

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 9, 2017

STADIO SERGIO LANFRACHI – EUROPEAN RUGBY CHALLENGE CUP

GLOUCESTER DIG DEEP TO COMPLETE THEIR ITALIAN JOB
AGAINST ZEBRE

ZEBRE RUGBY CLUB 26 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 33

After a shaky opening, when they went 0-14 down, Gloucester had to fight hard to clinch five vital European Rugby Challenge Cup points, eventually triumphing by 33 points to 26 over Zebre on Saturday afternoon.

Looking to build on a good recent run of form, and a week of positive contract announcements, Gloucester were made to scrap right until the very last whistle to come away with the win.

Zebre came into the game having lost their opening two matches in the competition, but they showed early on that they were in no mood to roll over in front of their own fans. In fact, they positively rocked Gloucester with two early tries.

It was an error-strewn and disjointed first half hour from Gloucester, whose lack of precision very much played into the hands of their hosts.

Gloucester also didn't get the benefit of several 50-50 decisions in that first half. Zebre's second try would have gone to the TMO had there been one on duty. Ben Vellacott seemed to score by touching the ball against the foot of the post pad but didn't get the call and Tom Savage had a try chalked off for crossing.

Finally though, the passes began to stick and Gloucester's fluidity started to return.

A decent spell of play either side of half-time swung the game their way although they could never quite shake off Zebre and Gaffney's late try made it a nervous final few minutes.

But, despite a couple of late alarms, Gloucester closed out the game to nicely set up next weekend's return fixture between the two sides and keep the Cherry and Whites breathing down Pau's necks at the top of the pool.

It was a dry, calm day in Parma, without a cloud in the blue sky and perfect conditions for rugby for the visitors, dressed all in pink, and roared on by a typically vociferous travelling support.

Gloucester showed their attacking intent with their first touches of the game, but Zebre had most of the initial possession and territory. A breakdown penalty relieved the pressure for the visitors, but they were soon on the defensive again in their 22 as Zebre earned a decision at the scrum.

The Zebre attack was aggressive and committed, and Irishman Ciaran Gaffney was only denied by the corner flag.

It was a brief reprieve; Zebre did open the scoring, and they were full value for it, flanker Johan Meyer applying the finishing touches to a break from fellow back rower Renato Giammaroli; Carlo Canna converting from wide.

The opening from Gloucester lacked fluidity, and a few errors crept into their game, providing the hosts with the possession and territory to attack, and test the visiting defence.

The hosts then doubled their lead, the Gloucester defence stretched with a number of phases in the 22. The Gloucester defence looked to have tackled Renato Giammaroli into touch, but the number eight reached out a hand to score in the corner. Canna again converting superbly from touch.

The response from Gloucester was good, a rolling maul earned a penalty, and the attacking maul was brought to ground over the Zebre line, handing the visitors a 5 metre scrum.

Then Gloucester did find a genuine response, Jake Polledri barging his way through a midfield gap and racing downfield. But, as he barged past the last defender, he was brought to ground at the expense of a penalty.

The visitors regrouped, and from the maul, Ruan Ackermann went solo to barge over the line. Williams converting confidently.

Concerted Gloucester pressure almost yielded the leveller; plenty of pressure on the Zebre line brought a pair of penalties, but as Tom Savage barged over the line, referee Mike Adamson called play back for crossing and the chance was gone, and Zebre escaped.

Gloucester regrouped and set up another attack and did get level. The maul won the ground, and Ollie Thorley shot through a gap on a great line, benefitting from a sublime offload from Richard Hibbard, to touch down. Williams levelled the scores with the conversion.

It didn't last long though. Time was up on the clock, but Zebre were clinical in attack and with men being hit back by the Gloucester defence, fly half Carlo Canna took a risk and his through-the-legs reverse pass kept the ball alive, before a perfect inside pass found centre Tommaso Boni to collect and score.

It was hugely important for Gloucester to score first in the second half, and they did so in fine style. Ollie Thorley the scorer, but the score owed much to the carrying prowess of Jake Polledri.

In the first half he had showed his hand with the ball, and he barged his way through the Zebre midfield, breaking into the 22. He found Charlie Sharples on his shoulder and the ball was worked to Thorley to race through the defence to score, and with Williams' conversion, the visitors had taken the lead for the first time.

It got better for the Cherry and Whites minutes later, back row duo Polledri and Freddie Clarke earned the penalty, and the maul was cleverly worked for that man Polledri to make more metres.

Gloucester were patient and Owen Williams danced his way through the Zebre defence. With the full back to beat, the fly half danced through the tackle, reaching out to score and bag the bonus point try, opening up a nine-point, and a two score lead.

Zebre were then dealt a blow as outside centre Mattia Bellini was shown a yellow card for a deliberate knock on as Gloucester threatened in the Zebre half. Gloucester continued the pressure, but a promising move broke down following interjection from the touch judge, and Zebre wrestled back the possession.

The home team set up a number of attacking opportunities, but crucially lost the ball at key moments, and the Gloucester defence was muscling up as replacements began to enter the fray.

Crucially in the second half, the Cherry and White pack was impressing and began to dominate the Italian engine room, winning a number of scrum penalties against the head. The forward dominance finally took its toll and Richard Hibbard finished off a well-worked catch and drive for 33-14.

But Zebre were not quite out of the game; they were committed and despite an attack seemingly going nowhere, a loose ball was hacked on by Giammaroli, and winger Ciaran Gaffney won the race to dot down in goal. Mike Adamson conferred with his assistants and confirmed. Zebre had a sniff.

But the Cherry and Whites held their nerve, and ran down the clock to take the victory and keep qualification hopes alive with a bonus point victory on the road.