

# **GLOUCESTER RUGBY**

**SATURDAY, MAY 6, 2017**

**KINGSHOLM – AVIVA PREMIERSHIP RUGBY**

**GLOUCESTER LEFT TO RUE MISSED OPPORTUNITIES  
AS CHIEFS TAKE THE SPOILS**

**GLOUCESTER RUGBY 20 EXETER CHIEFS 34**

Gloucester signed off their Aviva Premiership campaign on a disappointing note, pushing the high-flying Chiefs all the way but paying the price for not making more of a number of good try-scoring chances in a 20-34 defeat at Kingsholm on Saturday afternoon.

Gloucester will wonder how they came away from this one with nothing, having spent so much time in the Exeter 22 without converting chances into points on numerous occasions.

But that's not to take away from a very streetwise performance from the visitors who will advance to a home semi-final.

As Greig Laidlaw said when he spoke to the media after the game, it was a game that summed up the season. There was so much to admire about Gloucester's play, however they simply couldn't come up with the vital score when it counted.

So many times they made good ground into the Exeter 22, driving to within metres of the line only to come away without points. Compare and contrast it to the way that the Chiefs consistently came away with points after their forays into the Gloucester half, and you have the reason for why the two clubs sit where they do in the table.

That's taking nothing away from the Exeter defence, which was robust when it needed to be. They lived on the offside line, not always legally, with their rush defence and, when you're not penalised for it, you keep on doing it.

The visitors' conversion rate of chances to points was also impressive, they have real momentum behind them after their recent string of results and they'll be tough to beat in the play-offs.

Meanwhile, Gloucester now have to lick their wounds and prepare for Friday's European Rugby Challenge Cup Final against Stade Francais. It represents a chance for silverware and also the last possible route into next season's Champions Cup.

As is so often said, it's a game of small margins. Gloucester have the ambition and the skill. But they will need to execute better in Edinburgh next Friday.

There was an early escape for Gloucester when a loose pass in midfield was picked up by the Chiefs backline. Danger loomed but the ball was jarred loose and knocked on, much to the relief of the home crowd.

Gloucester responded with a couple of cohesive attacks, James Hook making good ground on one occasion, before kicking ahead for Jonny May to chase. But Exeter held out in what was a breathless opening.

However, the Cherry and Whites opened the scoring after eight minutes. A long lineout over the top found Freddie Clarke who set the ball up well. Possession was moved quickly left and Jonny May's inside pass put Lewis Ludlow over. Greig Laidlaw converted for 7-0.

And a second very nearly followed shortly afterwards, Gloucester attacking down the right flank, showing great hands, with Freddie Clarke making good ground only for his inside, and potentially scoring, pass for Billy Twelvetrees to be slapped down by a Chiefs hand.

As a result, the Chiefs dodged a bullet and took full advantage as they moved downfield to earn a penalty as the Gloucester back line was caught offside. Gareth Steenson made no mistake with the kick.

Straight from the restart though, Luke Cowan-Dickie was penalised for a double movement, trying to advance when held in the tackle. Laidlaw was on target, but Steenson responded immediately with his second of the day for holding on.

The Exeter rush defence was causing Gloucester problems and referee Ian Tempest was getting plenty of advice from the Kingsholm crowd. Tempest then enraged the home support still further by penalising Gloucester at a ruck only for Steenson to miss a sitter.

The visitors were showing ominous signs of starting to go through the gears, but were dealt a blow as the half-hour approached. Moving the ball wide, an ambitious offload was ill-advised and snaffled by Jonny May who ran it back all the way for a try and a 15-6 lead.

Exeter came back strongly and Gloucester defended well initially, including repelling a five metre lineout. But on 36 minutes, with seemingly nothing on, Ian Whitten broke a tackle and accelerated clear to go under the posts. Steenson converted for 15-13.

Charlie Sharples was then a tap tackle away from another interception try; he looked set to turn on the afterburners but a flailing hand just caught his ankle and halted him. There was no further scoring as referee Tempest blew to end an entertaining first 40 minutes.

There was little in it on the scoreboard, and little in it on the pitch. Both teams had enjoyed good spells, but Gloucester would feel slightly aggrieved at some of the decisions against them and a couple of chances had gone begging.

Whitten's try was frustrating as it came after a period of good defence, but Gloucester had shown enough to show they could win this game.

And the Cherry and Whites started the half in determined fashion, a well-worked lineout move creating real problems, but the Exeter defence held firm in the face of some real pressure as the big Gloucester ball carriers hammered away.

Gloucester did think they'd finally broken through when Jonny May produced a spectacular finish in the left-hand corner, but the ball had been lost forward in the build-up and play was called back for an Exeter scrum.

The visitors then showed how dangerous they can be in the red zone, building patiently before creating an opening for Ben Moon to crash over from close range wide out on the left. Steenson converted excellently to put his side 15-20 in front.

Exeter were now starting to get all the decisions and Ollie Devoto was able to pin Gloucester back with a couple of lengthy kicks to touch. Keeping the ball alive well, the Chiefs outflanked the defence and James Short was over for the third. Steenson again converted.

Gloucester had been rocked, but there was still hope and they hit back quickly. Referee Tempest was playing advantage when Jonny May did Jack Nowell like a kipper, leaving his England wing rival sprawling as Mark Atkinson found him with a long pass, and dived over for his second.

It narrowed the gap to 20-27 and Gloucester came so close to levelling matters when Ollie Thorley latched on to a kick downfield but couldn't quite shake the last man and the Chiefs escaped.

Frustratingly, having come so close, Gloucester then saw Exeter move efficiently downfield and make the absolute most of a trip into the Gloucester 22. Again, there was plenty of patient build-up play and, despite some valiant home defence, replacement scrum-half Will Chudley was able to snipe over under the posts from a metre out. Steenson converted and Gloucester were two scores down.

Still, they didn't throw in the towel but, once again, pressure didn't turn into points. There was one lengthy TMO referral when Jeremy Thrush seemed to have pounced opportunistically from close range, but the call went against the Cherry and Whites.

It seemed to sum up the day, Gloucester didn't finish on the right side of the intangibles and, although they fought desperately for the fourth try and also a losing bonus point, it wasn't to be.

JC