed to build on it in the second half.

The home side came out of the traps quickly, and a penalty award gave them an attacking lineout deep in the Gloucester 22. However, the defence was good and a big tackle jarred the ball loose to end the immediate danger.

However, Gloucester were walking a tightrope with the referee, and conceded a penalty for interfering with the lineout jumper on 48 minutes. Priestland duly made it a one point game at 6-7.

With their lead eroded, Gloucester focused on spending some time in the Bath 22. Patient build-up play eventually led to a penalty and James Hook had an easy kick for 6-10. But this was immediately countered by his opposite number and it was a one point margin once again.

Bath then thought they'd scored their first try of the evening after some nice interplay between backs and forwards. However, Chris Cook knocked on near the line. Play came back for a penalty and Priestland's fourth penalty made it 12-10 as the hour mark approached.

Bath now started to play the percentage and, to their credit, did it well with half-backs Cook and Priestland pinning the Cherry and Whites back deep. They were the right tactics for the occasion. Not pretty but effective.

And Bath looked to have clinched it when a hack downfield set Jeff Williams racing clear. Henry Purdy got back, but Gloucester were out of shape defensively and Aled Brew went over after a nice flip inside from Harry Davies.

Priestland missed the conversion and the lead was now 17-10. It looked as though Gloucester would get a losing bonus point at best.

However, one last attack got the Cherry and Whites to within metres of the Bath line; Vellacott spotted the gap and did the rest. Hook converted it and the spoils were shared.

JC