

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 7, 2017

KINGSHOLM – AVIVA PREMIERSHIP RUGBY

INSPIRED GLOUCESTER HANG ON FOR DRAMATIC PREMIERSHIP
WIN OVER SAINTS

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 29 NORTHAMPTON SAINTS 24

It went down to the wire, with Northampton pushing for a winning score with the final phase of the game. But Gloucester held on for a thrilling 29-24 Aviva Premiership victory over the Saints at Kingsholm on Saturday afternoon.

Over the past week or so, Gloucester have taken a hammering by various media pundits. Descriptions have varied from 'frustrating' to 'pathetic' following the defeat at Sale. Today, against Northampton, a few of those critics may just have inspired the Cherry and Whites.

A bonus point win against the league leaders, a team currently in great form, was something not a lot of neutral observers would have predicted. And it was done in adversity, Ed Slater lost to injury in the warm-up, his back-up Jeremy Thrush battling through an ankle injury.

And a word for Henry Trinder. His class has never been in doubt. But the injuries that have disrupted his career have been ill-timed and cruel. So, to see him gliding around Kingsholm, tormenting the Saints defence with his sleight of hand and quick feet was heart-warming.

Of course, Gloucester tormented their fans as they have done so often in recent seasons, by keeping the result in the balance right until the very final whistle.

To be fair to the Saints, they were never really out of this and they certainly have a never say die attitude about them.

When they had a five metre lineout with no time left to play, you'd have got good odds on a Northampton score. But, as they set up the maul, a man positioned himself in front of the jumper and was deemed offside. Wayne Barnes awarded the penalty and Kingsholm erupted.

It means that Gloucester finish the first batch of Aviva Premiership matches having won three matches from six. Not bad but could do better would read the school report, but the win will send the Cherry and Whites into Europe on a positive note.

There was late disruption on the day for Gloucester as Ed Slater was forced to withdraw in the warm-ups, Jeremy Thrush coming into the starting line-up and Jake Polledri taking Thrush's place in the replacements.

The Cherry and Whites had the first chance of points, but Owen Williams was wide of the mark with a difficult long-range penalty as Gloucester looked for a fast start in front of their home crowd.

And Gloucester certainly looked fired up in the opening exchanges, Henry Purdy making one good break down the right and also ripping the ball away from George North in contact when called upon to defend.

And the breakthrough came on nine minutes. Gloucester went left from a scrum on halfway, Heinz making the initial yards before Twelvetrees found Trinder who dummied his way clear. A tap tackle looked to have halted him, but the centre got back to his feet to dive over.

Gloucester went in search of a second after an excellent penalty kick to touch by Williams, but lost the ball near the line and almost paid a dear price as Saints tried to go the length, Cobus Reinach making good yards, but eager hands also knocked on near the line.

It delayed the visitors only momentarily. A midfield break by Luther Burrell was the incisive contribution and neat hands saw Jamie Gibson canter over on the right. Harry Mallinder added an excellent conversion for a 5-7 score-line.

It was a good spell for the Saints, who were depriving Gloucester of any form of meaningful possession, and missed the chance to extend their lead on 25 minutes as Harry Mallinder hooked a penalty wide after Gloucester were penalised at a set scrum.

A mental error then almost hurt the Cherry and Whites as they were deemed to have carried back into their own 22 and cleared direct to touch. It gave Saints A1 field position, but a crucial turnover from Ruan Ackermann saved the day.

Not many points at this stage, but gripping stuff as both teams enjoyed visits to the opposing 22 only to misfire when in the red zone.

But Gloucester struck just as it seemed as though the half would end on the same 5-7 score-line. A penalty went to the corner, the forwards trucked it up, but it was lightning feet by Trinder once again as he stepped inside to score against the odds.

It gave Gloucester a narrow, but well-deserved 10-7 lead at the interval. And it could have been even better with Owen Williams struggling to find his range off the kicking tee.

There was certainly plenty to talk about. Northampton were looking a confident, well-drilled outfit but were perhaps fortunate to have escaped a yellow card for any of three offences – tackling a man in the air, preventing a quick tap being taken or a high tackle. Take your pick!

The home side were bouncing back well after last weekend though. The scrum and defence looked solid and there was invention in attack. Only a couple of missed lineouts were a blot on the copybook. All to play for in the second half.

However, Saints pounced first. Trinder's kick downfield was fielded by Ahsee Tuala and the full-back evaded the two follow-up tackles. A quick burst of speed and a nicely timed pass and Harry Mallinder was over. The fly-half converted his own try for 10-14 and a good riposte from the league leaders.

Then a stroke of luck for Gloucester. Willi Heinz's box kick was half charged down but the ball fell to Jeremy Thrush who rampaged downfield. A few patient phases followed before Heinz's cross kick was plucked out of the air by Jason Woodward and the full-back fought his way to the line for 15-14.

Mallinder was then off target with a more than kickable penalty, but the pressure was straight back on Gloucester as Williams had a kick charged down and a lineout was lost. However, Ackermann came up with yet another key turnover.

Having dodged a bullet though, Gloucester were penalised at the next phase of play and Mallinder slotted an excellent long-range penalty.

But Gloucester scored from the restart and it was a cracker. Williams' low, short restart, obviously a pre-planned move, was grasped by Trinder who powered into the 22. He was hauled down just short, but Gloucester kept their cool and Billy Twelvetrees powered onto Heinz's flat pass to score. Williams added the extra for 22-17.

And there was better still to come. Willi Heinz seemed to have missed the ball coming out of the base of a scrum, but gathered, shrugged off a couple of tacklers and powered his way to the line for a superb solo score from 25 metres. Williams converted again.

Gloucester were well-set at 29-17 but, if anything, they'd scored too early and left Saints with too much time on the clock. The visitors emptied their bench, sending on experience and also a lot of bulk.

The latter made an immediate impact, Apu Ratuniyarawa featuring prominently in a close-range catch and drive which resulted in a try for Mikey Haywood. Stephen Myler converted to make it a one score game at 29-24.

Gloucester fans have seen this scenario so many times over the past couple of years, their team grimly defending a narrow lead only to slip to a heart-breaking defeat.

And, as they tried to run out the clock only to succeed in conceding a penalty for sealing off, there were memories of Bordeaux-Begles all around the stadium.

It wasn't to be on this occasion though. Despite knocking on the door, Saints came up just short and the celebrations began.

JC