

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

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ALFRED ARMANDIE STADE – EUROPEAN RUGBY CHALLENGE CUP

GLOUCESTER SET UP FINAL ROUND DECIDER
AFTER HARD FOUGHT AGEN TRIUMPH

AGEN 24 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 45

Gloucester passed a tricky examination in South West France on Friday evening, setting up a winner takes all Round Six fixture following a bonus point win over a spirited Agen outfit.

The visitors scored six impressive tries in all, adding to a perfect night from the tee from fly half Owen Williams to lay down the gauntlet to Pau ahead of next weekend's final round.

Perhaps frustratingly however, Agen crossed for a try bonus point of their own as the second half saw a raft of mistakes and loose play.

After having to defend stoutly in the opening stages, Gloucester stunned Agen with a sixth minute score, and it was a cracker.

Callum Braley took a quick tap and found Henry Trinder in space. The centre made good ground before dinking over the top and hacking ahead for Henry Purdy to win the race and score. Owen Williams added a fine conversion.

Gloucester kept up the pressure and the second try wasn't long in coming. A five metre lineout was held out, but play was switched to the left where Owen Williams sucked in two defenders before floating a pass over the final man for Purdy to add his second. Williams added a second excellent conversion.

Some strong scrummaging then allowed Gloucester to escape a possibly tricky situation and they took full advantage. Polledri and Sharples carried well, before Callum Braley dummied his way clear from a ruck and dived over under the posts. Williams had his easiest conversion for 0-21 after 19 minutes.

Agen did have a chance to hit back as Gloucester gave away a penalty for a high tackle. Agen went to the corner, but the ball only found Charlie Sharples who stretched his legs down the right flank before kicking ahead, but Gloucester couldn't capitalise.

The home team didn't mess up their second five metre lineout though. The initial surge was held, but Agen went to the narrow side and flanker Marco Kotze muscled his way over.

After a sluggish few minutes, that score, plus the loss of Charlie Sharples, seemed to spur Gloucester into action. Tom Marshall made the incisive break, and Braley almost dribbled his way to the line, but it was Owen Williams' chip over the top that proved pivotal, finding Jason Woodward for the score. The fly-half converted from the touchline.

The try scoring bonus point was in the bag, but there was still work to do and Agen pushed hard in the final few moments of the half. Gloucester lost a lineout to give the home team superb field position, but dogged defence kept the line intact.

5-28 to Gloucester at half-time and they were good value for it. However, Agen had shown that they were willing to take advantage of any lapses in concentration, Gloucester would need a professional second 40 minutes to prevail.

Gloucester started the second half in fine style. Trinder pinned Agen back deep with a fine kick, the pack produced a powerful catch and drive before releasing the ball for Mark Atkinson to dummy his way through a tackle before keeping the legs pumping to drive to the line. Williams had an easy conversion for 5-35.

But Gloucester were caught offside chasing a high kick shortly afterwards and it gave the home side a perfect chance to hit back. Gloucester defended well, but finally an opening was created and Johann Sadie sliced through a gap to score, Verdu converting for 12-35.

The home side may have been playing only for pride to the neutral, but they clearly hadn't thrown in the towel and nearly scored a third on 51 minutes but cold hands butchered a glorious chance.

The game had become very scrappy with Gloucester still looking to attack at every opportunity, but lacking precision and it was Agen who struck next. Brendan Holder benefitted from a lucky bounce of a kick through, but was just hauled down by Tom Marshall. Agen stayed patient and it was former Gloucester favourite Akapusi Qera who forced his way over in the corner.

Gloucester needed to settle things down a bit as Agen were now playing with a freedom not seen before, the home crowd finally finding their collective voice and getting behind their men.

So it came as no real surprise when Gloucester opted to take the points after Richard Hibbard was chopped down by a 'no arms' tackle. Owen Williams slotted the penalty and it was a three score game at 17-38.

And Gloucester put the game to bed on 69 minutes. A defensive turnover saw Billy Twelvetrees kick downfield. The chasers won possession, Freddie Clarke almost broke clear, but Ed Slater was on hand to take the offload from Jeremy Thrush and power over. Williams converted again for 17-45.

There was still time for Agen to restore some pride as they secured a try scoring bonus point as Jessy Jegerkehner won the chase to a loose ball in the in-goal area after Gloucester had slapped back Agen lineout ball near their own line. Jeremy Russell added an excellent conversion, but it was a mere consolation.