

THE CITIZEN

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 8, 2001

GLOUCESTER FAIL TO END VICARGE ROAD JINX
CHERRY AND WHITES EDGED OUT BY SARACENS
IN A PREMIERSHIP THRILLER
SARACENS 34 GLOUCESTER 30

Gloucester's Vicarage Road hoodoo sign continued as Saracens edged them in a thriller by four points following a roller-coaster of an encounter.

Saracens could thank Luke Smith who nailed all nine of [their] penalties and converted Tim Horan's try to knock Philippe Saint-Andre's run off its rails.

But Gloucester can have only themselves to blame after a chronic first period.

They hit back with tries from Oliver Azam and Daren O'Leary, but the mountain they had to climb was just too steep.

Gloucester were disjointed and never managed to recreate the concerted power with which they defeated Northampton.

They did not go about the job very well in a dazzling opening quarter from the home side that produced one try and a substantial lead.

Gloucester went behind as early as the second minute after a powerful line-out drive and an angled break from Darragh O'Mahony produced a penalty. Luke Smith converted.

It was a testing, driving start by the hosts, led by Kyran Bracken and Abdel Benazzi and Smith profited again when Dimitri Yachvili was penalised for pulling Bracken back without the ball.

It was all Gloucester could do to stay in the game. Saracens looked potent and eager and Gloucester were not helped by some slipshod handling that littered their play.

Smith made it 9-0 after 10 minutes, capitalising on a knock-on and Gloucester had not got into the game. In fact, they were being totally out-gunned, not just in the rigorous open play, but in the tight.

There was no pattern or control and all Gloucester had managed to do was face three re-starts.

It had taken Gloucester 15 minutes to shake into life. Ludovic Mercier aimed an up and under towards Adryan Winnan and when he fell on the wrong side, Mercier put Gloucester's first points on the board.

But that served as only temporary rest bite[*sic*]. Saracens grabbed their first try after 17 minutes and it was a beauty.

Saracens controlled a scrum on the 22, and as it wheeled, Bracken dummied into open play and snaked down the blindside, past Yachvili. He fed Scott Murray and Tim Horan was on hand to score. Smith converted, and Gloucester were already looking down the barrel.

Gloucester's uncertainty was characterised when Mercier and Jake Boer collided in midfield. It was all rushed and shockingly disjointed and Saracens just lapped it up.

There was an endless stream of errors, but Gloucester knew they had to use the ball far better if they were to make an impact.

Smith landed three more penalties; preying on Gloucester's ill discipline inside the 22 to stretch Saracens to what already appeared to be a winning lead.

They were incisive and slick and although Mercier landed two more penalties, Gloucester trailed 25-9 at the break.

However, there were signs before the interval, particularly up front, Gloucester's cause may not be lost. But they needed far more clarity in their thought and more precision in the execution.

Half-time: Saracens 25, Gloucester 6[*sic*]

Saint-Andre made two immediate half-time replacements, switching Federico Pucciariello and Chris Fortey with Trevor Woodman and Olivier Azam.

It made an immediate impact. Azam, charging with energy and bristling with intent and Woodman, ominous and tough, drove Gloucester back into the match. This was their best period of the match and typically it came from up front.

Rob Fidler was devilish in the line-out and stole two Saracens balls and eight minutes into the half, Gloucester clawed their way back into the game.

Fidler nicked a ball intended for Benazzi and Gloucester ploughed forward, splintered the Saracens defence and Azam was awarded the try. Mercier converted and Gloucester were only six points behind.

There was a real danger to Gloucester now and it stemmed from the forwards.

Outside the scrum, there was still indecision and a lack of trust in the backs outside the powerful Stoica. Every time Saracens attacked, points always seemed to be the end result.

Joe Ewens was penalised for a high tackle and Smith was on target with his sixth successful penalty.

It was a rollicking match and Gloucester were now, finally, in the clash. Mercier landed his third penalty when Saracens were penalised for off-side and Gloucester were again in at 28-22.

Gloucester had exploded the game into life. Stirred by their first try, they went in search of another and found it. Hazell was its heart with a blinding break down the narrow side that took him infield. Boer's intervention looked to have taken the momentum out of the move, but his scooped back pass enabled Diego Albanese to create room and Daren O'Leary slid in to score.

Smith, who had a great day with the boot, landed his eighth successive penalty to take Saracens to 31-27 with only seven minutes remaining.

It was now a war of attrition between the boots of Smith and Mercier and the Gloucester man held his nerve to leave Gloucester trailing by one point at 31-30.

Smith collected his ninth penalty in the last minute and although Stoica made a clattering break from the re-start, Gloucester could not keep it going and when Collazo's pass slipped forward, it was all over.

SARACENS: A. Winnan; T. Shanklin, T. Horan, K. Sorrell, D. O'Mahony; L. Smith, K. Bracken; L. Harbut, R. Russell, S. Phillips, A. Benazzi (capt.), S. Murray, R. Hill, T. Roques, B. Cole.
Reps.: J. Parkes, M. Cairns, K. Roche, K. Benazzi, N. Walshe, B. Sparg, G. Arasa.

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 (capt.), A. Hazell, J. Paramore.
Reps.: A. Gomarsall, S. Mannix, J. Simpson-Daniel, T. Woodman, O. Azam, E. Pearce, M. Cornwell.

REFEREE: A. Rowden (RFU)

STAR MAN: Patrice Collazo.

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