

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

FRIDAY, MAY 11, 2018

BILBAO – EUROPEAN CHALLENGE CUP FINAL

**GLOUCESTER SUFFER FINAL HEARTBREAK AS BLUES SNATCH
LAST GASP CHALLENGE CUP WIN**

CARDIFF BLUES 31 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 30

It was a humdinger of a final in Bilbao, with both sides enjoying spells of superiority. But the Blues overturned a 14 point half-time deficit to break Gloucester hearts, Gareth Anscombe's late penalty snatching a dramatic 31-30 win.

It was defeat in the cruelest possible manner for Gloucester. They led for most of the game and held a 6-20 lead at half-time. The Blues then launched a spirited comeback to draw level and then take the lead at 23-20.

But Gloucester looked to have withstood that comeback and re-took the lead courtesy of James Hanson's try to go into the final 10 minutes clinging on to a 23-30 lead.

However, despite some valiant defence, the Cherry and Whites just couldn't hold on. They were reduced to 14 men when Lewis Ludlow seemed to be harshly yellow carded for coming in at the side of a maul.

The Blues got to within two points as Blaine Scully went over in the corner, but Anscombe couldn't convert. However, from the restart, Cardiff broke downfield to win a penalty and the full-back didn't miss on this occasion.

It was so harsh on Gloucester who put in a superb first half. Credit to the Blues, however, they hit back immediately at the start of the second half and Tomos Williams' try probably changed the game.

TV replays showed that Gloucester could perhaps consider themselves hard done by. Ludlow had a first half try chalked off for a forward pass that perhaps wasn't, while Garyn Evans seemed to be offside when he scored his try.

However, it's all academic now. Referee Garces backed himself and his assistants on the day.

What is for sure is that it was a cracking game for the neutral to watch, no matter how painful the final outcome for players, staff and supporters.

Hats off to Cardiff for hanging in there when Gloucester seemed set to take the game by the scruff of the neck. It's a painful feeling for anyone connected with the Cherry and Whites at the moment, but the club has made real progress this season and is in a much better position than twelve months ago.

For now though, it's a few weeks of relaxation and contemplation for the squad before they come back firing on all cylinders next season.

Most pundits came into the game raving about the ability of the Blues back row at the breakdown, and they quickly earned a penalty chance as Gloucester were penalised for holding on. Jarrod Evans made no mistake off the tee for 3-0 after five minutes.

However, the Blues were dealt a blow just a minute later as Josh Navidi was forced to leave the field injured to be replaced by Olly Robinson.

But Gloucester had already established good field position courtesy of a cunning kick through from Tom Marshall and exploited it well. The forwards came close on a couple of occasions, but it was a wonderful cross kick from Billy Burns that picked out Henry Trinder who finished well. Twelvetrees converted superbly from the touchline for 3-7.

The Blues almost struck back immediately as patient build up play gave Blaine Scully a chance on the right. The winger thought he'd made the corner, but Callum Braley's magnificent cover tackle had forced a foot into touch.

Gloucester didn't exit cleanly though, Cardiff regained possession, won a penalty and Evans had no problem in slotting his second penalty of the evening to get the Blues to within a point at 6-7.

The Cherry and Whites dominated territory for the next few minutes, but the Blues defence held up well with their back row a constant threat at the breakdown. But the Blues failed to roll away from the tackle area on 25 minutes and Twelvetrees nailed the penalty.

Gloucester then thought they'd carved out a second try as they created space on the right, only for Josh Hohnneck's pass which sent Lewis Ludlow clear was ruled to be forward, perhaps controversially ...

However, Gloucester kept plugging away and scored an absolute beauty. Billy Twelvetrees sent Henry Trinder flying down the left with terrific sleight of hand, Callum Braley was inside in support and a lovely reverse pass sent Mark Atkinson clear and under the posts. Twelvetrees converted for 6-17.

And there was still just time for Gloucester to increase their lead as, with no time left on the clock, they nicked turnover ball, moved downfield and earned a penalty as Cardiff offended at the breakdown. Twelvetrees knocked the penalty over from distance for a 6-20 half time lead.

It was a deserved lead. Gloucester had played most of the half in and around Cardiff's 22, with the Blues restricted to a few fleeting forays into the Gloucester half. To be fair, the Blues had lost two players to injury which had affected their momentum, and there was still a lot of work to do yet.

But the Cherry and Whites had played with a control that hadn't been seen in recent weeks, and the confidence so vital to their game looked to be back with a vengeance.

But Cardiff came out firing on all cylinders and promptly scored a stunner to get themselves back in the game.

Jarrold Evans gathered his own grubber ahead before chipping forward, where Tomos Williams grubbered ahead to score as the ball rebounded off the post. Evans converted and it was 13-20.

Gloucester looked to regroup, but conceded a couple of soft penalties to give Evans another penalty attempt at goal, and the reliable fly-half maintained his 100% record to narrow the gap to 16-20.

The Cherry and Whites were now starting to make some costly errors, and the Blues took full advantage as a kick out on the full gave them great field position. Evans rolled another grubber behind the defensive line and, although Garyn Smith looked to be offside, the try was given. Evans converted for 23-20.

Gloucester desperately needed a response and duly got one. Trinder set up the field position by chipping ahead and forcing his man into touch. The pack went for the catch and drive and James Hanson claimed the try. Twelvetrees converted well for 23-27.

Lewis Ludlow then unleashed a massive hit on Gareth Anscombe to lift his side, and the pack responded by winning a scrum penalty. Billy Twelvetrees kept his cool to nail the penalty for 23-30 after 63 minutes.

But the Blues weren't done yet, and started to turn the screw as they set up camp in the Gloucester 22. Lewis Ludlow was yellow carded at a close-range Cardiff lineout and Ed Slater produced a crucial steal.

The Cherry and Whites were stretched in defence, and eventually created an overlap on the right, Blaine Scully just making the line despite Billy Twelvetrees despairing tackle. Gareth Anscombe couldn't convert but it was 28-30 with three minutes to play.

Gloucester put the restart long but Cardiff kicked long and, although Tom Marshall got back well, he was penalised for holding on. Anscombe stepped up and, under huge pressure, landed the vital kick.

The Blues gathered the restart and ran out the clock without any bother to bring Gloucester's season to close in a desperately sad and frustrating way.

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