

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 14, 2018

KINGSHOLM – HEINEKEN CHAMPIONS CUP

GLOUCESTER RUGBY START WELL IN EUROPE
WITH HARD-FOUGHT WIN OVER CASTRES

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Gloucester Rugby returned to Heineken Champions Rugby in winning style as they showed great character to hang on and defeat French Top 14 Champions Castres Olympique by 19 points to 14 at Kingsholm on Sunday.

The final score on the day didn't really do the Cherry and Whites justice. Stats after the game showed that they made 18 entries into the Castres 22 compared to four the other way around.

But, the only negative for Gloucester Rugby on the day was that they didn't make more of their scoring opportunities. They led from start to finish but had to hang on grimly in the final few minutes.

Some of those chances were denied by some pretty cynical defending by Castres, happy to concede a penalty rather than a try, but the decision to disallow Marshall's try was harsh. The game could have unfolded much differently had that been allowed.

Credit to the pack, the writing was on the wall in those final few minutes when Castres had a five metre lineout. With the visiting pack scenting blood in the water, the Gloucester Rugby forwards, by now featuring two 20-year-olds in Ciaran Knight and Henry Walker, produced a key turnover at the driving maul and then won a scrum penalty.

They were probably the most important set-pieces of their careers and helped to clinch the game for Gloucester Rugby and ensure a triumphant return to Heineken Champions Cup Rugby.

It will send the Cherry and Whites into next weekend's game at Munster in good spirits, but under no illusion as to the size of the task in hand. For now, Gloucester Rugby supporters can bask in the glow of a fine win over the French champions.

Heavy rain had fallen in the 48 hours leading up to kick-off, but the Kingsholm pitch was looking in terrific nick as the game got underway although handling was obviously going to be an issue.

That didn't stop Gloucester Rugby playing with some ambition in the game's opening exchanges, moving the ball across the back line, probing for openings which didn't arise in the face of some robust defence.

But it was a mistake from Castres, overthrowing a lineout in their own 22, which led to the game's first points. The visitors regrouped in defence, but conceded a penalty in doing so and Danny Cipriani made it 3-0 after 11 minutes.

The Cherry and Whites then seemed to have extended their lead as Callum Braley broke down the five metre channel and drew the last defender to put Tom Marshall in to score. However, the TMO spotted an offence at the preceding ruck and the try was ruled out.

Referee Mitrea then further enraged the home crowd by penalising Gloucester Rugby in their own half, and fly-half Julien Dumora kept his nerve to level the scores.

The perceived double injustice seemed to fire up both the home team and the home crowd, and the temperature went up a notch when Ben Morgan was called by the referee's whistle as he powered towards the posts.

In terms of possession, it had been all Gloucester Rugby in the first quarter, but that superiority was not reflected on the scoreboard. The Cherry and Whites kept plugging away but without any immediate joy.

However, another Castres lineout error allowed the Cherry and Whites to pile on the pressure again. Once more, the visitors conceded a penalty just a few metres from their own line and Cipriani made it 6-3.

The lead lasted just a minute though, as Gloucester Rugby fumbled the restart for Castres to re-gather. A couple of phases later and Dumora dropped a goal to level the scores.

Crucially, the Cherry and Whites responded in style. Attacking down the right, Charlie Sharples made good ground, but it was Tom Marshall who made the key incision before finding Callum Braley with the inside pass and the scrum-half was under the posts, Cipriani converting for 13-6 after 35 minutes.

Half-time came with no further addition to the score, and the Cherry and Whites were pretty good value for their lead. If anything, they would be slightly disappointed not to be further clear.

A couple of excellent try-scoring chances had been cynically thwarted by the visitors, and a decent looking try ruled out. Castres had been mainly using a tactical kicking game to make territorial gains, and had come away with points on pretty much the two occasions they'd entered home territory.

The first score of the second half was going to be crucial, and the Cherry and Whites poured forward in search of it, Cipriani ghosting through a gap into the Castres 22 but the final pass didn't quite go to hand.

And the visitors then blew a marvelous opportunity when awarded a penalty near the Gloucester Rugby line. Dumora was presumably aiming his cross-kick towards his left wing Taylor Paris, but only hoofed the ball into the West Terrace to the delight of the home crowd.

Jason Woodward then so very nearly broke through for Gloucester Rugby's second try of the day, a wonderful arcing run coming up just short and the Cherry and Whites had to settle for a Cipriani penalty and a 16-6 lead. Cipriani added his fourth penalty shortly afterwards as Castres' discipline started to wobble.

However, with the game slipping away from them, Castres hit back and the introduction of Rory Kockett and Steve Mafi off the bench seemed to galvanise them. A couple of cheap penalties allowed the visitors to move into home territory, but it was slick hands that allowed winger Martin Laveau to finish well on the right.

The conversion drifted wide but Castres had hope at 19-11 going into the final quarter and they duly narrowed the gap to 19-14 following a Dumora penalty on 72 minutes as Gloucester Rugby were penalised at a ruck in their own half.

The visitors now had their tails up and the pressure was well and truly on the Cherry and Whites, especially when Castres won a penalty and opted to kick to the corner.

The catch and drive looked well set, but the Gloucester Rugby pack dug deep and forced a turnover near their own line. There was still work to do, but a penalty was won at the next scrum and the lines were cleared.

Kingsholm erupted, and did so again a minute or so later as time expired and referee Mitrea brought proceedings to a close.

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