

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 2018

KINGSHOLM – AVIVA PREMIERSHIP RUGBY

**GLOUCESTER TAKE CRUCIAL FOUR POINTS WITH THRILLING WIN
OVER TIGERS**

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 24 LEICESTER TIGERS 17

Gloucester produced their best performance for several weeks as a hard-fought Aviva Premiership 24-17 victory over the Leicester Tigers takes them back up to third place in the table.

There was a lot riding on this game. Bath had leapfrogged above Gloucester with their Friday night win over Northampton, and the Cherry and Whites were also conscious that Leicester could significantly close the gap on them with a win.

And, to be fair, had you offered the average Gloucester fan a 24-17 win before the game kicked off, they'd have snatched your hand given that the Cherry and Whites had only beaten the Tigers once in the previous 11 encounters.

But Gloucester's triumph on the day was well-deserved, based on a rock-solid set-piece which didn't take a backward step all day. The Cherry and Whites also had to overcome the shock of conceding an interception try when they looked well on top in the first half.

Crucially, when they trailed 0-7 after Malouf picked off a pass on his own 22 and went the distance, Gloucester didn't panic and they didn't go away from their game plan. There was still plenty of ambition, but there was also a massive effort up front, Jake Polledri in particular catching the eye with some powerful work with ball in hand.

It was a day when not a single man shirked his duty, and the Kingsholm crowd played their part by noisily backing their team to the hilt.

Deprived of several internationals, Leicester were certainly no pushovers and were very competitive in the first half especially. They were also resolute, soaking up a lot of second-pressure before snatching a losing bonus point towards the end. Any win over the Tigers is hard-earned and today was no exception. It all added up to one of the more memorable matchdays at Kingsholm this season, and very much keeps alive Gloucester's top four hopes.

The Kingsholm pitch had been covered all week, but rain fell steadily throughout Saturday morning and, even though conditions were brighter at kick-off, the going was soft underfoot.

Gloucester also seemed to be playing into the breeze in the first 40 minutes, a couple of high kicks holding up in the wind as the Cherry and Whites looked to make ground.

One bright spot for Gloucester in the early stages was the ball carrying of Jake Polledri, the young flanker shrugging off would-be tacklers on two separate occasions in the first ten minutes.

It was all Gloucester, but they were hit by a sucker punch on 12 minutes. A promising attack seemed to have the Leicester defence stretched, but wing Nick Malouf picked off a pass and ran it back all the way for the game's opening try. Joe Ford converted.

It was a blow, especially having enjoyed so much possession and territory, but Gloucester went straight back on the offensive, moving the ball left and right, but without getting much joy out of the Tigers defence.

The visitors were soaking up what Gloucester could throw at them, although a fine break from Ruan Ackermann lifted the spirits, but there was a setback when Ollie Thorley was forced to leave the field through injury on 26 minutes.

But Gloucester stuck at it and finally got their reward on 29 minutes. They attacked the blindside where Leicester were short on numbers thanks to a wonderful switch of play by Billy Twelvetrees. Polledri and Ludlow showed great hands to free Henry Trinder and the centre, now playing on the wing, had the pace to score in the corner. Twelvetrees added a fine touchline conversion to level the scores.

The Leicester response was immediate. A hint of a forward pass after a missed kick to touch saw Brendan O'Connor slice through in midfield, and two offloads later, Joe Ford was scampering under the posts before converting his own try for 7-14.

The see-saw nature of the game continued; Jason Woodward taking a high kick and returning it with interest. The Tigers got back to quash the immediate threat, but Gloucester kept the ball alive and Tom Marshall offloaded superbly for Trinder to go over for his second. Twelvetrees added the extras.

Ford had a chance to snatch the lead again on the stroke of half-time but, having taken an age to line up the kick and also stealing a couple of metres, he pushed his penalty attempt wide of the uprights much to the delight of the Shed.

It had been a pulsating half of rugby, with Gloucester pretty much playing all the rugby. However, the quality of the Tigers was such that they had ruthlessly finished the two chances they'd had and that meant the game was all square.

The Cherry and Whites had played some of their best rugby for quite some time and really stretched Leicester. More of the same in the second half, plus a little bit more composure and precision, would be required to emerge triumphant from this one.

Gloucester started the second half seemingly determined to take the game to Leicester. One decent opening was spurned, but the Tigers lost Mulipola to the sinbin as he illegally stopped a quick tap and Twelvetrees knocked over the penalty for 17-14 after 48 minutes.

The Cherry and Whites continued to pour forward with the Tigers short of numbers and, after a couple of half chances went begging; slick hands across the back line finally put Matt Scott over untouched for the third try. Twelvetrees slotted his third conversion to make it 24-14.

Gloucester turned down a kickable penalty on 67 minutes as they tried to catch the Tigers napping with a quick tap – would it prove to be crucial? Only time would tell ...

The Cherry and Whites went looking for the bonus point try but, despite three lineouts from five metres out, couldn't seal the deal and the Tigers survived the onslaught.

Leicester weren't done yet, and broke downfield through the excellent O'Connor and laid siege to the home 22. Given the experience of the equivalent game last year, these were stressful times for the Kingsholm faithful.

The Tigers did apply some pressure as time ticked away, but the Gloucester line never really came under any stress and, when Leicester opted to kick a penalty with no time left on the clock to take a losing bonus point, it told its own story.

JC