

THE CITIZEN

MONDAY, JUNE 10, 2002

TWICKENHAM DELIGHT FOR GLORIOUS GLOUCESTER

FIDLER AND BOER LEAD VICTORY CHARGE

GLOUCESTER 28 BRISTOL 23

They finally have their hands on a trophy again. This was not a classic final in the truest sense of the word, but a humdinger in terms of commitment and full-blown anxiety – Gloucester are trophy winners at last.

This day had been a long time coming and Gloucester would have woken up yesterday morning with the mother and father of all hangovers.

The rugby-crazed brethren of this Cherry and White-decked city will milk their Twickenham victory with unstinting pride and enthusiasm until the beginning of next season.

But for Gloucester, this means more than just a trophy. It represents a very real threat to the pre-eminence of Leicester Tigers and their task now is to chase down the European champions with the same relentless hunger that drove them to their first outright trophy since 1978.

Despite neither side coming remotely close to matching their pre-final form, Gloucester held sway in the crucial areas and can thank their resilience and mental fortitude for this victory.

Gloucester were served magnificently by Jake Boer and Rob Fidler in a pack of forwards that created a small but crucial advantage.

They never came to terms with what they are usually good at – the scrum and the line-out – but they won the war of attrition up front, despite valiant efforts from Bristol's Alex Brown and Michael Lipman.

Referee Roy Maybank never allowed Phil Vickery to scrummage against Darren Crompton, while Julian White's monstrous tussle with Patrice Collazo underpinned the edifying commitment of both teams.

Both sides looked jaded and without much spark, but Andy Gomarsall, who was by far the best half-back on show, harried and probed behind Gloucester's forwards, while Ludovic Mercier's goal-kicking was almost faultless. He contributed all but five of their points.

Gloucester can also thank the heavy-hitting menace of Terry Fanolua and Robert Todd in midfield, who tackled ferociously throughout.

Considering this was the 11th month of their season, the drive and fierce commitment was astonishing, even if the end product was not always realised.

The first period was scrappy and disjointed but Gloucester broke the cycle with their only try of the afternoon.

Mercier and Gomarsall revived a flagging move through midfield before Henry Paul's long pass found Collazo and he sent Boer crashing over from short range with an inside pass.

The try broke the deadlock after both teams had been tied at 6-6. It was a crucial advantage.

Gloucester had more power up front but were never allowed to steam into their formidable action in the first period as Bristol stole a good amount of ball that robbed Gloucester of their flow.

But Bristol had been dragged into a battle in the tight and could not get the width or pace on the ball they were craving.

Yet they hit back with a sparkling try minutes after the restart.

A late tackle on Felipe Contepomi gave Bristol a penalty and Agustin Pichot raced up near the Gloucester line and took it quickly.

He evaded the desperate lunge of Vickery and clattered his way through Paul for the try.

That was the one moment Bristol had been hoping for and, in an instant, it looked as if they might shift the balance of power.

Phil Christophers went streaking away past Daren O'Leary but put a foot into touch as Gloucester's advantage wobbled.

But it was only to be a fleeting danger. Mercier calmed Gloucester's nerves with two penalties to make the score 22-13 and seemingly put his team out of sight again.

Wrong. A superbly executed line-out move sent Paul Johnstone charging through. He evaded the weak challenge of Beim and scored a quite superb try. Contepomi added the conversion to leave Gloucester ahead by only two points.

The Cherry and White hordes were momentarily hushed until Mercier came to the rescue. He landed two more penalties to ease Gloucester home.

It was the Frenchman who booted the ball into the crowd to signify the end of Gloucester's trophy drought and set in motion a wave of celebration that will take some time to die down.

The statement of this victory is clear. As Vickery and Andy Deacon hoisted the trophy skywards to a huge roar of delight, the first steps towards hunting down Leicester had been taken.

There is some way to go, but do not discount the importance of this victory for the trophy winners from Kingsholm.

