

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, MARCH 24, 2018

MADEJSKI STADIUM – AVIVA PREMIERSHIP RUGBY

GLOUCESTER OVERCOME SLOW START TO SECURE VITAL
BONUS POINT WIN AT IRISH

LONDON IRISH 29 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 33

Needing a win to keep their Aviva Premiership play-off hopes alive, Gloucester gave London Irish a 17-0 start at the Madejski Stadium on Saturday before prevailing by 33 points to 29.

For the neutral, this was a humdinger of a game. For anyone connected with either club, the 80 minutes were a danger to their blood pressure.

For nearly half an hour, Gloucester just weren't at the races. Irish looked anything but a side struggling at the bottom of the table as they tore into the Cherry and Whites, who could barely lay their hands on the ball.

But then the game swung dramatically. Gloucester finally got going on 27 minutes when James Hanson scored, the first of three tries in eight minutes.

The Cherry and Whites kept up the pressure at the start of the second half, having two tries disallowed before running in two more to make it 33 unanswered points.

However, the momentum changed once again as the hosts launched a dramatic late comeback. Tries from Brophy Clews and Cokanasiga made it 29-33 within eight minutes and Gloucester fans would have been forgiven for thinking, "Here we go again!"

But Gloucester hung on and moved back into the top four of the Aviva Premiership table, albeit temporarily with other games left to play.

The push for a possible play-off place, and European Rugby Champions Cup qualification are still alive. But you can bet there are plenty of twists left to come.

The Exiles got the game underway and started brightly, maintaining possession patiently through a number of phases. The pick and go was especially popular, and eventually Gloucester infringed in front of their own posts leaving James Marshall with an easy penalty to open the scoring.

Gloucester, in contrast, spilled the ball on their first foray into Irish territory allowing Alex Lewington to kick downfield. Willi Heinz got back but was caught in possession and penalised.

Irish went to the corner and, again showing great patience, piled on the pressure. The forwards cleverly set up a maul from ruck ball and Josh McNally got the score. Marshall converted to open up a 10-0 lead.

It was a poor start from Gloucester and a clearly fired up home side continued to dominate proceedings, the Cherry and Whites unable to get into the game. Another penalty went to the corner, and scrum-half Piet van Zyl escaped the clutches of Willi Heinz to dart over. Marshall added the extras.

Gloucester finally moved downfield courtesy of a fine clearance from Trinder and turning over the resulting Irish lineout. James Hanson pounced on the loose ball and, several phases later, it was Hanson who burrowed over from close range. Twelvetrees kicked the conversion and the Cherry and Whites were off and running.

The Cherry and Whites suddenly came to life and the passes started to stick. Just as importantly, Gloucester worked a few phases and kept their heads in the red zone to work an opening for Tom Marshall to score, Twelvetrees converting.

Incredibly, two minutes later, they struck again. More solid build-up play, good decisions made and Lewis Ludlow dived over to give Gloucester a 17-19 lead. It had been quite some turnaround!

Half time came without further addition to the score-line in what had been a breathless half of rugby. Gloucester simply didn't get going for a good half an hour. However, when they did, they were electric and stunned the home side and crowd. Which Gloucester would emerge for the second half?

Gloucester started well and so nearly had a fourth after some excellent build-up play but, having taken play to within a couple of metres of the Irish line, lost the ball in contact. The Cherry and Whites were then denied what looked like a perfectly good try for Tom Marshall as the TMO spotted a dubious looking obstruction.

Buoyed by the double let-off, Irish very nearly hit back as van Zyl made a sharp break as the fringe defence was caught napping, but Gloucester got back to win a vital turnover in defence.

The end-to-end nature of the game continued, and Gloucester were denied another score, this time for a forward pass.

However, Gloucester kept up the pressure and kept Irish pinned back inside their own 22. Eventually, it paid off as Mark Atkinson ghosted outside a would-be tackler and stepped the final man to score. Burns converted for a 17-26 lead after 54 minutes.

And even better followed as Atkinson made another telling break, before slick hands from Heinz gave Tom Marshall a glimmer of an opening and the New Zealander finished superbly, just staying in the field of play to touch down. Burns added the touchline conversion.

But Irish had plenty of time left and this game wasn't finished yet. Gloucester got a bit too ambitious and were penalised for offside chasing a chip in their own half.

The kick went to the corner, the forwards drove it up before Theo Brophy Clews steamed on to a flat pass to score. Bell converted to narrow the gap to 24-33.

Cokanasiga then bumped off two tacklers to score in the corner. Crucially, Tommy Bell couldn't convert but it was now a very tenuous Gloucester lead at 29-33.

There was still drama to come, with both teams turning the ball over in those tense last few minutes, but Irish didn't threaten and Gloucester were back to winning ways.

JC