

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 2017

KINGSHOLM – AVIVA PREMIERSHIP RUGBY

GLOUCESTER WITHSTAND SARACENS COMEBACK
TO EDGE 31-23 NAILBITER

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Gloucester left it late but made it count against Saracens on Friday evening at Kingsholm, Richard Hibbard's late try clinching a thrilling 31-23 win over the Men in Black in the Aviva Premiership.

What a difference a week makes! Last week Gloucester were second best at Welford Road and slipped to defeat against the Leicester Tigers. This evening, they defeated the Premiership and European Champions.

It was an impressive victory, against one of the best sides in Europe. And it didn't come easy. Salesi Ma'afu was lost after just three minutes, Paul Doran-Jones was yellow-carded, Motu Matu'u lasted just three minutes and Billy Burns also left the action injured.

Then there was the small point of seeing a ten point second half lead disappear. Gloucester have lost several games from winning positions this season and, when Saracens drew level at 23-23, could have been forgiven for thinking, "Here we go again...."

However, Gloucester played the last quarter sensibly, not playing too much in their own half, box-kicking their way into Saracens territory and waiting for a mistake to happen.

It finally happened when the visitors pulled down a lineout. Billy Twelvetrees knocked over a crucial penalty. Ben Morgan then produced a sensational break. It took Gloucester deep into the Saracens 22, and a well-executed catch and drive saw Richard Hibbard score.

Kingsholm erupted as the home crowd were given something to really cheer about. It was a great night for supporters and players alike. But, as the players on media duties after the game confirmed, this result will matter little if it's not followed up with a good performance at Wasps next weekend. That's the challenge.

The game started with a flurry of box kicks from both sides, punctuated only by a pause for treatment for Gloucester prop Salesi Ma'afu who had to leave the field of play to be replaced by Paul Doran-Jones.

The Cherry and Whites had an early chance for points as Marcelo Bosch blocked Matt Scott with the latter chasing a kick through. It was a long-range attempt for Billy Burns but he made no mistake for 3-0.

The visitors responded with an impressive spell of pressure, stretching Gloucester left and right, generating quick ball before creating superiority in numbers and Schalk Brits dived over. Lozowski converted for 3-7.

And the Men in Black extended their lead on 14 minutes when good counter-rucking earned a penalty just inside the Gloucester half and Marcelo Bosch had no problem with the distance from head on to the posts.

Gloucester needed a lift and got one as David Halaifonua applied good pressure after a kick downfield. It gave Gloucester good field position, they were patient with their build-up play and eventually Tom Marshall powered his way over. Burns converted to level the scores.

However, Saracens promptly regained the lead. Halaifonua had to carry over his own line after a crafty grubber through from Brits. Gloucester held form at the five metre scrum but conceded a penalty for offside and Lozowski made it 10-13.

The Cherry and Whites thought they'd regained the lead when Sean Maitland couldn't handle a grubber from Heinz and Halaifonua gathered to seemingly score. But, after consulting the TMO, the score was disallowed.

Gloucester kept up the pressure though, with Marshall almost sidestepping his way through. Willi Heinz went close, sniping down the blindside but play came back for a penalty and Burns made it 13-13 on 35 minutes.

Backed by a vociferous crowd, Gloucester finished the half well. Halaifonua, who was involved in everything, came close as he chose to go for the line with Matt Scott unmarked outside him. But it was the trusty boot of Burns that slotted a penalty with time up to give the Cherry and Whites a narrow 16-13 half-time lead.

It had been a see-saw first half and Gloucester had bounced back well after conceding the early try. There was very little in it, but Gloucester certainly looked up for the job in hand and the Kingsholm crowd were thriving on it and getting behind the team.

However, Saracens had shown they had enough menace in attack to trouble Gloucester at times and, of course, they had the confidence from winning so many close games over the years. A big second half lay ahead.

And the visitors duly came out firing, Sean Maitland opening up the defence with a dangerous break and it took good work from Tom Marshall to quash the danger near his own line.

And Gloucester then capitalised on errors from the visitors at the other end of the pitch to extend their lead.

Bosch tried a cheeky chip on his own 22 and only found Halaifonua, before the ball squirted loose at a Saracens ruck and Jeremy Thrush stooped to gather and score. Burns added an easy conversion for 23-13.

With plenty of time left to play though, the game was far from won, especially against an opponent of this calibre and Lozowski narrowed the gap on 56 minutes with a well-struck penalty.

With more penalty awards, and some seemingly endless advantages played, Saracens poured forward once more and Gloucester were forced to defend their line heroically, Billy Burns literally putting his body on the line in the corner and having to go off injured with James Hook entering the fray.

There was a lengthy delay as the young fly-half was attended to, and he left the field on a stretcher to sympathetic applause from both sets of supporters.

When play resumed, Gloucester were right under the pump as Saracens kicked for the corner. The first catch and drive was halted illegally and Paul Doran-Jones was yellow carded. The second was unstoppable and Will Fraser scored, Lozowski's conversion levelling matters at 23-23.

Gloucester then lost Motu Matu'u to a head injury just minutes after he came on as a replacement and scrums went uncontested with Saracens applying all the pressure and there was a let off on 70 minutes when Lozowski pushed a drop goal wide.

After what seemed like an eternity, Gloucester were finally awarded a penalty themselves on 74 minutes when a maul was pulled down. Billy Twelvetrees held his nerve and knocked over the penalty.

It led to a narrow 26-23 lead, and still time for Saracens to respond. Cometh the hour, cometh the man, Ben Morgan produced a powerful run out of his own 22 and Gloucester surged forward looking for the go ahead score.

Saracens actually seemed to deliberately knock the ball into touch to deny a possible inside scoring pass, but it didn't matter. The resulting five metre lineout saw several backs pile in to support their forwards and Richard Hibbard claimed the score.

Twelvetrees couldn't convert but it mattered not. Gloucester had the win and didn't they deserve it?