ZURICH FINAL CLOCK WATCH

1 Minute: Darren Crompton penalised in the scrum and Ludovic Mercier lands a 52-metre penalty that bounces off the bar and over.

Gloucester 3, Bristol 0

12 Minutes: Bristol penalised again and Mercier slots his second penalty from the right to increase Gloucester's lead.

Gloucester 6, Bristol 0

15 Minutes: Bristol battle their way back into the contest and earn themselves a penalty that Felipe Contepomi easily converts.

Gloucester 6, Bristol 3

21 Minutes: All Gloucester's early good work disappears when Patrice Collazo is yellow carded for a high tackle on Agustin Pichot. Contepomi converts the penalty to level the scores.

Gloucester 6, Bristol 6

27 Minutes: Bristol reduced to 14 men when Phil Christophers is yellow carded for pulling back Tom Beim after a high catch and break from Henry Paul.

38 Minutes: Gloucester grab their crucial only try when Andy Gomarsall and Paul move play to the left and Collazo sends his inside pass to Jake Boer who powers over. Mercier adds a superb conversion from the left touchline.

Gloucester 13, Bristol 6

40 (plus 5) Minutes: Gareth Archer commits the first of three fouls all of which cost his side points when he stamps on James Forrester. Mercier slots the simple penalty.

Gloucester 16, Bristol 6

SECOND HALF

42 Minutes: Bristol blast back. When Contepomi is high tackled, Pichot takes the penalty from where the ball lands and burst through Gloucester's defence and beats Paul's tackle to score. Contepomi converts.

Gloucester 16, Bristol 13

56 Minutes: Mercier misses a penalty after great tackling work from Paul on Lee Best forces a five metre scrum.

60 Minutes: Possible turning point. The impressive Terry Fanolua breaks through midfield only to be stopped by a superb tackle from Michael Lipman inches short of the line.

63 Minutes: Bristol penalised for offside and Mercier adds the penalty to stretch Gloucester's advantage to six points.

Gloucester 19, Bristol 13

69 Minutes: With time ticking down, Gloucester take a huge step towards the title when Robert Todd makes a brilliant tackle on Christophers. The Bristol centre is penalised for not releasing and Mercier successfully lands his fifth penalty.

Gloucester 22, Bristol 13

73 Minutes: With seven minutes remaining, the game takes another turn. Paul Johnstone collects a tapped line-out and powers forward, bursting away from Beim to score a brilliant try. Contepomi's conversion slashes the deficit to only two points.

Gloucester 22, Bristol 20

75 Minutes: Archer penalised again when he blocks Junior Paramore from collecting his own chip and Mercier makes no mistake with his left foot to put Gloucester a try clear.

Gloucester 25, Bristol 20

77 Minutes: Bristol hit back when Gloucester are penalised in the scrum and Contepomi kicks the penalty.

Gloucester 25, Bristol 23

80 (plus 3) Minutes: Fittingly, Mercier has the final word when Bristol are penalised for offside and he slots his seventh successful penalty out of nine. The party can begin. Gloucester ensure their victory.

Gloucester 28, Bristol 23

FINAL LINE-UPS

GLOUCESTER: H. Paul; D. O'Leary, T. Fanolua (C. Catling 70), R. Todd, T. Beim; L. Mercier, A. Gomarsall; P. Collazo (T. Woodman 49), O. Azam (C. Fortey 72), P. Vickery (c), R. Fidler, E. Pearce (C. Gillies 63), J. Forrester (K. Sewabu 69), J. Boer, J. Paramore.

BRISTOL: L. Best; J. Williams (S. Drahm 70), D. Rees, J. Little (c), P. Christophers; F. Contepomi, A. Pichot; D. Crompton (P. Johnstone 65), N. McCarthy, J. White, G. Archer, A. Brown, C. Short (R. Beattie 40), M. Lipman, B. Sturnham (A. Sheridan 50).

REFEREE: R. Maybank (RFU)

ATTENDANCE: 28,500

STAR MAN: Andy Gomarsall.

JC