

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, APRIL 1, 2017

KINGSHOLM – EUROPEAN RUGBY CHALLENGE CUP

**GLOUCESTER HIT CARDIFF WITH SECOND-HALF SALVO
TO EARN SEMI-FINAL SPOT**

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 46 CARDIFF BLUES 26

A fantastic second-half performance propelled Gloucester to a 46-26 European Rugby Challenge Cup quarter-final win over Cardiff Blues on Saturday evening to clinch a semi-final trip to La Rochelle.

It was at this stage last season that Gloucester bowed out of the tournament after a shock home defeat to the Newport Gwent Dragons. Today was similarly tough, and Cardiff looked well placed early in the second half.

However, the final half hour saw Gloucester re-discover their mojo and turn on the style to run in four unanswered tries and blow away the Cardiff challenge.

The Blues were visibly rocked and, although they refused to throw in the towel, they were a shell-shocked version of the side that had tested Gloucester to the max in the first 50 minutes.

Credit to both sides, it was a pulsating 80 minutes of rugby, the first half in particular, as the momentum swung this way and that. However, Cardiff seemed to have taken a decisive lead just before half-time only for one of the more memorable comebacks in Gloucester's recent history.

The Kingsholm crowd provided the appropriate background of sound and the famous old stadium was rocking as Gloucester clinched a semi-final spot away at La Rochelle.

However, that's for several weeks in the future. Next up is a short turnaround and a challenging trip to Newcastle. Tonight's win will be toasted, but the celebrations will be short and it's back to work next week to prepare for the Falcons.

The game started off at what seemed like a hundred miles per hour. Both teams looked dangerous, Billy Burns testing the Blues with a canny chip over the top, Matthew Morgan returning the ball dangerously for Cardiff.

But it was first blood to the visitors. Nick Williams and Tau Filise made the initial inroads and Gloucester couldn't slow the ball down. Possession was moved quickly right and Alex Cuthbert had the strength to make the line. Steven Shingler added an excellent conversion for 0-7 after just five minutes.

However, Gloucester hit straight back. There was a bit of good fortune to the score as Richard Hibbard's offload went backwards off a Cardiff boot. Ross Moriarty scooped up the loose ball and powered his way to the line. Cardiff complained, but to no avail, and Billy Burns levelled the scores with the conversion.

The Blues quickly nudged their way back in front. Gloucester were judged offside in midfield and Shingler, head on to the posts, made no mistake with the penalty, only for Burns to tie things up with his own effort three minutes later.

Matthew Morgan had already served notice of his danger with ball in hand, and almost opened up Gloucester again on 20 minutes as he returned a Burns kick with interest leaving several would be tacklers in his wake.

The defence held out, but Burns was lost to a head injury and Shingler made it 10-13 with his second penalty of the evening. Once again, Gloucester responded immediately with Twelvetrees on target with his first penalty of the match to make it 13-13.

Gloucester then went in front with an absolute cracker. Clean lineout ball was moved into midfield, Twelvetrees broke a tackle, handed off another defender and then found Tom Marshall with a long pass and the full-back did the rest. Twelvetrees added the extras.

It had been a helter-skelter first half hour and it showed no signs of slowing up. Ill-discipline allowed Cardiff to kick into the corner. The catch and drive was repelled, as were several subsequent surges by the pack but Josh Hohneck was yellow-carded.

It was a key moment in the game and Cardiff made it count. Not getting any joy around the fringes, Cardiff moved the ball wide and Alex Cuthbert cut a smart line to go over for his second. Shingler's conversion levelled things up at 20-20.

Incredibly, there was still time for Gareth Anscombe to drop a goal to edge Cardiff into a narrow 20-23 lead before this breathless half came to a close.

It had been real end-to-end stuff with both teams determined to play expansive rugby. Like two heavyweights slugging it out, both had landed their punches but the knockout blow was yet to come.

The visitors held a slight advantage at the break and certainly oozed menace whenever they had ball in hand, but it was still all to play for. How Gloucester would cope for the remainder of Hohneck's sinbin would be key.

Gloucester held out – just. Alex Cuthbert again created real problems for the home defence; another penalty was conceded and Cardiff went to the corner again. However, the lineout was overthrown and Charlie Sharples gathered.

The home team were still making life difficult for themselves though, conceding possession deep within their own half and it led to a 50th minute penalty for Shingler which opened up a 20-26 lead.

There was still hope though and Henry Trinder very nearly made the most of a handling error from Matthew Morgan, kicking on towards the line only for Gareth Anscombe to get back and boot the ball dead to save the day for the Blues.

However, Gloucester weren't to be denied. The five metre scrum was solid, Twelvetrees floated a cross kick for Jonny May and the winger gathered and stepped his man to dive over. Twelvetrees added a superb conversion to give Gloucester the tightest of leads at 27-26.

Kingsholm was bouncing and Cardiff had a real escape when replacement scrum-half Tomos Williams had two consecutive box kicks charged down only for the ball to bounce kindly.

Gloucester were determined to ride the wave of momentum though, and a superb break from Willi Heinz opened up the Blues again.

The outside backs stayed cool and Tom Marshall spun out of a tackle to go over for his second try. Twelvetrees again converted superbly for 34-26.

A mention must go to the Gloucester pack as a strong scrum effort had forced the penalty which created the field position and they followed it up with a similar effort shortly afterwards.

By now, Gloucester were on the front foot and on fire. More strong scrummaging got the team moving forward and Cardiff were creaking.

It still took something special to open them up though, Mark Atkinson's dummied kick freezing the defence before he stepped his way to the line. More solid work off the tee from Twelvetrees opened up a 41-26 lead.

The Blues still had the capacity to stroke back though, and a smart break from scrum-half Williams and a neat inside pass to Sam Warburton sent the flanker clear only for his pass to Willis Halaholo to drift forward.

That seemed to well and truly take the wind out of Cardiff's sails and Gloucester finished things off in style as Henry Purdy crossed after more good work by the backs, a lovely floated long pass from Callum Braley giving the winger space to cross.

Cue the celebrations.

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