

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 12, 2017

STADE DU HAMEAU – EUROPEAN RUGBY CHALLENGE CUP

**ERROR STREWN FIRST HALF COSTS GLOUCESTER DEAR IN
EUROPEAN OPENER AT PAU**

PAU 27 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 21

Gloucester's away-day woes continued as, despite a spirited comeback, they paid the price for a sluggish opening 40 minutes and kicked off their European Rugby Challenge Cup campaign with a 27-21 defeat at Pau.

Three second-half tries, part of a brave second-half comeback, weren't quite enough to claw back the home side on the night and Gloucester are left with only a losing bonus point to show for their efforts.

It all adds up to a disappointing start to their European Rugby Challenge Cup campaign, a tournament which Gloucester have enjoyed in recent seasons.

However, they were left with simply too much to do after a scrappy first-half performance which left them chasing the game. That said, when they did finally click into gear, they started to run Pau ragged and Gloucester so nearly pulled a fine fight-back.

Indeed, at 20-14, chasing the go-ahead third try, had Owen Williams' chip found a team-mate's hands rather than those of Frank Halai, Gloucester could well have snatched this. But Halai gleefully grabbed the ball and went all the way to crush the comeback.

Henry Purdy's last-gasp score, superbly converted by Williams from the touchline, proved only to be a consolation. It could turn out to be a crucial point in the grand scheme of things, only time will tell.

But, for now, Gloucester will leave the South of France deeply disappointed at losing a game they could and perhaps should have won.

It's a game of fine margins at this level, and there were so many 'if onlys' about the performance this evening. The rejigged starting XV did struggle to gel in the opening exchanges, but the defensive effort verged on the heroic at times.

However, the opening try had more than a hint of offside about it while the second was a defensive mis-communication in midfield. On the contrary, when Gloucester carved out a scoring opportunity, Jacob Rowan had the ball ripped from his grasp as he went for the line and the chance was gone.

The second half was better, although Pau were able to stretch further away with two Colin Slade penalties. But, once Gloucester clicked into gear, they stretched the home team all over the park. Some of the attacking play in the final quarter was very slick and spoke volumes for the character of the squad.

For now, though, the main feeling is one of '...what might have been...', but there's plenty of rugby to play in this competition yet.

Compared to recent trips to the likes of La Rochelle, it was actually quite a subdued atmosphere as the game got underway at the Stade du Hameau with the stadium just over half full and little raucous singing and flag-waving.

It was honours even in the opening few minutes. Owen Williams produced one nice touch-finder whereas Pau were quickly using their big runners to test Gloucester around the fringes.

Aided by a couple of soft penalties, the home team were able to dominate field position in the opening 10 minutes though, and Gloucester's defence got a good workout. At this stage, it was up to the task.

But, having soaked up so much pressure, Gloucester were ironically undone as they turned over ball while on the front foot. Callum Braley passed the ball out to where Pau flanker Daniel Ramsey was stood waiting and he ran it in from 35 metres. Slade converted from the touchline for 7-0. Was Ramsey offside? Not according to the officials.

It was a bizarre and frustrating score to concede after so much good work in defence. Gloucester nearly hit back soon afterwards as Mark Atkinson charged down a kick in the Pau 22, but the ball fell kindly for Frank Halai and the wing rescued the situation.

And Pau took full advantage. Slade's delayed pass saw Benson Stanley steam through in midfield and the fly-half kept up to take the return pass and coast home unopposed. Slade converted his own try for 14-0 after 25 minutes.

Gloucester had been starved of possession and badly needed the next score. It so very nearly came from Jacob Rowan, but full-back Buros ripped the ball out of the flanker's grip as he reached for the line after some good build-up play.

The half-hour mark came and went and Gloucester were still struggling to get into the game. A couple of key lineouts were lost and the handling looked nervy. The one positive was seeing Pau's tormentor-in-chief Benson Stanley limp off.

Half-time duly came with Gloucester still striving to find some cohesion to their play and the home team were, quite frankly, good value for their lead. Their tries had been relatively soft ones to concede, but they had quite comfortably dominated possession and territory.

And the errors continued after the resumption. The restart was spilled, giving Pau superb field position. Ill-discipline compounded matters and Slade had an easy penalty for 17-0. Johan Ackermann responded by sending on James Hanson and Gareth Denman.

However, the momentum was still with the home side and Slade made it 20-0 on 50 minutes with his second penalty of the evening as Gloucester were penalised at a ruck in their own half.

But, on 55 minutes, Gloucester finally got on the scoreboard as they took advantage of some home ill-discipline. Kicking a penalty to the corner, the catch and drive was patiently set and Ruan Ackermann claimed the try. Owen Williams added a good conversion. 20 points to 7 now the gap and still a glimmer of hope.

Pau did their best to snuff out that glimmer with a powerful catch and drive of their own, but a key turnover rescued Gloucester just as the line looked set to be breached.

And Gloucester then made things interesting, as slick handling made inroads into the Pau defence. Jake Polledri looked to be clear but was just tap-tackled, but the ball was kept alive with a superb offload by David Halaifonua for Ben Vellacott to score. Williams added the extras to make it 20-14 with nine minutes left to play.

Quickly back on the front foot, Gloucester looked set to complete an amazing fight-back with Pau stretched in defence, but Owen Williams' chip over the Pau defensive line only found Frank Halai and the winger ran it in from his own 22, the conversion making it 27-14.

It sealed the game, but Gloucester fought tooth and nail until the very last minute as they looked for at least a losing bonus point to take home with them and did score a third try as Henry Purdy gathered a cross kick to touch down after a period of pressure.

The conversion was wide out, but Williams kept his cool and bisected the posts to at least give Gloucester something to show for their efforts; the least they deserved after the way they fought back.