

THE CITIZEN

MONDAY, JANUARY 14, 2002

GLOUCESTER CLOSE IN ON EUROPEAN GLORY

LA ROCHELLE 12 GLOUCESTER 36

LA ROCHELLE : L. Vialaret; E. Gapon, R. Paillet, D. Giannantonio, F. Toala; J. B. Elissalde, C. La Rue; X. Pujos, N. Merlin, D. Joulin, F. Leif, J. Pierre, Y. Lacrouts, L. Faure, G. Oriel.

Reps.: J. Garcia, V. Debaty, S. Bozzi, N. Harvey, S. Bonneau, F. Brunet, F. Toddeschini (all used).

GLOUCESTER : L. Mercier (J. Goodridge 80); D. O'Leary, R. Todd, T. Fanolua, J. Ewens; H. Paul, D. Yachvili (A. Gomarsall 75), P. Collazo (T. Woodman 41), C. Fortey, P. Vickery (F. Pucciariello 48), R. Fidler (E. Pearce 62), M. Cornwell, A. Eustace, A. Hazell (K. Sewabu 75), J. Paramore (J. Boer 66).

REFEREE : A. Rolland (Ireland).

ATTENDANCE : 5,000 (est.).

STAR MAN : Mark Cornwell.

It is too early to say if it will act as a watershed for Gloucester, but do not underestimate the potential value of this victory at the Stade Marcel-Deflandre.

On a warm French evening and with their cup season ready to blossom into life, Gloucester took a giant leap towards Parker Pen Shield glory with this absolute victory.

Before the game descended into farce in the second period following four yellow cards and a red for Trevor Woodman, Gloucester established complete control through the vitality, organisation and suffocating power of their forwards.

Three men down, Gloucester naturally lost their shape and composure, but remained firm enough to hold La Rochelle at bay in the closing stages, despite two tries for the home side.

But by then, the game was dead. In the first half, Gloucester produced one of their most stirring performances of the season. Victories away in France are to be cherished and this one was no different.

Their first period struck at the very heart of the hosts, and through feverish commitment, Gloucester produced two forward-orientated tries to cement their advantage.

It is almost impossible to separate the efforts of the Gloucester eight but when Rob Fidler hits his straps, he is the barometer for the rest of the team. Committed and forthright, he and Mark Cornwell, who had a towering game at lock, set Gloucester on course.

In front of them, at the coalface, Phil Vickery, Chris Fortey and Patrice Collazo scrummaged and tackled diligently and relentlessly.

Gloucester played off these efforts, kept the ball away from the hosts and took their chances in a drive towards a match-winning position.

Their hard work allowed Ludovic Mercier, back in the team following his knee injury, to cut La Rochelle with an immaculate series of kicks that helped Gloucester into a 26-0 lead.

They were already 3-0 ahead when a swinging move that had Dimitri Yachvili and Andy Hazell at its heart allowed Henry Paul and Terry Fanolua to bring in Daren O'Leary.

He chipped towards the corner but was blocked late and Mercier kicked the penalty to touch.

Cue the mighty effort and cue the shift in balance of power. Cornwell held the catch and from the third roll away, Collazo was bundled over for the try.

It was a terrific score because it struck at the very core of La Rochelle. There was a smoothness and reliability about Gloucester, and despite a lucky moment when Ezio Gapon chipped over Joe Ewens into the arms of Filippo Toala, only to be called back for being in front of the kicker, Gloucester were never seriously exposed.

Their lead grew. Gloucester out-tackled, out-muscled and were massive in their pressure. Two more Mercier howitzers took the score to 16-0 before their second try.

In a carbon copy of their first score, Cornwell held the catch, but this time Fortey emerged from the pile with the try. Gloucester's imposing forward display simply grew.

La Rochelle should have hit back when Romuald Paillet made a thrilling break through midfield, but number eight Xavier Pujos spilled the ball with the line in sight.

Then came the dismemberment. La Rochelle introduced Seb Bozzi and all hell broke loose. Woodman sported a nasty cut after the first scrum, before he and Vickery were hit off the ball.

Federico Pucciariello and Adam Eustace were sin-binned for the second of the two fights and Woodman was then dismissed for stamping on a La Rochelle player.

It meant Cornwell and Fidler became the two tallest props in Gloucester's history and Hazell and Robert Todd two of the shortest locks as the referee had no option but to turn to uncontested scrums. The bite and the confrontation dissipated immediately, and Gloucester were not helped by the introduction of Federico Toddeschini at stand-off, but despite his best efforts, La Rochelle coughed up far too much possession in midfield.

Most of Gloucester's work had been done before Paillet grabbed a try back for the hosts with a neat break and finish following Toddenscini's little dart.

It was impossible to rate Gloucester's second half showing, such was its fragmentation, but after La Rochelle's best efforts to intimidate them with violence, Gloucester kept their focus clear and were never seriously ruffled.

Nick Harvey pulled a second try back for the hosts with a short-range drive, but fittingly, the last word was Gloucester's.

From a scrum on the 22, Andy Gomarsall dummied to open field before chipping superbly for O'Leary to chase and score.

It completed a good evening for Gloucester and they can now look forward to a quarter-final against Ebbw Vale at Kingsholm, but this squad can think about going even further.

JC