

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, APRIL 15, 2017

KINGSHOLM – AVIVA PREMIERSHIP RUGBY

**GLOUCESTER OUTLAST SALE IN DRAMATIC PREMIERSHIP
ENCOUNTER AT KINGSHOLM**

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 39 SALE SHARKS 30

On a glorious afternoon at Kingsholm, Gloucester made heavy weather of defeating Sale Sharks, gifting the visitors a number of tries, but finally prevailed by 39 points to 30.

It was another typical Jekyll and Hyde performance from Gloucester. There were flashes of brilliance, but also some moments to infuriate coaches and supporters alike.

Gloucester could have won this by a canter, but they found ways to keep Sale interested and to have seen this one slip away would have been devastating for morale.

When the team sit down for their analysis session after the weekend, they'll look back on two tries absolutely laid on a plate for the visitors. They'll also ponder on why it took a good 15 minutes or so to start playing in the second half, by which time Sale had scored two tries and taken a 15-24 lead.

And, of course, followers of Gloucester this season will know all too well that no victory can be taken for granted until the final whistle is actually blown. Leading by six points in the final minute, when Tom Foley awarded a simple penalty, the sigh of relief around Kingsholm was palpable.

The five points keep the Cherry and Whites in the hunt for a top six spot, just one point behind Quins and Saints, and send the team into next weekend's European Rugby Challenge Cup semi-final with a spring in their step.

Still plenty to play for this season and, judging by the matches so far, it probably won't be dull.

Gloucester thought they'd got off to a flyer after only four minutes. A Sale pass in midfield went loose, Jonny May gathered only to be hauled down just short before quick ball saw Henry Trinder glide over.

However, referee Tom Foley went upstairs to the TMO to double check and the score was chalked off due to a Gloucester knock-on having caused the ball to spill loose in the initial contact.

However, Gloucester shrugged off the setback by scoring a cracker. Swift hands along the back line from Burns and Atkinson gave Jonny May space to sprint down the left wing and his inside pass found Tom Marshall who stepped the last man to score. Billy Burns converted.

The lead was short-lived as Gloucester dropped the restart straight into the hands of Cameron Neild. He was dragged down, but Sale recycled the ball sharply and Sam James touched down. A J MacGinty added an excellent conversion to level the scores after 15 minutes.

And the second Sale try, a minute later, was similarly gift-wrapped. Gloucester lost a lineout and the ball was grubbered downfield by Mike Phillips. Tom Marshall thought the ball was going out, but was fooled by the bounce and Ben Curry put Phillips over.

Mutters of dismay were heard around Kingsholm, even more so when Billy Burns dragged a penalty wide when Sale fielded the ball in an offside position when they fumbled the restart.

Gloucester looked to hit back immediately and some good interplay saw play move menacingly into the Sale 22, only for a ball carrier to get isolated when just a few metres out and get penalised for holding on. The Cherry and Whites were remaining innovative, but the Sale defence was getting up quickly and into their faces. A John Afoa line break made good ground but the visitors dug deep.

Gloucester stayed on the offensive though, pinning Sale back and eventually forcing a penalty which went to the corner. Sale held the first catch and drive out illegally, but the second attempt was well-executed and Richard Hibbard levelled the scores after 31 minutes.

Back on level terms, Gloucester looked to finish the half on a high as they launched a strike move from first phase ball, Charlie Sharples making good ground down the right. Sale killed the ball and Burns made it 15-12 as the teams headed for the dressing rooms.

It had been an entertaining but slightly stressful 40 minutes for Gloucester, who had shown the best of what they could do but also committed a couple of basic errors which had been gleefully exploited by the visitors.

The fightback after the double setback had shown some real resilience though and, with the breeze now behind them in the second half, Gloucester would be feeling positive about the next 40 minutes.

But Sale silenced the home crowd by taking the lead within the first two minutes of the second half. There was an element of fortune as Jennings' grubber hit a Gloucester leg and bounced back into his arms, but MacGinty's inside pass to Kieran Longbottom was a smart one and the prop scored. MacGinty converted for 15-19.

And Gloucester's sluggish start to the second period continued as they then dropped off a couple of tackles which allowed Sale to march into the red zone and fashion an opening for Byron McGuigan to score in the left hand corner and open up a 15-24 lead.

It had been all Sale but Gloucester made a couple of changes and fought their way back into contention. Matu'u and Atkinson combined to get beyond the gain line and the latter then offloaded superbly for Henry Trinder to dart over. Burns converted for 22-24.

So Gloucester were back in striking range but, just when a good exit was required, they were pinged for holding on just outside their own 22 as they tried to run it out from deep and MacGinty's penalty extended the lead to 22-27.

Still the drama came thick and fast as Gloucester claimed the restart. In the phases that followed, Sale's Ross Harrison was yellow carded and Gloucester went to the corner. The catch and drive didn't work, but the ball was shipped left and Tom Marshall went outside his man for his second. Burns added the conversion to edge Gloucester into a 29-27 lead.

What Gloucester needed to calm the nerves was another score. It duly came, and it was another cracker. Marshall returned a kick downfield with interest, Ben Vellacott injected real pace into the move and Billy Twelvetrees sprinted over. The conversion wasn't easy, but Burns nailed it.

Credit to Sale, they still weren't done after this body blow. MacGinty slotted a penalty to get them back within losing bonus point range with a minute left to play. With a try scoring bonus point already in the bag, all five points were still on offer for the Sharks.

These have been nervous situations for Gloucester on many occasions this season, and Sale looked to attack from deep. Thankfully, for once, the referee's decision went Gloucester's way and Burns kicked the easy conversion to clinch the 39-30 win.

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