

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

FRIDAY, JANUARY 19, 2018

KINGSHOLM – EUROPEAN RUGBY CHALLENGE CUP

**STREETWISE PAU CLOSE OUT THE POOL FOLLOWING
24-34 EURO WIN AT KINGSHOLM**

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 24 PAU 34

A frustrating night at Kingsholm as Gloucester tasted defeat at home for the first time this season, a European Rugby Challenge Cup loss to Pau meaning the visitors top the pool and Gloucester will face an away quarter-final.

It had all looked so promising when Jeremy Thrush burrowed his way over to give Gloucester a 7-0 lead early in the first half. However, from that moment on, Pau gradually took control and started to strangle the life out of the game.

The big name players who they brought back for this game – Armitage, Mowen, Slade and Smith – all had influential games and made key contributions throughout the 80 minutes.

The visitors were very efficient in possession and their defence was stifling. That said, the game was on a knife edge until a missed lineout gifted Pau seven points on the stroke of half time.

Gloucester did battle their way back into it courtesy of a Billy Twelvetrees penalty soon after the resumption. But Pau stuck to their game plan and hit Gloucester with a number of scores in quick succession.

A couple were very well taken, but a couple will leave Gloucester ruing mistakes which were ruthlessly exploited by the men in black and green.

That was very much the case in the first meeting between the two sides, back in October, and it will be a big learning experience for the Cherry and Whites.

But, a quarter-final berth has been clinched and, even though Gloucester will now have to win on the road to progress in the competition, they are still in the mix.

Gloucester dominated the first couple of minutes of possession, but could make few inroads into some solid Pau defence and Steffon Armitage won the first penalty of the game for some good work at the breakdown.

The former England flanker was a prominent figure in these opening few minutes, winning a second breakdown penalty and producing a powerful carry with ball in hand as Pau tried to gain the upper hand.

It had been hard going for the Cherry and Whites, but Billy Burns lifted the crowd with two chips over the defensive line and Jason Woodward launched one thrilling counter attack from his own 22.

Billy Burns then drilled play to within five metres of the Pau line with a fine penalty kick to touch. The catch and drive crabbed infield, a couple of surges came close but Jeremy Thrush forced his way over from close range to open the scoring. Twelvetrees converted for 7-0 after 16 minutes.

Gloucester then had a real escape as Pau exploited a numbers advantage on the blindside, quick hands setting up what seemed to an inevitable try, only for a knock-on near the line to reprieve the home side.

The Gloucester pack unleashed a powerful catch and drive which delighted the home side, but the home side were indebted to some fine defensive work from Ollie Thorley who raced back to cover a kick through before showing great strength to stand firm until his support got back to him.

But the visitors were enjoying a good spell of possession, keeping Gloucester pinned back in their own 22, and finally forced a penalty on 28 minutes which Colin Slade kicked with ease to narrow the gap to 7-3.

That penalty was for a tackle without the arms, and the same offence gave Slade a second shot at goal on 34 minutes but the former All Black hooked a very kickable attempt wide of the posts.

However, he was to make no mistake on 37 minutes as Gloucester were penalised for holding on in the tackle. 7-6 and the momentum seemed to be with the visitors.

The Kingsholm crowd was becoming increasingly unhappy with the refereeing at this point, the Pau defence living on the verge of offside but getting away with it to close down any Gloucester attacks.

Then, on the stroke of half time, Pau almost took the lead following some wonderful hands down the left and it took a superb cover tackle from Billy Twelvetrees to keep the line intact as he forced Votu into touch at the corner.

But Gloucester failed to take advantage of the let off. The resulting lineout went astray, the ball sailing perfectly into the hands of Steffon Armitage who only had to fall over the line to score. Slade converted for 7-13 at half time.

On balance, the visitors were probably good value for their advantage at the break, having enjoyed the majority of the possession and territory. The try on the stroke of half time was a hammer blow and Gloucester would need to show real resilience to get back on top of this game.

Gloucester would have been looking for a fast start and came out playing ambitiously. Pau were stretched on a couple of occasions and gave away a penalty for a deliberate knock on, which Billy Twelvetrees knocked over from distance to make it 10-13.

Pau were still looking composed with ball in hand, and their defence continued to be suffocating as Gloucester probed for openings.

A couple of half breaks excited the crowd, but the door was swiftly slammed shut.

And Pau dealt Gloucester a potentially decisive blow on 56 minutes when Frank Halai, scorer of a crucial try in round one, caught the fringe defence napping at a ruck and burst clear to score from 25 metres. Slade converted for 10-20.

And a missed touch seemed to seal the deal four minutes later. Charly Malie rang it back with interest and a couple of swift offloads saw Lourens Adriaanse dive over. Slade added the extras for 10-27.

The visitors had blown the game wide open and Gloucester had a mountain to climb. They responded by sending on five replacements in a bit to turn the tide.

A try did come quickly. The forwards smashed away after a five metre lineout was brought down close to the line, but Callum Braley showed great strength to snipe his way over the line from close range. Twelvetrees converted for 17-27.

It provided a glimmer of hope, but that was swiftly extinguished as Slade dummied his way clear and committed the final man before offloading to Daniel Ramsay for the second row to score. Slade had an easy conversion for 17-34.

Jason Woodward showed some real skill as time ebbed away, rolling a grubber kick ahead and unleashing serious pace to get to the ball first only for it to elude his grasp. It had been that kind of day.

And that really seemed to be reinforced as Freddie Clarke was denied a try by the TMO for a knock on near the line.

Gloucester kept on probing and finally broke the shackles of the Pau defence as Jake Polledri cut a good line to score, Twelvetrees slotting the conversion but, sadly, it was little more than a consolation and eyes will now be glued to other results to see where Gloucester will be in the quarter-finals.

JC