

THE CITIZEN

MONDAY, JANUARY 21, 2002

GLOUCESTER CUP BID UNPICKED BY IRISH

LONDON IRISH 25 GLOUCESTER 10

One down, one to go. After the pyrotechnics at the Memorial Stadium, a damp squib at the Madejski Stadium.

Gloucester's Powergen Cup ambitions yesterday ran aground on a glut of lost possession, a harrowing series of turnovers and a faltering set piece in a rain-lashed quarter-final.

A game they could have comfortably won turned into a nightmare.

It would be tough to say Gloucester appeared not to care because that is certainly not Andy Deacon's way, but it is clear Philippe Saint-Andre has put all his eggs in his European basket – no Junior Paramore, no Andy Hazell, no Adam Eustace, no Patrice Collazo – and they were just the fit forwards missing, emphasised his priorities elsewhere.

But try telling that to Deacon. If that is to be his final domestic cup match, then it is a crying shame because he led from the front in his own style yesterday.

That is not to say that there was not the usual effort or drive from Gloucester, but London Irish unpicked their efforts with an alarming simplicity to claim a cup victory they will cherish. They played what was in front of them and Gloucester did not.

Neither team controlled the ball well in the conditions, but the Irish used what they had far better, adapted quicker and made fewer mistakes.

Barry Everitt pulled their strings like a little maestro at the high table of number 10 – the Irish outside half played with a wonderful sense of assurance and diligence.

He made no errors and was outstanding in his control and execution.

It was a performance nobody on the Gloucester side could match and he won Irish the game, not with his immaculate goal-kicking, but with his sense of pragmatism in the Irish driving seat.

He displayed a kicking game far beyond Gloucester's wavelength and forced them to play rugby from very deep or to punt away possession.

He kicked when he had to kick and ran when he had to run. He mixed up play superbly, but Gloucester did the opposite – running when they should not have done and generally fogging their efforts up with too much lost ball in the tackle area.

London Irish were simply better at the basics of the game – at the ruck, maul and line-out, while Gloucester's fell apart in the second period when the decision not to introduce Cornwell was particularly baffling.

There were some mighty efforts too from Ryan Strudwick and James Cockle in the heart of the Irish pack, but there were also some thumping contributions from Rob Fidler and Jake Boer who tackled above and beyond the call of duty for Gloucester.

Skipper Deacon was also massive in his drive and commitment alongside Chris Fortey and Federico Pucciariello, but for all that, Gloucester never really looked like winning.

They gifted Irish their opening try when Henry Paul's high and awkward pass was spilled by Terry Fanolua and Paul Sackey brushed through some wafer thin tackling and around Ludovic Mercier to score.

That amounted to a disaster for Gloucester who had dominated the opening quarter.

With Andy Gomarsall in sprightly form, Deacon's charges controlled territory without ever really threatening to score in an uneven and fragmented opening.

The closest they came was ironically from behind their own posts when Gomarsall fed Paul and James Forrester, again impressive and hard working, cut inside with a little dummy, but Gloucester could not recycle possession quickly enough.

But they got the try they deserved when Boer clattered into the 22. Paul reversed a pass inside to Pierre Caillet who took play beneath the posts with a fine surge and Gomarsall burrowed over to score. Game on.

However, Gloucester's vulnerability was already being exposed. Only Fidler supplied them with any banker line-out ball and Paul was clearing out rucks rather than piloting Gloucester forward.

Everitt added two more first half penalties and a splendid drop-goal, while Mercier was off target with two and a drop-goal as Irish eked out a priceless 16-7 interval lead.

Gloucester had not been helped in the first period by some particularly harsh refereeing decisions from Steve Lander, especially in the line-out where Fidler was tripped twice, but the Irish rode their luck through it and deserved their lead.

Mercier reduced the deficit immediately after the re-start with a neatly taken penalty following another dangerous Irish infringement at the line-out and it cut Irish's advantage to just six points.

But against the Irish drift defence, Gloucester needed more than their lateral running because you get very close to the advertising boards unless you straighten attacks.

The Irish have an excellent knack of soaking up pressure and then collecting points from other team's mistakes and that is exactly what they did here.

Gloucester knew exactly what to expect, but could do nothing to counter it.

There were some interesting experimentations at the end, notably James Simpson-Daniel at outside centre, but with Everitt in no mood to let his standards slip, Gloucester slipped out of the cup.

LONDON IRISH : M. Horak; P. Sackey, G. Appleford, B. Venter, J. Bishop; B. Everitt, H. Martens (R. Barrett, 80); M. Worsley, R. Kirke, R. Hardwick (S. Halford, 46), R. Strudwick (capt.), S. Williams, J. Cockle, D. Danaher, C. Sheasby.

GLOUCESTER : L. Mercier (M. Garvey, 64); D. O'Leary, J. Ewens, T. Fanolua, J. Simpson-Daniel; H. Paul, A. Gomarsall; F. Pucciariello, C. Fortey, A. Deacon (capt.), E. Pearce, R. Fidler, J. Boer (K. Sewabu 74), J. Forrester, P. Caillet.

REFEREE : S. Lander (Liverpool)

ATTENDANCE : 8,076

STAR MAN : Jake Boer.

JC