

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 29, 2017

AJ BELL STADIUM – AVIVA PREMIERSHIP RUGBY

**GLOUCESTER HUMBLLED AT SALE AS THE SHARKS RUN RIOT AT
THE AJ BELL**

SALE SHARKS 57 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 10

If it could go wrong for Gloucester at the AJ Bell Stadium on Friday evening, it duly did. The Cherry and Whites fell behind early, gifted Sale three tries through interceptions and were simply swept aside in a poor second half, the Sharks running out 57-10 winners.

During the week, Head Coach Johan Ackermann had spoken about the need for discipline and for respecting possession. On the night, they were two areas which let Gloucester down, as Sale scored three tries from interceptions and three tries while their visitors were down to 14 men.

The Cherry and Whites enjoyed decent possession for long periods of the first half, and could conceivably have still been in touch at half-time, but for Byron McGuigan's first interception which came as a bitter blow as Gloucester poured forward in search of the score that would have got them back into the game.

They could also point to the glorious scoring opportunity that they squandered when trailing 7-3 after Willi Heinz's superb break from his own 22. Had Gloucester converted that, and taken the lead, who knows?

But that's a case of what ifs, and the sad truth of the matter is that Gloucester were soundly outplayed on the night. Trailing to a couple of really well taken early scores, they had to chase the game and played right into Sale's hands.

The home team grew visibly in confidence as the game progressed and pounced mercilessly during a purple patch in the second half, as they ran in five tries in 24 minutes with Gloucester at sixes and sevens.

Sale's finishing on the night was clinical whereas Gloucester can only look back upon no end of visits to the home 22, a number of five metre lineouts and very little to show for it all.

A period of soul-searching lies ahead of the Cherry and Whites; this was a performance that can't be repeated and a bounce back performance next week against Northampton is a must.

It went wrong right from the off. Gloucester were stunned within a minute of the kick off.

Denny Solomona got the ball in some space on the right, chipped ahead and the ball stood up beautifully for the winger to gather and score, AJ MacGinty having an easy conversion for a 7-0 lead.

It was a moment of individual brilliance, one that Gloucester really didn't need to be on the receiving end of so early on and lifted the sparse home crowd to their feet.

The Cherry and Whites may have been rocked, but they responded positively, patiently making their way into the home 22 and chipping away at the lead with a Billy Burns penalty on 8 minutes.

And they so very nearly took the lead straight from the restart, as Ruan Ackermann's offload saw Willi Heinz break from his own 22. The skipper showed great strength and speed to get into the Sale 22, but the ball was knocked on when recycled with an overlap beckoning.

There were more promising signs from Gloucester in attack, the scrum looked solid but a couple of key lineouts saw chances go begging. And then the momentum swung violently the way of the home team.

Gloucester were undone as a chip over the top fell into Sale hands. A neat chip over the top by de Klerk duly found no-one at home and Byron McGuigan kicked ahead to score. MacGinty converted again to open up a 14-3 gap.

Gloucester tried to hit back, Richard Hibbard and Billy Twelvetrees leading the way with some powerful ball carries, but the Sale defence was tackling well and the final pass continued to elude the Cherry and Whites.

Gloucester kept up the pressure, forcing a number of close-range lineouts as Sale gave away a number of penalties but, with the home team creaking, Bryn Evans produced a vital steal to rescue his team.

Despite Gloucester dominating possession and territory, they were promptly undone by a real sucker punch on 33 minutes.

Freddie Clarke had made a powerful break to get his team on the front foot, but Billy Twelvetrees' pass was picked off by McGuigan and the winger just held off Jason Woodward to score. It was a hammer blow.

19-3 down with just a few minutes to go until half-time, Gloucester were up against it and the home team poured forward to press home their advantage. They duly did so in the last minute from a MacGinty penalty.

So, the home team went into half-time with a decent 22-3 lead and few could argue with the score. Gloucester had enjoyed decent spells of possession in and around the home 22 but had come away with nothing.

In contrast, Sale had struck with two early moments of individual skill then pounced for an interception which really rubbed salt into the wounds. Gloucester were going to have to improve drastically in the second half. However, the home side were quickly back on the front foot and Billy Twelvetrees was yellow carded for pulling back Tom Curry.

A man to the good, Sale pounced as Faf de Klerk wriggled his way over from close range. MacGinty converted for 29-3.

Sale were rampant now, and the fifth try wasn't long in coming as Solomona cut a fine angle as he came in off his wing and went over untouched. The conversion was a formality. Five minutes later and James O'Connor was over for a debut try, the extras making it 43-3.

Bad went to worse. As Gloucester pressed in vain to try and get something from the game, Sam James picked off an errant pass and went all the way. Four minutes later, McGuigan repeated the feat for, unbelievably, a third interception try as Sale were able to gamble in defence.

Gloucester had the final word as John Afoa went over with four minutes to go, but it was scant consolation.

A night to learn from but, ultimately, one to forget.

JC