

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, MARCH 3, 2018

KINGSHOLM – AVIVA PREMIERSHIP RUGBY

**LATE HEARTACHE AGAIN FOR GLOUCESTER
AS FALCONS HANG ON FOR VITAL WIN**

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 20 NEWCASTLE FALCONS 21

Gloucester Rugby outscored Newcastle by four tries to two on Saturday but, crucially, couldn't convert any of them and the Falcons held on for a vital 20-21 Aviva Premiership victory at Kingsholm.

It was a game that went to the wire, Lewis Ludlow scoring from a catch and drive to give Billy Twelvetrees the chance to snatch a key win. The Shed liked Twelvetrees' kick as it left the boot, but it slid agonisingly across the posts.

It meant that the visitors hung on for a narrow 20-21 victory, the second week in a row that a late kick has denied Gloucester important Aviva Premiership points.

The nature of the finish, and the margin of defeat, is a hard one to take but, in reality, Gloucester left themselves with just a little bit too much to do, having trailed by 16 points to 5.

The first half performance from the Cherry and Whites was certainly a disjointed one; far too many errors preventing Gloucester gaining any real momentum and a foothold in the game.

Jason Woodward's fine individual try was an exception as, time and again, Gloucester couldn't retain possession and also gave away penalties in kickable position which allowed Joel Hodgson to keep the scoreboard moving.

The second half was much better and Gloucester could easily have taken the spoils, but, in the final reckoning, it was just a step too far.

Credit to Newcastle, they took what was on offer but, to be fair, in the first half in particular, they didn't have to work too hard for their points. That's what will disappoint Gloucester the most. There's very little between the two sides and today it was Newcastle's day.

After a superlative effort from staff and supporters alike, the Kingsholm pitch and spectator areas were cleared of snow on Saturday morning, leaving a decent playing surface come game time.

The visitors got off to the better start, assisted by a Gloucester handling error from the kick-off. The Cherry and Whites were then caught offside in defence and Joel Hodgson had an easy penalty to open the scoring after four minutes.

There was little to choose between the sides over the next few minutes, both looking to play expansively with the visitors looking a confident and efficient outfit.

But, in the face of some physical defence, Gloucester kept plugging away and got their reward on 14 minutes. Nothing really looked on when Jason Woodward got the ball on the left wing, but the full-back grubbered the ball ahead, re-gathered and touched down for a fine try and a 5-3 lead after 15 minutes.

Newcastle hit back almost at once, and it was a soft one from a Gloucester perspective. Michael Young fielded a high kick on his own 10 metre line, then evaded a tackle and set off downfield. His inside pass found Ally Hogg and the flanker galloped over. Hodgson converted for 5-10.

Gloucester then thought they'd hit back straightaway as Willi Heinz went over under the posts, but the TMO spotted a knock-on in the build-up to rule out the score. Handling errors were hurting Gloucester as this stage as they strove to get back into the game.

The Cherry and Whites then suffered a setback as David Halaifonua went in high on Sinoti Sinoti and was yellow carded as both players went off for an HIA. Hodgson rubbed salt into the wound by slotting the penalty as the visitors opened up a 5-13 lead.

These were testing times for Gloucester who weren't quite at their best. Things weren't quite clicking, the execution wasn't quite there and the home crowd voiced their frustrations as things continued to go Newcastle's way.

Halaifonua returned without further damage to the scoreboard, but Gloucester again gifted Newcastle an opportunity with no time left on the clock, conceding a free kick and then a penalty which Hodgson kicked to make the half-time score 5-16.

Jason Woodward's try apart, it had been a tricky first 40 minutes for the Cherry and Whites. There was plenty of effort, but errors and indiscipline were hurting them badly and Newcastle hadn't really had to work too hard for their lead.

The Falcons had simply soaked up what Gloucester could throw at them, and then taken the points on offer whenever they'd moved into the home half. They'd had to create very little themselves.

A big 40 minutes lay ahead of the Cherry and Whites with their unbeaten home record in the Premiership on the line.

However, the errors continued to come after the resumption despite two good runs from Jake Polledri and Charlie Sharples as they broke powerfully from their own half. Crucially, Gloucester couldn't force home the advantage.

Finally, Gloucester got a break as Charlie Sharples chased and claimed a high kick. The ball was quickly moved left where Jason Woodward offloaded neatly to David Halaifonua who powered over the final man to score and get Gloucester back within a score at 10-16.

However, the good work was promptly undone as the Falcons stripped the ball in the tackle and shifted the ball left where Michael Young made the most of superiority in numbers and scampered over. It was a real blow to Gloucester's hopes.

The Cherry and Whites started to throw caution to the wind in a bid to get back into the game. The pressure on the Newcastle line was intense but so was the defence from the visitors until, finally, Mark Atkinson ghosted over on 66 minutes.

Unfortunately, Burns' conversion hit the upright and stayed out but Gloucester were still fighting.

Gloucester continued to drive forward, and the Falcons were clearly on the ropes. With five minutes to go, Gloucester chose to kick for the corner and, following a good catch and drive, Lewis Ludlow claimed the score.

It left Twelvetrees facing a tricky kick to potentially win the game. It looked good as he first struck it, but it wasn't to be.

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