

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

FRIDAY, MAY 12, 2017

MURRAYFIELD – EUROPEAN RUGBY CHALLENGE CUP

**EUROPEAN DREAM ENDS AS SECOND HALF EFFORT FROM STADE
EARNS THE WIN**

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 17 STADE FRANCAIS PARIS 25

Heartache for Gloucester who couldn't capitalise on a bright start in Friday evening's European Rugby Challenge Cup Final, Stade Francais fighting back from a 10 point deficit to triumph 25-17.

Gloucester's valiant European campaign came to a halt in the most painful manner, as they slipped to defeat in the Final at Murrayfield against Stade Francais.

Having topped the pool and followed up with knockout victories over Cardiff and La Rochelle, the latter a particularly impressive effort, falling at the final hurdle is the cruellest possible way for hopes to be shattered.

But, on the night, it's fair to say that the French side deserved the win. They regrouped impressively having gone behind 10-0 and took a grip of the game. Gloucester were starved of possession and prevented from really landing any telling blows.

That said, the team battled valiantly and were still in the game on the hour mark.

Indeed, it's a game of inches and, had Tom Marshall touched down before the ball went dead in the second half, who knows what the outcome would have been.

However, Stade promptly pounced themselves and took a decisive lead; one that they weren't to relinquish.

It brings Gloucester's season to an abrupt stop, no play-offs and an end to any lingering hopes of Champions Cup rugby.

Frustratingly, it had all started so positively, a 10-0 lead from an interception try from Jonny May. Billy Burns added a conversion and a penalty and the Cherry and Whites genuinely had their tails up.

Other half chances were created. Indeed, the game took a decisive turn when a five metre lineout saw Richard Hibbard power to within a few metres of the line. However, Gloucester were penalised and the chance was gone. 10-0 up at the time, who knows what another score could have done to Stade's morale?

But it's a case of ifs, buts and maybes and congratulations to Stade on their win. It was well deserved in the final reckoning.

After what seemed like an eternally long build-up, play finally got underway under leaden Edinburgh skies. A steady drizzle was falling and handling looked as though it could be tricky on the night.

It was nip and tuck in the opening few minutes, both teams reluctant to over-commit and tactical kicking very much the order of the day. Stade were the first to threaten as a neat offload in midfield got them in behind the defensive line but Gloucester were quick to get back.

It had been mostly defensive duties for the Cherry and Whites in the opening ten minutes, but they were looking reasonably comfortable in defence in the face of some testing French offence.

And it was offensive defence that led to the game's first try. Big tackle followed big tackle and, as Stade tried an ill-judged offload, Jonny May pounced for the interception and went 70 metres for his fifth try in three games. Billy Burns converted for 7-0 after 15 minutes.

Gloucester had their tails up and powered forward through Jeremy Thrush after Stade lost possession. The big second row made it to the Stade 22, but the French side disrupted Willi Heinz's service at the base to nullify the threat.

One area of concern for Gloucester was the scrum, and it was a blow to see John Afoa replaced after 21 minutes. However, the setback was softened by Billy Burns slotting a long-range penalty to open up a 10-0 lead.

The French side may have been rattled, but almost carved Gloucester open with a gimmick lineout which saw Waisea Vuidarvuwalu break down the right. He was hauled down but a penalty followed, and Jules Plisson opened Stade's account with a penalty from just inside the Gloucester half.

Stade now had a bit of momentum and duly levelled the scores after 32 minutes. Referee Lacey was playing advantage when Will Genia dinked a kick over the defensive line, Hugh Pyle tapped it back and Sergio Parisse gathered to score. Plisson converted.

And things got a little bit more difficult for Gloucester when Willi Heinz was yellow carded for a late hit on Jules Plisson as the fly-half cleared. The Stade 10 made the most of it, but Gloucester were now a man down.

It was a crucial period for Gloucester and things were starting to come to a boil as referee Lacey struggled to maintain control. And the inevitable occurred as a huge brawl erupted a minute before half time.

Lewis Ludlow was the man penalised but Gloucester managed to get into half-time without further damage, and on level terms at 10-10. It had been a rough 15 minutes or so after a bright start but they were still in the game.

The first key objective was to get through the rest of the sinbin period without conceding, then tackle the rest of the game. And discipline would be key after the punch-up at the end of the first half.

Gloucester duly passed the first test, and Greig Laidlaw replaced Willi Heinz at the end of the sinbin period as the Cherry and Whites looked to battle their way back into the game. The match was on a knife edge.

The next score was key and it nearly went the way of the French side, but Plisson was off-target with a more than kickable penalty for a player of his calibre.

Gloucester had soaked up a lot of pressure but then very nearly pounced after Stade fumbled a kick, Laidlaw kicking ahead but Marshall couldn't quite touch down before the ball went dead.

The decision went to the TMO, and there was a fleeting thought of a penalty try as Hugo Bonneval seemed to make contact with Marshall and knock him off his stride, but the decision went against Gloucester.

Disaster then struck for the Cherry and Whites. As they looked dangerous in attack for the first time in a while, a loose pass was intercepted by Djibril Camara before the ball was shipped wide to Jonathan Danty to score. 10-15 to Stade after 59 minutes.

Without a real platform up front, the mountain to climb was looking increasingly steep for Gloucester who were being forced to play from deep within their own half as Stade looked to turn the screw.

Another Stade score looked inevitable, but Gloucester dodged another bullet when Morne Steyn dragged a tricky penalty wide after Jonny May was penalised for tackling a man in the air. It was marginal but all the calls were going against the Cherry and Whites.

Then came the killer blow. Nothing really looked on for Geoffrey Doumayrou when he received the ball on the Gloucester 22. But the centre slipped a couple of tackles before accelerating clear to score. Steyn had an easy conversion for 10-22.

Steyn then added a penalty as a Gloucester scrum disintegrated and that was pretty much it. Gloucester carried on battling but the Parisians had their tails up and the clock was ticking.

The final word did go Gloucester's way as Darren Dawidiuk made a bustling break up the middle before finding Ross Moriarty who went over under the posts. Burns converted but it was too little, too late.

The final word though should go to the Gloucester supporters – they travelled in their thousands and shouted at the top of their voices in the second half in a bid to inspire their team. Even back home in Gloucester, they gathered in their numbers to watch the action on a big screen at the Gloucester Quays.

Their support was magnificent and we thank them for it.

JC