

# **GLOUCESTER RUGBY**

**SATURDAY, JANUARY 19, 2019**

**STADE PIERRE-FABRE – HEINEKEN CHAMPIONS CUP**

**HEARTBREAK FOR GLOUCESTER RUGBY IN FRANCE AS CASTRES  
SNATCH WIN WITH LAST PLAY**

**CASTRES OLYMPIQUE 24 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 22**

Gloucester Rugby could have made it a hard-fought Heineken Champions Cup double over Castres Olympique on Saturday, but failed to kick the ball out with no time left on the clock and the home team pounced to score a try with the last play of the game to snatch a 24-22 victory at the Stade Pierre-Fabre.

It was tough on the Gloucester Rugby side who led from virtually start to finish. They opened up an early 14-0 lead, were pegged back and then seemed to have regrouped to take the win.

Clinging on to a narrow 22-19 lead, they seemed to have clinched the win as Castres turned the ball over in the Gloucester Rugby 22 with the clock in the red. Just needing to kick the ball dead, the kick went downfield and the rest was almost inevitable.

Castres slowly but surely made their way downfield and won a penalty which was kicked to the corner. Gloucester Rugby defended bravely, but hooker Kevin Firmin drove over from close range to snatch the win from the jaws of defeat.

It had been such a magnificent and brave performance from a very young side, that it was a tough pill to swallow. The manner of defeat will hurt, but every single one of the players should take heart from their contribution on the day.

The game got off to a blistering start, and the Cherry and Whites stunned the home crowd by opening the scoring after just two minutes, and it was a cracker of a score.

They took the restart and confidently moved the ball left and right before an awesome offload from Matt Banahan freed Henry Trinder on the left. The centre found Freddie Clarke who offloaded inside for Trinder to complete an outstanding score. Owen Williams added a fine conversion for a 0-7 lead.

Gloucester Rugby continued to dominate possession over the next few minutes, young half backs Ben Vellacott and Lloyd Evans looking to play with width while, more pragmatically, Tom Hudson produced one lovely touch-finder. However, despite a couple of visits to the Castres 22, they couldn't add to their lead.

Boosted by their defensive effort, the big Castres pack started to flex their collective muscle and it took some outstanding work by the Gloucester Rugby forwards to repel a couple of close range catch and drives.

Having withstood the pressure, Gloucester Rugby then pounced with another fine score. Matt Banahan fielded a chip through before launching a counter attack. He looked to be heading into touch, but kicked ahead and Ben Vellacott showed great footwork to dribble on, gather and score. Williams again added a superb conversion for 0-14 after 20 minutes.

The restart was allowed to bounce though, and Castres pounced on the loose ball to pile on the pressure. Gloucester Rugby couldn't quite clear their lines and Julien Caminati almost scored. But great work by Tom Hudson won a penalty at a ruck to save the day.

Castres were quickly back in the Gloucester Rugby 22 though, and the frustration of the home crowd went up a notch as Maama Vaipulu picked up from a five metre scrum, powered for the line but saw the ball jarred loose by a brave tackle from Lloyd Evans.

The Gloucester Rugby scrum was starting to come under some pressure, and Castres seemed to be camped on the Cherry and Whites' line for what seemed like an age, but the defence was brave and committed to keep the home team at bay.

It was a tremendous defensive effort but, with no time left on the clock, Castres broke through as centre Florian Vialelle broke a tackle to power over. Rory Kockott converted for a 7-14 score at half time.

It had been a brave performance from the Cherry and Whites who had scored a couple of fine tries to take a deserved lead into the interval.

But the latter part of the first half had been all Castres, and Gloucester Rugby wouldn't be able to continue to defend in a similar fashion in the second half. They would need to get their hands on some possession and spend some time in Castres territory, preferably accumulating points.

But the home team were quickly back in Gloucester Rugby territory, as a missed tackle on Vialelle allowed the centre to power into the 22. Once again, the defence near the line was magnificent but the Cherry and Whites were under the cosh once again.

The Cherry and Whites did manage to clear their lines, but crucially lost a lineout on halfway. The home team didn't waste the opportunity and some good offloading saw Vialelle scamper over for his second. Kockott converted to level the scores.

However, to the fury of the home crowd, Castres were promptly penalised for pushing early at the second scrum in a row. A penalty was the result, and Owen Williams nudged his team in front 14-17 with a fine kick at goal.

An exhausting passage of play followed, both teams striving in vain to make a telling break, and Castres came close to scoring but knocked on when well-placed and tempers predictably became frayed.

And then Gloucester Rugby stunned the home crowd again. Castres indiscipline allowed the Cherry and Whites to move into the home 22. The forwards trucked the ball up, before Lloyd Evans dinked a superb chip over the defence for Matt Banahan to gather and offload for Owen Williams to score and extend the lead to 14-22 after 69 minutes.

But the home team weren't done yet as Gloucester Rugby were careless with possession at a ruck on halfway. Kockott pounced, Castres were on the front foot and eventually Armand Batlle was over in the left-hand corner. 19-22 with seven minutes left to play.

It was now backs to the wall stuff as Castres threw everything at the Cherry and Whites with time running out. In fact, the clock went into the red and still the Gloucester Rugby defence held out.

When Castres lost possession in the Gloucester Rugby 22, that looked to be that. But the ball wasn't kicked dead in a manner eerily reminiscent of last year's Challenge Cup quarter-final in Connacht.

On that occasion, Gloucester Rugby got away with it and left with the win. This evening, the rugby gods were smiling on Castres and the home team snatched the win.

JC