

THE CITIZEN

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 19, 2001

MERCIER BELOW PAR AS FALCONS SWOOP

NEWCASTLE 18 GLOUCESTER 16

They say it is grim up north and Gloucester discovered just exactly how grim yesterday.

Defeated again on their travels by a less talented team – there is a sickening fallibility about Gloucester away from home.

And there was something disturbingly missing at Kingston Park.

The forwards, who have been as tight as a drum and as sharp as a knife throughout the campaign so far, looked to have slightly lost that snarling edge.

That is not to belittle their efforts because they tackled like dervishes around the fringes, but there was not that edifying unity – the sort when they are so tight, individuals are barely recognisable in their efforts from one another – they had dropped from their maximum yesterday.

The front row scrummaged hard and Jake Boer, Chris Fortey and Rob Fidler all tackled themselves to a standstill, as did Junior Paramore around the fringes, but Newcastle held firm.

There was a worrying lack of shape about Gloucester's efforts. At the time when they had Newcastle where they wanted them – at the start of the second period when they mauled the hosts up front – they could not shut the game off. There was a lack of savvy and a lack of killer instinct.

Gloucester opted for a scrum rather than a kick at goal or even a close-range line-out, lost the ball and lost their way.

Newcastle established control in the areas where you win games, at number eight and number 10 and consequently took the victory that sat in the palm of Gloucester's hands at the break.

Worrying further, was the lack of direction and composure.

If their forwards cannot master control and, despite being on top for long periods were never in complete command, and Ludovic Mercier does not land his kicks, there is not much more to Gloucester's game.

That theory was laid brutally open here. Gloucester were unable to drive with the same conviction that shattered Bristol and Mercier could only return a 50% record with his goalkicking.

Dave Walder, the outstanding pocket battleship for the Falcons, was their driving force.

He controlled the game superbly as their rudder; better than Mercier, while Pat Lam tied it all together with a hard-hitting display from the base of the scrum.

On this evidence it is very hard to see Gloucester being consistent enough for long enough to mount a serious challenge to Leicester.

Gloucester were good enough to win, but did not deserve to, but they could not have gone to Newcastle in better heart.

A thumping west country derby win was still fresh in the Kingsholm memory banks and the knowledge they did not have to face Jonny Wilkinson will have gladdened the hearts even further, but they still lost a game against a side who never threatened to score a try and who, in all honesty, would not come close to matching Gloucester if they played to anything like their potential.

Gloucester seriously need to add more to their narrow repertoire.

This was the third opportunity missed away from home and a horrifying theme has run through all three.

At present, they are one dimensional and predictable, despite the greatest intentions of the forward unit.

Gloucester lost a lot of cohesion around the tackle ball because of their indiscipline, and apart from thumping breaks from Joe Ewens, Terry Fanolua and Robert Todd, never threatened to break the line wide out.

But they took the lead after 18 minutes with a splendid try.

Henry Paul, worryingly quiet, set the move going when he escaped from Lam before the highly commendable Federico Pucciariello pummelled forward. Boer took up the next phase with a clattering surge and Andy Gomarsall, sprightly on his return at number nine, weaved his way through from 25 metres past Dave Richardson and in for the score.

Gloucester led 13-6 and deservedly so. They defended with power and authority, but Walder kept the hosts in the hunt with a penalty before half-time.

But it was at the start of the second period, when it appeared Trevor Woodman crossed the line, that Gloucester's hopes fell away.

Newcastle repelled a series of close-range drives and Walder now came into his own, kicking well in behind Gloucester and making them turn to defend.

He was also immaculate with his goal-kicking, landing six successive penalties in a rigorous final quarter when the home side's forwards managed to wrestle some control.

Another tale of what might have been for Gloucester away from home. They could and should have won, but again came away with nothing.

It was a grim day all round in the Newcastle mist.

NEWCASTLE: D. Richardson (P. Dowson 75); V. Tuigamala, J. Noon, T. May, G. Maclure; D. Walder, H. Charlton (G. Armstrong 61); M. Ward, N. Makin (C. Balshen 56), M. Hunter, H. Vyvyan, D. Weir (C. Hamilton 46), J. Dunbar (E. Taione, 68), R. Arnold (R. Devonshire, 46), P. Lam (capt.).

GLOUCESTER: R. Todd; D. O'Leary, T. Fanolua, H. Paul, J. Ewens; L. Mercier, A. Gomarsall (D. Yachvili, 63); T. Woodman (A. Deacon, 52-61), C. Fortey (O. Azam, 59), F. Pucciariello, R. Fidler, M. Cornwell, J. Boer (capt.), A. Eustace (K. Sewabu, 78), J. Paramore.

REFEREE: J. Barnard (Driffield, East Yorkshire).

ATTENDANCE: 5,537

STAR MAN: Robert Todd.

JC