

# **GLOUCESTER RUGBY**

**SATURDAY, MARCH 31, 2018**

**SPORTSGROUND – EUROPEAN RUGBY CHALLENGE CUP**

**GLOUCESTER EDGE THRILLER IN CONNACHT TO EARN HOME  
EUROPEAN SEMI-FINAL**

**CONNACHT RUGBY 28 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 33**

Gloucester delighted and distressed their supporters in equal measure at the Sportsground on Saturday afternoon, but finally edged an enthralling quarter-final against Connacht by 33 points to 28 and keep their European dreams alive.

It was, quite frankly, a game that you simply couldn't take your eyes off. Gloucester have developed a reputation for their games going to the wire in recent times and today was no different. In fact, the Cherry and Whites ensured that the public got their money's worth by keeping the ball alive even when time had expired!

Both teams more than played their part on the day. Connacht were particularly good in the first half and then showed great resolve to fight their way back into the match just when it looked as though their goose was cooked.

There were incidents galore throughout; Gloucester spent the first half hour trying to adapt to the way Romain Poite was refereeing the game and spent 20 minutes with only 14 men on the pitch following yellow cards to Ben Morgan and Lewis Ludlow.

But they went into half-time with an important 10-17 lead, three tries in the bag albeit with a hint of luck involved in the first two.

And Gloucester just about kept Connacht at bay as the second half ebbed and flowed. The home team could never quite be shaken off, but they were just about held at arm's length.

Crucially, the Cherry and Whites kept their composure when it mattered and, on the day, edged enough of the key moments to ensure that Kingsholm will be hosting a European Rugby Challenge Cup semi-final in three weeks' time.

That match will be against Newcastle, a mouth-watering proposition following the tight game between the same two sides a few weeks ago.

For now, though, it's celebration time for the travelling Gloucester supporters. Not only did they witness a great game, it was a great Gloucester win.

In fine conditions in Galway, early decisions went against Gloucester, Charlie Sharples perhaps lucky to escape censure as he tackled the catcher in the air from the kick-off, swiftly followed by a free kick conceded at the game's first lineout.

But Gloucester stunned the home crowd by taking a fourth minute lead. Connacht actually nicked Gloucester lineout ball, but the tap back went loose and James Hanson pounced on the bouncing ball before steaming ahead and stepping the last man to dive over. Owen Williams' conversion hit the upright and stayed out.

However, the Cherry and Whites put themselves under pressure from the restart, knocking on and then conceding a scrum penalty. The kick went to the corner and Gloucester held the initial surge, but the ball was spun out wide and scrum-half Kieran Marmion had enough pace to find a gap and score. Jack Carty couldn't convert.

The home side, backed by a vociferous crowd, were looking very lively at this point and Gloucester were having to work hard in defence as well as to get onside with the officials with most of the calls going Connacht's way.

Gloucester could barely buy a decision, and it came as no real surprise when number eight Ben Morgan was yellow carded for a high tackle on 16 minutes, the real irritation being that it came after Tom Marshall had seemingly kept the ball infield following a kick to touch.

Connacht's handling wasn't helping them out but, following another free-kick for delaying a lineout, the home team struck. Hooker McCartney made the initial break and, although Gloucester got back, the ball was kept alive with some lovely handling for Bunde Aki to power over. Carty was off target again but Connacht led 10-5 on 22 minutes.

Morgan returned without further damage to the scoreboard and Gloucester promptly hit back. Again there was an element of luck in the build-up as Gloucester misfired at a five metre lineout only for Connacht to knock on.

Solid scrum ball then gave the backs good ball to work with; they worked a slick move and Owen Williams' long pass gave Tom Marshall enough room to go in at the corner and level matters at 10-10 after 28 minutes.

Gloucester were finally showing signs of starting to get their game going, Trinder pinning Connacht back with a lovely kick into the 22 and the Cherry and Whites then thought they'd re-taken the lead after Val Rapava Ruskin burst through powerfully.

Ed Slater went over on the left as Gloucester kept the ball alive, but once again the officials intervened as they ruled that Atkinson's pass to the second row was forward. Referee Poite and his assistants were rapidly becoming key players.

But Gloucester kept up the pressure and deservedly broke through on 38 minutes. Nothing really looked on for Henry Trinder as he entered the 22, but a beautiful body swerve and outside break saw him break the defensive line and the centre had the strength to make the line despite three defenders in attendance. Williams converted from the touchline for 10-17.

So a breathless 40 minutes came to an end with Gloucester holding sway on the scoreboard. It had been an eventful half and the feeling was that there was a long way to go in this tie just yet.

Gloucester's first try was slightly fortunate but, when they got going, they looked really good with ball in hand and could easily have been further ahead. However, discipline was a concern and there was every possibility that Monsieur Poite could still have a big part to play.

The second half started well for Gloucester as they disrupted Connacht ruck ball and won a penalty. Owen Williams didn't seem to strike the ball cleanly, but it had the legs and Gloucester had a 10-20 lead.

However, the home team struck back immediately. With the referee playing advantage for a scrum penalty, a lovely kick through from Marmion forced Tom Marshall to turn and he and Owen Williams were beaten to the ball by Niyi Adeolokun for the score.

Connacht were suddenly on fire as Adeolokun made a telling break down the right. The cover defence got back as the home team knocked on with the line in sight. Gloucester were penalised for offside and Carty's penalty narrowed the gap to 18-20 after 48 minutes.

Gloucester then proceeded to waste a couple of good scoring opportunities, but finally broke through on 56 minutes. Mark Atkinson made a telling outside break before finding John Afoa on his inside and the prop romped home from 22 metres out. Williams added an important conversion for an 18-27 lead.

Equally as important was his 64th minute penalty as the Gloucester scrum forced a penalty out of the Connacht pack and the lead was extended to 18-30.

But back came the home side as they saw their European hopes drifting away. Gloucester muscled up in defence, perhaps too physically, and Lewis Ludlow was yellow carded for leading with the shoulder in the tackle. Craig Ronaldson's penalty narrowed the gap to 21-30 with 12 minutes left to play.

And Connacht promptly made it 28-30 as Gloucester were again caught flat footed by a chip in behind the defensive line, Matt Healy gathering to step the final man and score. Ronaldson converted and it was game on.

Gloucester still carried on playing their ambitious game, slick handling taking play into the Connacht 22. In desperation, the ball was knocked on deliberately by Jarrad Butler, who saw yellow for his actions, and Billy Twelvetrees had an easy penalty as Ludlow returned to the fray.

Connacht gave it everything as time expired, but the Gloucester defence was up to the task. A vital steal of the ball by Callum Braley looked to have settled things as he ripped the ball from the ball carrier but, instead of kicking the ball out, Gloucester hoofed the ball downfield.

Thankfully Matt Healy was caught in possession as he sprinted back to his own line and conceded a penalty. This time, the ball did get kicked into touch and Gloucester were finally able to breathe a sigh of relief!

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