

THE CITIZEN

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 9, 2002

AZAM RETURNS TO HELP GLOUCESTER TRIUMPH

LONDON IRISH HIT BACK LATE BUT THE CHERRY AND WHITES
SCORE A VITAL WIN

GLOUCESTER 29 LONDON IRISH 22

Olivier Azam made an all-conquering return to Gloucester colours with a try in a typically robust display as the Cherry and Whites earned themselves a massively important win over London Irish.

The French international, making his first appearance since his sending off against Newcastle in December, hammered over a try in the second period to add to one from Terry Fanolua in the first half.

Gloucester had all their efforts knitted together by Ludovic Mercier's howitzer of a left foot as he collected 19 points.

Surely there must be some kind of mistake, A game at Kingsholm on a Saturday at 3pm. It must be a dream. But at last, a game.

So much water has passed beneath the Gloucester bridge since they had beaten Ebbw Vale in the Parker Pen Shield that returning to the relative normality of life in the Premiership was almost a godsend.

London Irish had not [won] at Kingsholm since October 1993, but with two victories already over Gloucester, they might never have a better chance.

Olivier Azam returned in the front row for the first time since he was sent off against Newcastle late last year.

Henry Paul was also back in the side after he was left out of the side to face Vale.

But it promised not to be a thriller. The conditions saw to that, but Gloucester slithered into an early lead thanks to the prodigious boot of Ludovic Mercier, who landed a penalty after Irish were penalised for not rolling away at the tackle.

Gloucester kicked and chased everything, relying on the bump and grind of their forwards and a suffocating territorial game.

But the Irish had not read the script. They dominated the middle 20 minutes of [the] half, were more concerted in their driving play and minimised mistakes.

They were level when Paul Sackey and Justin Bishop added the legs to a neat drive, before Paul Gustard was stopped beneath the posts. But Gloucester were off-side and Barry Everitt landed the penalty.

There was little continuity in any of the phases, but plenty of bite and commitment from both sides.

Mercier put Gloucester back ahead with another penalty, but it was the Irish who made more ground in open play.

Good surges from Declan Danaher and Paul Gustard moved play to within striking distance for Everitt and he dropped a goal to tie the scores up again.

Gloucester could thank the near faultless kicking of Mercier – you can do a lot with a man who kicks with such reliability – and for all the Irish commitment, they found themselves behind again thanks to the Frenchman.

The game seriously needed a try and in the circumstances it could have gone either way. But it was Gloucester who got it.

Andy Gomarsall sacked Hendie Martens from an Irish scrum and James Forrester hacked on down the far left touchline. The Gloucester openside, moving like a winger, chased down the ball and managed to reach it with Brendan Venter, who spilled possession and Fanolua nipped in to score.

It was a crucial score and Mercier converted from the Shed touchline with a tremendous kick to land Gloucester a 10-point advantage.

In the conditions and situation, it was a crucial lead, despite another Everitt penalty, the advantage remained intact when Mercier landed his fourth successful kick of the half.

Half-time: Gloucester 19, London Irish 9.

The second period was barely a minute old when Robert Todd was sent to the sinbin for coming in from a ruck from the wrong side[*sic*] and it meant the next 10 or so minutes would be crucial to the outcome of the match.

Irish started brightly and Everitt reduced the deficit in bizarre fashion. His penalty landed short, but Gomarsall's clearance went straight back to the Irish number 10 who dropped a magnificent goal that went over via the crossbar.

But there were not only new shirts for Gloucester, but a new vigour in their forward play. They were seriously up for the challenge.

Mark Cornwell hit rucks and mauls as if his life depended on it, while at the front Azam and Patrice Collazo were having seriously meaty impacts.

They started to drive with power and pace – it was raw boned and tough and it brought them their second try.

Firstly, Irish lost Chris Sheasby just like Gloucester had lost Todd. Mercier's penalty went to the corner and the rest, as they say is history.

Cornwell held the catch and Gloucester crashed their way forward for Azam to return with a try that sparked huge acclaim from the crowd. Mercier again nailed the conversion and a subsequent penalty to leave Irish trailing 29-12.

It was a match winning advantage. It was tremendously exciting. Junior Paramore started carrying his prodigious weight into contact, while Forrester tackled way above his weight.

But the Irish kept coming. They controlled territory and kept the ball for long periods without really threatening to get over the line, but all that changed with a bang.

It was a hard working performance from Gloucester, but the Irish did get the score they deserved when Ryan Strudwick drove hard following a short line-out and from the maul, Sheasby emerged with the score with three minutes to go. Everitt's conversion hit the post as they trailed by 12 points.

They cut that further to an almost deathly Kingsholm hush when Hendie Martens' short pass following a good passage of play allowed Michael Worsley to plough over into the corner.

Suddenly, there was a game on as Gloucester led by only a score.

It was not the ending Saint-Andre had foreseen only minutes before. But it was a victory for Gloucester and a crucial one.

GLOUCESTER: D. O'Leary; T. Fanolua, H. Paul, R. Todd, D. Albanese; L. Mercier, A. Gomarsall; P. Collazo, O. Azam, F. Pucciariello, R. Fidler, M. Cornwell, J. Boer (capt.), J. Forrester, J. Paramore.

Reps.: D. Yachvili, J. Ewens, J. Simpson-Daniel, C. Fortey, A. Deacon, K. Sewabu, E. Pearce.

LONDON IRISH: M. Horak; J. Bishop, R. Hoadley, B. Venter, P. Sackey;
B. Everitt, H. Martens; M. Worsley, R. Kirk, R. Hardwick, R. Strudwick
(capt.), S. Williams, P. Gustard, D. Danaher, C. Sheasby.
Reps.: D. Edwards, J. Brown, E. Thrower, A. Flavin, E. Halvey,
G. Delaney, S. Halford.

REFEREE: S. Leyshon (Keynsham).

STAR MAN: Olivier Azam.

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