

THE CITIZEN

SATURDAY, MARCH 30, 2002

GLOUCESTER CONTINUE PUSH FOR SECOND SPOT CHERRY AND WHITES TRIUMPH DESPITE A LESS THAN STYLISH PERFORMANCE

GLOUCESTER 36 SARACENS 13

Without much style, but with plenty of honest work, Gloucester set themselves up for a second place finish with a three-try victory over Saracens. It was a good team effort from the Cherry and Whites, whose dominance began in the scrummage, where they obliterated their opponents.

Gloucester scored first half tries from Robert Todd and Terry Fanolua and added a late score from Andy Gomarsall to cement their dominance, plus Ludovic Mercier finished with 19 points while Federico Pucciariello, Azam, and Woodman laid the foundations for the victory.

Mercier struck the hosts ahead when Saracens were penalised for coming into a maul from the wrong side.

It was a powerful and concerted start from the hosts. A scrum followed a line-out, but Saracens' scrum was smashed by a vigorous early drive from the Kingsholm front row and when it swung round on its heels, the ball shot out and Robert Todd scooped it up to score.

Jake Boer and Trevor Woodman were impressive in the early skirmishes, and they almost pounced again when Woodman, Andy Gomarsall and Junior Paramore fed play to the right side and Daren O'Leary chipped to the corner, but Tim Horan got back to smother the danger.

But the vigour evaporated from the Gloucester heartbeat as Saracens swung into action. They got on the board when Kevin Sorrell kicked a penalty following a splendid break from Brett Sparg, and despite a Mercier penalty to stretch Gloucester's lead to 13-3, Sarries hit back with their first try.

The first quarter had been littered with Saracens' errors, but it was one from Gloucester that cost them dear. Horan's kick had not gone 10 metres, but Boer played on and Saracens scooped up possession.

Abdel Benazzi made a crashing break through the heart of Gloucester's first-up defence, but the chance seemed to have gone when Kyran Bracken tapped a penalty.

Saracens retained possession and another surge by Benazzi created space for Horan to find Kevin Sorrell and he put Gerald Arasa in to score. It was a mistake that cost Gloucester dearly.

Gloucester's intent had dissipated and Saracens looked quicker and sharper out wide and were competitive up front, where Scott Murray was outstanding.

Saracens cause was helped when Mark Cornwell was sinbinned for killing the ball, but Gloucester ended the half strongly with a second try.

There was not the usual snap and drive from the set-play, but Gloucester managed to retain possession through enough phases for Terry Fanolua to score.

Woodman, Paramore and Boer were all heavily involved in a series of surges for the line, but Saracens held out until Gomarsall's pass found Paramore in space, who had been involved four times, and his cut-out pass found Fanolua on the half-volley.

The Samoan hit-man scooped up the ball and barged through Arasa to score. Mercier added a superb conversion from the touchline for a 20-10 Gloucester lead.

Saracens, though, remained in the game. Sorrell landed another penalty to cut the deficit to seven by the break.

Half-time: Gloucester 20, Saracens 13.

Sarries, to their credit, remained in the contest. They had been inspired by a virtuoso display from Tim Horan who purred along at stand-off like a vintage car.

But it was a story of what might have been. Sorrell, who had missed an easy penalty in the first half, was again the culprit.

A lovely break by Kris Chesney set up play deep inside the Gloucester half, but when they earned a penalty, Sorrell hit the left post.

Saracens had plenty of the ball, but their efforts floundered in a series of mistakes at set-phase and a well marshalled Gloucester defence.

Gloucester had Fanolua sinbinned for an offence at a ruck, but even with the man advantage, Saracens could not break the home defence.

There was not the usual bite or vitality about Gloucester, except for the scrum, that was consistently on top and turned over possession four times from Saracens put-ins.

The half had remained scoreless until the 61st minute when Mercier kicked a third penalty to stretch Gloucester to what should be a match-winning 10-point advantage. But Gloucester had never really got going.

There was not the usual steaming intent about their driving play, as a host of errors crept into their game. They could hardly keep the ball long enough to stretch the Saracens defence through multi-phase attacks.

But the relentless boot of Mercier kept Saracens pinned down with another superb display of goal-kicking. He kicked two more goals in the 70th and 73rd minutes as Gloucester eased themselves 29-13 ahead.

Mercier was then replaced by James Simpson-Daniel after he took a fearful whack on the side of the head.

It almost seemed to wake Gloucester and they added their third try in the final minute when the home forwards drove a line-out up and over the line for Gomarsall to pounce and score. Henry Paul converted to give the scoreline a convincing look, although the performance was far from satisfying, but will leave Gloucester chasing second place.

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

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

SARACENS: B. Sparg; B. Johnston, T. Shanklin, K. Sorrell, G. Arasa; T. Horan, K. Bracken; D. Flatman, R. Russell, P. Durant, A. Benazzi (capt.), S. Murray, K. Chesney, T. Roques, R. Hill.

Reps.: L. Harbut, M. Cairns, K. Roche, B. Cole, N. Walshe, L. Smith, R. Haughton.

REFEREE: R. Maybank (RFU).

STAR MAN: Federico Pucciariello.

JC