

NORTHAMPTON SAINTS

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 2018

KINGSHOLM – GALLAGHER PREMIERSHIP RUGBY

GLOUCESTER RUGBY 27 NORTHAMPTON SAINTS 16

[Saints report]

Gloucester Rugby have not been fast starters in recent seasons, only two wins in round one since 2009. So, a victory was most welcome today, even though it had to be earned the hard way.

Opening up an 8-0 lead with Saints having hardly touched the ball perhaps raised expectations a tad high around Kingsholm, as the visitors doggedly worked their way back into the game and certainly gave Gloucester Rugby plenty to think about.

The key part of the match was probably the third quarter. Saints certainly had the better of it, and the Cherry and Whites were forced to dig deep in their own territory. It spoke volumes of the team's self-belief that they came through unscathed and went on to clinch the win.

There's clearly still plenty to work on, but there were signs of genuine promise from this performance. As always, the real challenge is to back up one good performance with another.

But Gloucester Rugby supporters will go home with a smile on their faces this evening and will look ahead eagerly to next week's local derby against Bath Rugby at the Rec.

Those supporters, clearly charged up, got behind the Cherry and Whites from the kick-off, and roared with joy as Billy Twelvetrees kicked Gloucester Rugby into a 3-0 lead with a 2nd minute penalty as Saints failed to roll away from the tackled player.

Even better was to come. Jason Woodward made a telling break to put Northampton on the back foot and force the visitors into conceding a penalty. The kick went to the corner, the pack launched the catch and drive and James Hanson touched down for the first competitive try of the season and an 8-0 lead.

It had been all Gloucester Rugby, but Saints finally got their hands on the ball and eked out a penalty chance for Dan Biggar on 11 minutes which the Welsh fly-half confidently landed. However, Twelvetrees responded in kind two minutes later to make the score 11-3.

Northampton hit back though, and in some style. Good ball-carrying and swift hands gave Tuala the chance to made good ground down the left into the home 22, and the winger stayed strong in the tackle to offload inside for Piers Francis to muscle his way over.

Gloucester Rugby were quickly back on the front foot as Val Rapava Ruskin made a powerful break, but Ed Slater was ruled to have taken Cobus Reinach high in the clear out and was yellow carded.

The Cherry and Whites, now a man light, found themselves under the pump and had to defend their line gallantly. Saints lost two men to HIA assessments but levelled the scores with a 22nd minute penalty from Biggar.

Gloucester Rugby now needed to assert themselves and re-took the lead on 25 minutes when Twelvetrees slotted his third penalty for a high tackle on Jason Woodward although Matt Banahan nearly powered his way over in the corner with advantage being played.

Slater returned and Gloucester Rugby looked to have re-grouped. A massive scrum in the Saints 22 saw advantage being played, but Danny Cipriani floated a delightful wide pass to allow Charlie Sharples to get outside his man and score. Twelvetrees converted for 21-11 after 36 minutes.

And that remained the score at half-time as the home pack started to gain the upper hand at the set-piece and put the Northampton scrum in particular under pressure.

The Cherry and Whites would have been happy with the ten point lead at half-time, but would also be conscious that Northampton had shown enough threat to not be completely counted out of this. A big second half lay in wait.

Indeed, the visitors, knowing that a big start was required, came out in determined fashion and very much took the game to Gloucester Rugby in the opening exchanges, the hosts in contrast a little sluggish and not as accurate as they would like to be.

Heinrich Brussow dropped a pass when well-placed for Saints, and the tension grew around Kingsholm as Northampton continued to ask questions of the home team who were having to defend stoutly.

It was a torrid third quarter for the Cherry and Whites, but they came through it unscathed – just about – and Twelvetrees extended the lead with a 64th minute penalty from virtually the first trip into the Saints 22.

Then came a moment of controversy when, despite a flurry of misdemeanours from the visitors which went unpunished despite howls of protest from the home crowd, Tom Hudson was yellow carded for killing the ball.

It allowed Saints to kick for the corner, and Courtney Lawes touched down from the catch and drive. Crucially, Dan Biggar missed the touchline conversion to leave the lead at eight points, 24-16, with 13 minutes left to play.

It could have been a nervy last few minutes, but Twelvetrees slotted a late penalty to open up a 27-16 lead and was narrowly wide with another attempt.

Saints thought they'd secured a late losing bonus point, but the ruling of the TMO just seemed to sum up their frustrations on the day.

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