

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, JANUARY 6, 2018

FRANKLIN'S GARDENS – AVIVA PREMIERSHIP RUGBY

GLOUCESTER DENIED IN THE LAST MINUTE AT SAINTS
BY PENALTY TRY

NORTHAMPTON SAINTS 22 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 19

Gloucester came within seconds of triumphing at Franklin's Gardens, only to be denied by a last-minute penalty try which gave Northampton a narrow 22-19 Aviva Premiership victory.

It was a game that Gloucester lost rather than Northampton winning. The Cherry and Whites had the Saints by the throat midway through the second half when they led 8-19, but couldn't quite deliver the coup de grace.

Even when Saints narrowed the gap to 15-19 courtesy of Nic Groom's close-range try, there were chances to finish the game off but, crucially, none were taken.

And the final few minutes had an air of inevitability about them as error after error, not all of Gloucester's making, cost them dear as Northampton pounced.

A missed lineout as Gloucester went for the fourth and decisive try, was followed by a dubious knock-on called against Jason Woodward. Gloucester were then penalised at a scrum, an area they'd dominated, then lost another lineout before another controversial call went against Henry Trinder, this time for offside.

It allowed Saints to move into the red zone and a dangerous catch and drive looked to have come up short. However, referee Tempest and TMO conferred and decided that Andy Symons had collapsed the maul.

A penalty try followed and Saints had snatched a win from the jaws of defeat.

It was gut wrenching for Gloucester who knew that they should have closed this one out and had largely contributed to their own downfall. It's the sort of game that Gloucester have managed to edge this season. On this occasion, a vital late score went against them.

The Cherry and Whites remain in the top four of the table for the time being with the Aviva Premiership taking a back seat as European and Anglo-Welsh action beckons, and will be determined to get back to winning ways when the league resumes.

For now though, there's a long trip home thinking about what might have, and perhaps, should have been.

It was bitterly cold but dry as kick-off time dawned at Franklin's Gardens, both teams lining up as announced the day before.

Both teams looked ambitious from the off, but Gloucester had an early opportunity to take the lead as Mariano Galarza was taken out in the air at a lineout, but Owen Williams dragged his kick wide of the left hand upright.

And the home team belied their recent poor run of form by opening the scoring after 11 minutes. Ahsee Tuala started things off by taking a high kick well and offloading swiftly. Gloucester regrouped but were caught short on the left and Ken Pisi had the strength to step off his right foot and make the line for a 5-0 lead.

The Cherry and Whites regrouped in some style. A penalty award allowed Owen Williams to drive play into the Saints 22 and the pack took over. The catch and drive was powerful and well controlled, Api Ratuniyarawa pulled it down and the penalty try was inevitable.

The second row was also sinbinned and Gloucester had a chance to profit from a five metre scrum and five metre lineout soon afterwards, but were penalised for a neck roll at the next ruck.

The home team took advantage, benefitting from a couple of penalty awards and, following the second, Harry Mallinder slotted his first penalty of the afternoon to move Saints narrowly in front at 8-7.

Again the response was impressive from Gloucester. The pack again paved the way, driving Saints off their own scrum ball. David Halaifonua produced a powerful surge down the left, but it was James Hanson who burrowed over from close range, Owen Williams landing a tough conversion for an 8-14 lead.

And it was the Cherry and Whites who were pushing hard as the half came to an end, almost benefitting from a missed lineout throw from Dylan Hartley near his own line but running out of time with a close-range scrum pending.

So, Gloucester were edging it at half-time but there was little to choose between the two sides on the scoreboard. However, the Cherry and Whites were looking up for it and, with a little more accuracy, could have been further ahead.

Saints claimed the second-half restart and Gloucester came under pressure, having to defend their line as the home team looked for a morale boosting score.

Gloucester weathered the storm and threatened at the other end but couldn't finish from a five metre lineout.

But it only delayed Gloucester for a couple of minutes. Jake Polledri carried powerfully into the 22, before Owen Williams challenged the defensive line, offloaded brilliantly and John Afoa gathered skilfully to score. 8-19 after 54 minutes.

But Gloucester switched off fatally for the restart allowing Pisi to gather. The home team poured forward, sniffing the whitewash, and it was scum-half Nic Groom who sniped over. Mallinder converted and Saints were back in at 15-19.

The home team were re-invigorated, but Jason Woodward very nearly latched on to a cross kick only to be beaten by the cover and Owen Williams was off target with a 63rd minute penalty attempt as the game remained in the balance.

Gloucester looked the more likely to score and had several visits to the Saints 22 without coming away with anything to show for their efforts.

With just a few minutes to go, Gloucester opted to kick for the corner rather than take a tricky shot at the posts. It was the right call at the time, and they'd probably make the same call again should history repeat itself.

However, the game unravelled from there and four points slipped through the fingers.

JC