

THE CITIZEN

MONDAY, APRIL 29, 2002

DREAM DIES WITH MERCIER'S MISS

GLOUCESTER 27 SALE 28

The dream died to a deafening silence and a flood of French tears. Outworked and outplayed, Gloucester's Parker Pen Shield quest was derailed by a side brimming with desire and commitment at Franklin's Gardens yesterday.

It is hard to question the merit of Sale's victory. In the end this tale of European confrontation will rest on the shoulders of Ludovic Mercier, the shoulders that dropped so inconsolably at the finale, following his missed penalty in the final minute.

There was no consoling him and it will hit him hard, but it should not be allowed to detract from the season he has had with the Cherry and Whites.

It is impossible to chastise him solely for Gloucester's failings.

The chance arrived when referee Nigel Whitehouse reversed a penalty following some back chat by Adam Black after a break by Diego Albanese.

The scene was set, but Mercier's left foot could not administer the knock-out blow.

But Gloucester lost to a side with more variety and whose sum of their parts rose against the odds to secure a famous victory. With that Gloucester could not argue.

They were outsmarted and outmanoeuvred, picked apart by the half-back combination of Bryan Redpath and Charlie Hodgson who ran the game for Sale in a controlled but penetrating performance.

The more time Hodgson had with the ball, the harder Gloucester's task would be and so it proved.

It was a game where the traditions and styles clashed – the grunt and grind of a superior pack of forwards met with a set of three-quarters blessed with pace and drive.

Sale won because their continuity with possession, not only out wide but back inside, was far superior.

They were able to play through a variety of phases with Hodgson at their heart and it was he who created wave after wave of penetration when Sale found parity up front.

The Sharks can also thank an edifying effort from their front five. Alex Sanderson and Pete Anglesea – who were suffocating in their commitment and drive – they never let Gloucester settle.

In their previous two Premiership meetings, Gloucester systematically dismantled Sale in the scrums.

It must have been the part of the game the Manchester side feared most, but they coped with it admirably thanks to a monumental effort from the tight five; so much so, they were even confident enough to re-scrum at one point in the second period.

Gloucester never got the ferocious upper hand they would have wanted, or expected, but the way Sale eroded their 13 point advantage was brilliant.

From the 17th to the 59th minute, Gloucester did not score a point, while Sale contributed with four high quality tries.

It initially looked good when Ed Pearce was able to control a line-out following Mercier's kick to touch, and the Frenchman's pass allowed Terry Fanolua to barrel his way through a series of missed tackles to score terrifically near the posts.

Mercier converted, and then landed a drop-goal for a 13-0 advantage after 17 minutes.

But with nine minutes of the half remaining the tide turned. Jason Robinson created a line for Mark Cueto with a surging break through midfield and Koli Sewabu missed the tackle for the Sale wing to score.

Seven minutes later, Sale were in again. Andy Gomarsall's kick was charged down by Redpath and Dan Harris and Hodgson created room for Steve Hanley to surge away down the left to score.

Sale were irresistible in their effort now and decisive with the ball.

Anglesea, Hanley, Joe Shaw and Stuart Pinkerton were involved in a superbly executed move that enabled Charl Marais to score to put Sale ahead for the first time three minutes into the second half.

Sale's efforts up front allowed Harris to score 10 minutes later and the match was all but up for Gloucester.

They had kicked away possession badly and without direction and were made to pay the heaviest of prices.

But they will take great heart from the way they clawed back, regaining the zeal in the forwards in the final quarter, that firstly created a try for James Forrester with 21 minutes remaining and then Fanolua set up a barnstorming finish with a short range effort.

But the recovery had come too late to save them and not even Mercier could manage it.

GLOUCESTER: C. Catling (H. Paul 73); D. O'Leary (D. Albanese 40), T. Fanolua, R. Todd, J. Simpson-Daniel; L. Mercier, A. Gomarsall; T. Woodman (P. Collazo 50), O. Azam (C. Fortey 73), P. Vickery (capt.), M. Cornwell, E. Pearce (R. Fidler 50), J. Forrester, K. Sewabu (J. Boer 50), J. Paramore.

SALE SHARKS: J. Robinson: M. Cueto, M. Shaw, D. Harris (M. Deane 76), S. Hanley; C. Hodgson (capt.), B. Redpath, K. Yates, C. Marais, S. Turner (A. Black 68), I. Fullerton, C. Jones, A. Sanderson (R. Wilks 61), S. Pinkerton, P. Anglesea.

REFEREE: N. Whitehouse (Wales).

ATTENDANCE: 5,756

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