

# **GLOUCESTER RUGBY**

**FRIDAY, MARCH 24, 2017**

**ASHTON GATE – AVIVA PREMIERSHIP RUGBY**

**GLOUCESTER DOG OUT HARD-FOUGHT WIN OVER WEST COUNTRY  
RIVALS BRISTOL**

**BRISTOL RUGBY 14 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 32**

Missing so many starters, and up against a team fighting for their Premiership existence, Gloucester did what had to be done at Ashton Gate on Friday evening, battling their way to a 32-14 Aviva Premiership win over Bristol Rugby.

The win clinches Gloucester's first Aviva Premiership double of the season and sees the Cherry and Whites leapfrog Newcastle and move into eighth place in the table.

The score-line looks comfortable enough, but this was a victory that had to be earned the hard way – Jonny May's bloodied face at the final whistle testimony to the effort put in and the courage displayed on the day.

The home side, scrapping for Premiership survival, actually enjoyed large periods of territorial dominance and, when they narrowed the gap to 9-13 on 54 minutes, the game was very much up for grabs. The Cherry and Whites were doing far more tackling than they would have liked.

However, if anyone had doubted Gloucester's collective state of mind after a difficult couple of weeks, the defensive display tonight would surely have put that to bed. The Cherry and Whites may have been on the back foot, but they defended superbly.

And, having soaked up so much pressure in the first 55 or so minutes, they then pounced for three good scores to clinch the win. Max Crumpton's late try for Bristol was little more than a consolation.

The final try was worth the entry fee alone. Attacking from behind their own posts, Gloucester's ambition was rewarded when Jonny May finished off a length of the field move, diving over to clinch the bonus point.

It's a welcome boost with next Saturday's European Rugby Challenge Cup quarter-final against Cardiff Blues at Kingsholm looming on the horizon. The medical team will be working overtime this week, but Gloucester's heart is in good shape.

On the night, Gloucester started the game brightly with the front row duo of Hibbard and Hohneck both carrying well. As play moved into the Bristol 22, the home team failed to roll away from the tackle area and Billy Burns had an easy kick to open the scoring after just three minutes.

Bristol had an immediate chance to get back on level terms as Gloucester were penalised for a high tackle, but Jason Woodward was off target from long range. The Cherry and Whites did suffer a setback though as Jonny May went off with a blood injury.

However, the canny Kiwi Alby Mathewson soon bought Bristol another penalty, throwing the ball deliberately into the retreating Ben Morgan, only for Woodward to drag his kick wide left.

Gloucester were getting penalised mercilessly at this point, and this was giving Bristol plenty of opportunity to establish field position in the Gloucester 22. Billy Searle took over kicking duties and levelled matters in the 12th minute.

Starved of possession for a while, Gloucester made it count when they finally got some. Patient build-up play led to an opening on the right where good hands from Hibbard and McAllister put Charlie Sharples in some space and the winger eluded Will Hurrell to score. Burns added an excellent conversion for 3-10.

Roared on by some enthusiastic home support, Bristol were quickly back on the front foot but some excellent defence pushed them backwards and eventually out of touch. An overthrown five metre lineout by the home team also relieved the pressure somewhat.

Gloucester were looking solid in defence but, frustratingly, couldn't hang on to the ball when they did turn it over leading to more Bristol pressure as the minutes ticked by.

It was tough, attritional stuff and both teams lost their inside centre to injury as half-time approached. Andy Symons off to be replaced by Billy Twelvetrees and Jack Tovey coming on for Tusi Pisi for Bristol, the latter stretchered off to sympathetic applause.

Billy Burns then almost inspired a moment of genius for Gloucester. From behind his own line, he floated a cross kick for David Halaifonua to gather. Unfortunately, the inside offload to Billy Twelvetrees was just behind him and the chance was gone. It was the Tongan's last contribution as he also limped off.

The various injuries caused a lengthy delay and Gloucester got back up to speed the quicker, Burns knocking over a 37th minute penalty for 3-13 after Bristol played the scrum-half without the ball at a ruck.

However, the game then swung towards Bristol as Tom Marshall was yellow carded on the advice of TMO Rowan Kitt for a deliberate knock-on – referee JP Doyle seemed set to award just a penalty – and Billy Searle slotted the resultant kick.

It sent the teams into half-time with just a score between them, Charlie Sharples' try proving to be the difference. The home team had enjoyed a lot of possession but, by and large, Gloucester had soaked up what was thrown at them.

The game was still very much in the balance, both sides trying to scrape out a win and the home side obviously fighting for Premiership survival. It wasn't a classic up to this point but it was tight, hard-fought and edgy.

Gloucester's fate would very much depend on how they would cope for the remainder of Marshall's sin-bin and they would certainly have to improve upon their discipline as the penalty count was a crippling 9-2 to Bristol at this point.

Gloucester did threaten first though as Henry Trinder made a gliding outside break, found Sione Kalamafoni, but Jason Woodward made a try-saving tackle on the Tongan flanker. The Cherry and Whites had a five metre lineout and a five metre scrum but couldn't press home the advantage.

And Bristol made the most of their reprieve as they moved downfield to force a penalty at a set scrum in the Gloucester 22, and Searle had an easy kick to make the score 9-13.

However, Gloucester then pounced for a key try. Heinz drilled through a cunning grubber kick which Luke Arscott couldn't handle, Jonny May pounced on the loose ball and popped it up for Billy Burns to scamper over. The fly-half converted his own try to open up a 9-20 lead.

With the home team now becoming increasingly desperate, Gloucester looked to turn the screw and pinned Bristol back into their own 22. The pressure built and eventually Gloucester made a five metre lineout count, Lewis Ludlow claiming the score.

Bristol showed good heart. They could so easily have thrown in the towel, but their efforts were finally rewarded when Max Crumpton spun out of a tackle to score from close range with two minute to go.

It was too little, too late though as Gloucester saved their best for last. They could easily have booted the ball dead but chose to counter from behind their own line in search of the try scoring bonus point. Swift hands and an incisive break from Tom Marshall put Jonny May in space and the winger did the rest.