

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 30, 2017

KINGSHOLM – AVIVA PREMIERSHIP RUGBY

**TWELVETREES' TWO LATE PENALTIES CLINCH NARROW 20-16 WIN
OVER SALE**

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 20 SALE SHARKS 16

Gloucester Rugby finished 2017 on a high note with a 20-16 home Aviva Premiership victory over Sale Sharks at Kingsholm on Saturday, but they did it the hard way, defending their own line in the final moments to close out the win.

It was an afternoon when Gloucester made life difficult for themselves, a high error count and large number of penalties conceded contributing to Sale staying within striking range throughout.

Credit to the visitors, they played their part in frustrating Gloucester, and could never quite be shaken off even when the Cherry and Whites did battle their way in front. But sometimes you have to win ugly – four points earned playing in a scrappy fashion is the same as four points earned playing champagne rugby.

On the day, Sale did ease to an early 0-6 lead, making the most of Gloucester indiscretions with AJ MacGinty in accurate form off the kicking tee.

The Cherry and Whites battled back to take the lead twice, only to immediately surrender it again before Twelvetrees stepped up and kept a cool head to slot two long-range penalties.

The second was particularly significant as it opened up a four point lead at 20-16.

That proved to be vital as indiscipline turned an attacking position into one where Gloucester were desperately defending their line with no time left on the clock. Sale had to go for the try and came desperately close until a superb turnover from Ed Slater, ripping the ball from the grasp of Andrei Ostrikov, secured the win and started the celebrations.

It means that Gloucester, after 12 rounds of Aviva Premiership action, head into 2018 in fourth place in the table. It's quite some turnaround but, as Johan Ackermann told the gathered media after the game, there's still a lot of rugby to play for and nothing has been achieved yet.

Northampton are next up next Saturday, and the focus will go no further ahead than that. A week of intense preparation lies ahead.

It was a promising start from Gloucester on the day, playing into a stiff breeze, moving the ball around with ambition but unable to make any real dents into a robust Sale defence in the opening minutes.

Tom Marshall lit up the crowd with one lovely break down the right wing, but Gloucester couldn't capitalise and then had to defend themselves as MacGinty inspired a counter-attack which saw the visitors threaten.

And it was Sale who had the first chance of points as Gloucester lost a lineout and were then penalised at a subsequent ruck. AJ MacGinty was head on to the posts and made no mistake off the tee for 0-3 after 12 minutes.

Gloucester were struggling to get into their game in this first quarter, while Sale were looking physical and solid and it came as no real surprise when MacGinty extended the lead to 0-6 after 19 minutes with his second penalty.

But the Cherry and Whites finally got some front foot ball as Andy Symons broke from his 22, offloading superbly to Lewis Ludlow.

The flanker found Ben Vellacott in support but he was caught by Denny Solomona.

Sale conceded a penalty but Twelvetrees pushed his kick wide of the posts to continue the frustration.

Gloucester needed a spark and it very nearly came from first phase ball, Charlie Sharples coming in off his wing and scything his way through. But he couldn't quite beat the last man and Gloucester turned down a kickable penalty in favour of a five metre scrum.

The bold decision paid off as, despite some more physical Sale defence, Gloucester stayed patient near the line and Symons put David Halaifonua over in the corner with a neat pass under pressure. Twelvetrees added a magnificent touchline conversion for 7-6 lead after 34 minutes.

The restart was knocked on to pile the pressure back on, Janse Van Rensburg punching a hole in the midfield defence but the Gloucester pack rescued an ominous position by winning a scrum penalty near their own line.

Gloucester stayed ambitious as half-time approached, but it ultimately cost them as they were penalised for failing to release in the tackle and MacGinty was able to slot his third penalty for a 7-9 lead as time expired.

All in all it had been a frustrating 40 minutes for Gloucester who hadn't really hit their stride. They were being forced into some handling errors in the face of some physical Sale tackling and this was preventing any real momentum being created.

Halaifonua's try was a morale-booster as half-time neared, but conceding the lead shortly afterwards was disappointing. Gloucester did at least know they would now be playing with the wind at their backs but it would have to be used wisely.

The Cherry and Whites started well, Sale indiscipline allowing them to move into the 22. Sale held out initially as Gloucester tried the catch and drive from five metres out, but when the ball came out Ben Vellacott showed great strength to fight his way to the line. Twelvetrees converted for 14-9.

However, the hard work was promptly undone as Sale kicked a penalty into the 22, Faf de Klerk made a sniping break around the rear of the lineout and offloaded to MacGinty who stepped his way to the line for the try. The fly-half converted his score for 14-16.

It was a soft score to concede and desperately disappointing after the hard work put in to take the lead. Gloucester would need to regroup and go again.

Sale dodged a bullet as Jono Ross tackled Ben Vellacott early as the scrum-half took a quick tap and then killed the ball but no yellow card was issued. Gloucester piled on the pressure but couldn't quite get over the line as Sale defended for their lives.

There looked to be no way through the thick blue line at this point, despite huge efforts being put in, but Sale finally conceded a penalty just inside their own half and Billy Twelvetrees knocked it over for a narrow 17-16 lead after 64 minutes.

Twelvetrees then crucially backed it up with another long-range effort to extend the lead to four points at 20-16 with the game now in its final ten minutes.

The Cherry and Whites then went for the jugular as time started to run out, but lost a vital lineout near the Sale line and then conceded several penalties in a row to take play to within metres of the Gloucester line.

There was a nervous buzz around Kingsholm as the sell-out crowd held its breath. Gloucester were on a final warning and seemed to be creaking. This time last year, this game would probably have been lost.

However, cometh the hour, cometh the man. Ed Slater has contributed some key moments to Gloucester's season so far and came up with another, snaffling possession as Sale faltered at the set piece.

It brought play, and Gloucester's 2017, to a close. 2018 promises to be an exciting one!

JC