

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

FRIDAY, APRIL 20, 2018

KINGSHOLM – EUROPEAN RUGBY CHALLENGE CUP

**GLOUCESTER SEE OFF DOGGED NEWCASTLE TO EARN PLACE
IN CHALLENGE CUP FINAL**

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 33 NEWCASTLE FALCONS 12

Gloucester overcame a nervy start to run in four tries on their way to defeating Newcastle Falcons 33-12 at Kingsholm on Friday evening and earn a spot in the European Rugby Challenge Cup Final in Bilbao next month.

The win sees the Cherry and Whites set for a showdown in the final against either Cardiff Blues or Pau, who meet in the second semi-final in Cardiff tomorrow. A Cardiff win would secure Champions Cup qualification for the Cherry and Whites.

But, on the night, in front of a raucous home crowd who even unveiled a new song towards the end of the game, Gloucester were deserved winners.

After a slightly ragged opening few minutes, during which time the Falcons took a 0-5 lead, Gloucester slowly but surely took control of the game, drawing level through Tom Marshall's try. Newcastle clung on in determined fashion, but Motu Matu's try on the stroke of half-time was critical.

Billy Burns crossed for a vital third five minutes into the second half to open up a bit of breathing space, but the Falcons gave themselves some hope as Scott Lawson scored his and Newcastle's second try of the night.

However, Billy Twelvetrees kept the scoreboard ticking over with a couple of penalties before Ben Vellacott put the icing on the cake with a late try and make the final score 33-12.

Joyful scenes at Kingsholm and no doubt a number of supporters frantically trying to make travel plans for the Bilbao final, but Johan Ackermann will be working hard to keep the focus on next weekend's home game against Bath which is arguably as important as this evening's game.

Conditions were perfect as the game got underway, the Kingsholm ground staff having worked wonders following the recent wet weather and heavy conditions. Blue skies and warm weather greeted the teams.

The game started at a furious pace, and the visitors started confidently, winning an early breakdown penalty and giving the Gloucester defence a good workout in the opening minutes.

But it was early indiscipline that allowed the Falcons to take the lead on nine minutes. Newcastle were able to kick to the corner and, at the second time of asking, the catch and drive resulted in a try for Gloucester old boy Scott Lawson and a 0-5 lead.

Gloucester for their part were slow getting into their game and a couple of handling errors brought promising moves to an abrupt end as the Cherry and Whites tried to hit back in the face of some pretty robust defence.

The Falcons were certainly looking after the ball better when they were going forward and there were nervous mutterings around Kingsholm as the game neared the end of the first quarter of play, the only real consolation being that Gloucester were still within a score.

Then the Gloucester back line erupted into life. With a scrum penalty advantage being played, Billy Burns looped Atkinson and found Jason Woodward in space. The full-back made the crucial break and found Tom Marshall in support for the score to level the scores.

The passes were suddenly starting to stick for Gloucester and it was Newcastle now having to work hard in defence. A powerful carry from Jake Polledri forced the Falcons to concede a penalty on 27 minutes and Billy Twelvetrees made no mistake from distance for 8-5.

However, Gloucester then lost Fraser Balmain to what looked like a hand injury on the half hour. The scrum had been going well, but a more than decent replacement in the form of John Afoa entered the fray.

Some cagey play followed, with neither team able to really gain the upper hand, but the Gloucester scrum was going well and a second try almost followed as a result but the Cherry and Whites were penalised for holding on right on the Falcons line.

But Gloucester went for the jugular as the Falcons discipline deserted them. The catch and drive started to work as a weapon and, with no time remaining in the half, it was Motu Matu'u who claimed the try. Twelvetrees converted and Gloucester went into half-time with a 15-5 lead.

After an indifferent start, Gloucester had taken control of proceedings and were deserving of their lead at the interval. The pack were laying a powerful platform and it looked as though Newcastle were struggling to live with it.

The challenge now for Gloucester was to kick on. Too often this season, leads have been frittered away to leave their supporters biting their nails nervously. Apart from their early catch and drive, Newcastle hadn't fired many shots. Gloucester needed to keep it that way.

They started with purpose and Woodward was close to extending the lead within five minutes when he entered the line at pace but was tackled into touch just a few metres short of the line.

But it was Billy Burns, who endured a tough time last time out against the Falcons, who made the breakthrough, taking an offload from Tom Marshall to sprint clear for the third try, diving over gleefully.

The lead was now 20-5, but Gloucester didn't exit cleanly from the restart and put themselves under pressure as the visitors were able to eke out a penalty and kick to the corner.

And the catch and drive tactic worked for the second time for the Falcons, as they stayed patiently, inching forward inch by inch, and Lawson claimed his second try. Hodgson converted for 20-12 after 55 minutes and the game was still very much alive.

Concerted pressure as Marshall rose magnificently to claim the restart forced Newcastle to concede a penalty near the line though, and Twelvetrees settled the nerves with an easy penalty.

And, after Newcastle squandered another five metre lineout, an interception from Callum Braley saw Gloucester move downfield and earn another penalty chance for Twelvetrees which the centre gleefully accepted for 26-12.

Defensive duties were now called for as Newcastle threw everything at Gloucester in a bid to get back into the game. Time was against the visitors but they were still fighting.

However, it was Gloucester who would have the final word, attacking down the left off turnover ball and carving out an opening for Ben Vellacott to sprint clear from Woodward's inside pass. Twelvetrees converted and the job was done.

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