

THE CITIZEN

SATURDAY, MARCH 16, 2002

BEST IS NOT ENOUGH TO BEAT THE CHAMPIONS

CHERRY AND WHITES FAIL TO BREAK LEICESTER'S
WELFORD ROAD FORTRESS

LEICESTER 27 GLOUCESTER 10

Once again Gloucester gave it their manful best, but they could not shatter Leicester's seemingly impregnable home record at Welford Road.

Inspired by a domineering performance from Lewis Moody, the Tigers put both hands around their fourth successive Premiership title after defeating their nearest rivals.

Gloucester were brutal in their effort and commitment, especially up front where Olivier Azam, Rob Fidler and the rest of the pack never took a backward step in the tight. But it was not to be for Gloucester, despite the effort.

This was the day when Gloucester could measure themselves against the best.

A trip to Leicester can hold its own fears, but the Cherry and Whites seriously believed they could become the first team [to] win at Welford Road for almost five years. They would have to do it without Phil Vickery, the British Lions prop, ruled out with an ankle injury, to be replaced by Andy Deacon.

A whiff of cordite clung to the air well before the teams entered the arena and Gloucester could have been pleased with their opening quarter's work. An extreme air of physicality draped itself to the game and Gloucester matched the Tigers stride for belting stride.

Chances were few and far between but Deacon led his forwards on a concerted charge in which Olivier Azam revelled in the contact.

He had an explosive opening, making tackles and charging breaks and set the tempo of Gloucester's effort.

Mark Cornwell was not too far behind – stealing two line-outs from Leicester throws as he and Rob Fidler charged around the field.

Ludovic Mercier missed the first opportunity when he skidded a penalty just wide of the right post after Will Johnson had come over the top at a ruck.

Gloucester needed something for their efforts here, but could not manage it and were made to pay the heaviest of prices.

Leicester's main threat had come through Freddie Tuilagi down the left and it had taken a superb tackle by Diego Albanese to deny him, but their first try came from a more traditional avenue.

They won a penalty on the right and Tim Stimpson kicked it to touch. Johnson took possession and after two neat passes, Neil Back's momentum sent him crashing through from short range. Stimpson converted.

Gloucester almost hit back immediately when Stimpson's horrible pass put Austin Healey in trouble and James Forrester and Albanese combined to hack the ball forward, but the Argentine was beaten to the line by Healey.

Gloucester were not always helped by the referee Spreadbury, who allowed the Tigers an age in the tackle to release, but penalised Gloucester far more rapidly.

They were not helped three minutes before the break when Patrice Collazo was sinbinned for persistent off-side and from the penalty, Leicester scored again.

It was a carbon-copy score. This time Lewis Moody collected possession at the tail of the line-out and after two drives, Leicester moved the ball for Healey to break inside Mercier from short range to score.

Gloucester had been punished fully for not taking their chances. It was a very even contest – Gloucester bruising up front and committed in the tackle, but 14 points down.

They went 17 down before the break when Stimpson landed a long-distance penalty when Gloucester were penalised for handling on the floor.

Half-time: Leicester 17, Gloucester 0.

Gloucester had not coped with Leicester's ability to steal ball in contact in the first half and had to score first in the second to stand any chance.

However, the Tigers scored their 20th point in almost as many minutes when Stimpson kicked his second penalty when Gloucester were penalised for not releasing.

But if Leicester thought they had it sewn up, then they were wrong. Gloucester stormed back with 10 points in two minutes, all from Mercier.

Firstly he landed a penalty, and then conjured a very special try. Gloucester had secured good position from a scrum and when the ball came back, Mercier dummied the drop at goal before breaking blind. His little chip took him away from Moody and into the corner for a brilliant try. He converted from the far touchline as Gloucester halved the deficit with 28 minutes remaining.

The pace was relentless and the tackles rained in. Moody was inspirational for Leicester in almost every phase, while the introduction of Trevor Woodman and Koli Sewabu had added impetus to Gloucester.

Leicester had control, but Gloucester just sensed something. They craved another quick try to really put the pressure on.

They should have had a penalty when Spreadbury showed advantage, but he stopped play immediately after Tuilagi's tackle on O'Leary – a decision that incensed Azam.

But Leicester grabbed the points when Kafer's break and pass found Steve Booth. On another day the pass might have been forward, but although he was stopped by Catling, Dorian West motored up in support to score. Stimpson added the conversion for a 27-10 lead.

It was a brave effort from Gloucester, particularly the front five where Azam was outstanding, but they could not rely on the foundations of their game as consistently as Leicester.

They lost four line-outs in the second half and although they were desperate in their application, Leicester were in command. For that they could thank Moody, West and Back – the three dynamos in their forward effort.

The victory almost guarantees Leicester a fourth successive title. To lose it, it would mean Leicester losing all their remaining games and Gloucester winning theirs.

LEICESTER: T. Stimpson; S. Booth, O. Smith, R. Kafer, F. Tuilagi; A. Healey, H. Ellis; G. Rowntree, D. West, D. Garforth, L. Deacon, B. Kay, L. Moody, N. Back (capt.), M. Corry.
Reps.: R. Cockerill, W. Johnson, P. Freshwater, R. Nebbett, J. Hamilton, G. Gelderbloom, A. Balding.

GLOUCESTER: D. O'Leary; D. Albanese, H. Paul, R. Todd, T. Fanolua; L. Mercier, A. Gomarsall; P. Collazo, O. Azam, A. Deacon, R. Fidler, M. Cornwell, J. Boer (capt.), J. Forrester, J. Paramore.
Reps.: D. Yachvili, C. Catling, C. Fortey, T. Woodman, C. Pucciariello, K. Sewabu, E. Pearce.

REFEREE: T. Spreadbury.

STAR MAN: Olivier Azam.

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