

# THE CITIZEN

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 2001

MERCIER AND YACHVILI SHOW THE NEW DESIRE

HUNGRY GLOUCESTER OVERCOME A SLOW START  
TO SEE OFF NORTHAMPTON

GLOUCESTER 22 NORTHAMPTON 9

Gloucester for the title then. Maybe not, but this was a convincing opening to their Premiership challenge after a rollicking encounter against Northampton.

They overcame a shaky start to bury the Saints with one well worked try and an impressive goal-kicking display from Ludovic Mercier. He, alongside Dimitri Yachvili, summed up Gloucester's collective desire and hunger to win.

Mercier bagged 17 points as Philippe Saint-Andre's new look team made an opening bristling with intent.

The arrival of Northampton focused minds for a Premiership opener that held far more significance than just the 80 minutes.

Philippe Saint-Andre planted his faith in the majority of the side that beat Toulouse, minus the injured Terry Fanolua.

A weighty and expectant crowd watched Northampton strike ahead from virtually the kick-off.

The Saints went up the middle from the kick-off and in their desperate attempts to defend, Gloucester came off-side and Paul Grayson kicked Northampton ahead.

Gloucester regrouped and hit Northampton down the middle with a powerful, leggy burst from Alessandro Stoica, Patrice Collazo and Andy Hazell.

It was all very tense and Gloucester desperately needed an early try to settle the nerves. But they relinquished a good position from a driving line-out deep inside Northampton territory, before Junior Paramore and Adam Eustace attempted to make the best of a free-play when Northampton had already been penalised.

However, Ludovic Mercier celebrated his first Premiership points with a well struck penalty. Although Gloucester were niggly and concerted on Northampton's ball, they could not control their own ball with anything like the rock-steady assurance Saint-Andre would require.

The worrying thing for Gloucester was that Northampton seemed to make best use of the ball. They went ahead when Grayson landed his second penalty for killing the ball after Diego Albanese had made a splendid try-saving tackle on Craig Moir.

Gloucester dug in and went again. Their best form of attack was up the middle, through the bouncy surges of Hazell, but while there was plenty of effort, it was all rather rushed and Gloucester could not make the most of the ball.

They went 9-3 behind when Grayson landed his third penalty, before Gloucester clicked up a gear.

Mercier, after one blemish, was almost immaculate with his howitzer of a left foot, and Gloucester were safe in the knowledge that even if they could not manage the try, Mercier's kicking kept them in touch. He hauled Gloucester level after 33 minutes with two penalties before booting the hosts ahead with a monstrous 50 metre effort.

It was now their power and strength came flooding forth. They drove well up front and swamped Northampton with pressure that finally caved in[*sic*].

Gloucester broke play down the right with Daren O'Leary making the initial surge. Junior Paramore could not collect, but the Cherry and Whites recycled and from ruck ball, Dimitri Yachvili fed Federico Pucciarello who released Paramore to score after Northampton ran out of cover.

It was a splendid recovery. Gloucester had turned a 9-3 deficit into a 10-point lead and could thank Mercier's boot and some powerful work up front.

Half-time: Gloucester 19, Northampton 9

The momentum Gloucester had stoked into their game before the break did not die the poured all over Northampton at the start of the second period.*[sic]*

It was probably their best period of the match. Continuity was good and the ball retention between the forwards was excellent.

Mercier skimmed a penalty narrowly over the left upright, but he made no mistake minutes later with his fifth successful penalty to stretch Gloucester to 22-9 ahead.

Northampton were struggling to stay afloat. Some of the rugby Gloucester strung together was as concerted and incisive as anything last season, but they still struggled to take their chances when they were offered to them. Northampton's power brokers, Budge Pountney and Andrew Blowers were stifled in the middle of the field as Gloucester tackled manfully, particularly Mercier and Fortey.

The only scare was when Beal chipped over the defence but Catling managed to beat Ben Cohen to the touch down. Not even Northampton water boys could inspire Northampton.

Gloucester's third-quarter hard work eased off with 20 minutes to go as Saint-Andre made a host of changes.

Paramore was sinbinned for an off the ball incident with Blowers, giving Northampton a man advantage for the last few minutes.

Northampton almost made it pay when Tom Smith hurtled through a gap, but somehow only managed to find Pucciariello, but it was Yachvili who summed up Gloucester's approach when he drove Moir back with a pumping tackle, before Matt Dawson was driven into touch.

GLOUCESTER: C. Catling; D. O'Leary, J. Ewens, A. Stoica, D. Albanese; L. Mercier, D. Yachvili; F. Pucciariello, C. Fortey, P. Collazo, R. Fidler, A. Eustace, J. Boer, A. Hazell, J. Paramore.  
Reps.: A. Gomarsall, S. Mannix, J. Simpson-Daniel, T. Woodman, O. Azam, M. Cornwell, E. Pearce.

NORTHAMPTON: N. Beal; C. Moir, P. Jorgenson, J. Leslie, B. Cohen; P. Grayson, D. Malone, T. Smith, S. Thompson, M. Stewart; J. Phillips, O. Brouzet, A. Blowers, B. Pountney, M. Soden.  
Reps.: S. Brotherstone, C. Budgen, A. Newman, R. Hunter, M. Dawson, J. Brooks, M. Tucker.

REFEREE: T. Spreadbury (RFU)

STAR MAN: Ludovic Mercier.