

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SUNDAY, APRIL 7, 2019

FRANKLIN'S GARDENS – GALLAGHER PREMIERSHIP RUGBY

**ATKINSON LEADS WAY WITH HAT-TRICK AS GLOUCESTER RUGBY
ROMP TO WIN AT SAINTS**

NORTHAMPTON SAINTS 31 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 40

Gloucester Rugby solidified their top four challenge in the Gallagher Premiership by stunning the in-form Northampton Saints at Franklin's Gardens on Sunday, scoring six tries on their way to a thrilling 31-40 victory.

The victory sees the Cherry and Whites consolidate third place in the table, six points ahead of Harlequins and, with Heineken Champions Cup qualification in mind, thirteen points ahead of seventh placed Saints.

However, despite the importance of the result, there was a physical price to pay. The Cherry and Whites had already had to replace the back three that started against Wasps a fortnight ago, and several players had to hobble off today. The physio's will be busy this week.

It shouldn't detract, however, from a magnificent performance on the day. Northampton were back in form and looking to close the gap on the teams above them in the table. Defeat today was a setback for them.

Gloucester Rugby were even able to overcome the disappointment of gifting a couple of scores to their hosts. This may have been decisive not that long ago, but this version of the Cherry and Whites seem to be made of sterner stuff and simply shrugged it off.

The team were superb on the day. The work-rate and team spirit was clear for everyone to see.

In adversity, no-one took a backward step and, in attack, Gloucester Rugby oozed menace on their way to their fourth win on the road this season.

It's a short turnaround to Bath coming to Kingsholm this weekend though. Rest and recovery will be vital this week, and everyone in Cherry and White will have to be focused on the task in hand. Today was a positive step forward, but there's a lot of rugby to be played yet.

Dan Biggar put the kick-off out on the full to give the Cherry and Whites an early boost, quickly followed by Franco Mostert nicking the home team's first lineout. But a scrum penalty negated the advantage.

And the home team struck with their first foray into Gloucester Rugby territory. Taquele Naiyaravoro featured once in the build-up with a powerful carry down the left, then finished the move several phases later, breaking a couple of tackles on his way to the line. 5-0 to the Saints after six minutes.

But the Cherry and Whites hit back immediately. A penalty award against the home team allowed Gloucester Rugby to move into the 22. Charlie Sharples got close to the line on the left wing, but it was Mark Atkinson who shook off Naiyaravoro to go over on the right. Billy Twelvetrees added a fine conversion for a 5-7 lead after 11 minutes.

But the Saints were gifted the lead within a minute. It looked on for Gloucester Rugby to attack from their own 22, but the ball was crucially knocked on and Piers Francis had only to pick up and run under the posts to score. Biggar added the extras for 12-7.

Once again the Cherry and Whites responded in style; once again it was Atkinson with the score.

A well worked lineout move had the Saints defence in sixes and sevens, and Atkinson cut a great angle off a flat pass from Franco Marais to go over untouched. Twelvetrees converted for 12-14.

Gloucester Rugby had a couple more promising openings in the minutes that followed, but weren't quite clean enough in their execution; one break from Jaco Kriel in particular promising great things, but the Saints were able to hold out.

It had been a breathless opening, and Saints to their credit were looking equally as dangerous, one searing break from Cobus Reinach halted by a marvelous tap tackle from Danny Cipriani.

Gloucester Rugby then very nearly extended their lead as Matt Banahan picked off a loose Saints pass. The winger couldn't escape the pursuit, and Billy Twelvetrees was halted illegally by Naiyaravoro as he tried to take the offload.

Naiyaravoro was yellow carded and the penalty went to the corner. Although the catch and drive was held out, Gloucester Rugby stayed patient and Ruan Ackermann muscled his way over from close range for the third try. Twelvetrees' conversion made it 12-21.

After all the good work in attack, some real dog in defence was then needed as Tom Hudson was forced to carry a grubber kick over his own line. The Gloucester Rugby scrum dug deep, before a penalty was then won by Willi Heinz for Saints holding on near the line.

However, the excellent good work was promptly undone as Gloucester Rugby's kick chase let them down. Ahsee Tuala was wrapped up in the tackle, Teimana Harrison took it on and the number eight found Cobus Reinach in support for the try. Biggar's conversion narrowed the gap to 19-21.

But there was still time for the Cherry and Whites to strike again. Cobus Reinach was hunting his trademark interception as Gloucester Rugby secured good lineout ball.

Willi Heinz went through the gap left by his opposite number, Jaco Kriel was on his shoulder and the flanker put Atkinson over for his hat-trick.

Twelvetrees couldn't convert unfortunately, but the Cherry and Whites held a 19-26 advantage at half time. It had been real end to end stuff, and no-one at this stage quite frankly could predict a winner.

There would no doubt be plenty more thrills and spills and points to come in the second half. Could Gloucester Rugby go on to clinch an important road win?

The opening signs were good. Matt Banahan made good ground down the right, before Fraser Balmain made a telling break in midfield. Gloucester Rugby stayed patient and worked several phases to allow Ed Slater to crash over from close range. Twelvetrees converted for 19-33.

The Cherry and Whites then nearly went further ahead, Danny Cipriani's break from his own half opening up the Saints only for his pass out wide to be knocked on. George Furbank gathered and kicked ahead, only to be halted illegally by Willi Heinz.

The penalty went to the corner and the Saints pack executed their catch and drive well for hooker Reece Marshall to touch down. Biggar couldn't convert, but there was a blow for Gloucester Rugby as Tom Hudson and Danny Cipriani both went off injured. 24-33 with 26 minutes left to play.

It was a key phase of the game, and the momentum now seemed to be with the home side. A few decisions started to go against Gloucester Rugby, and the Franklin's Gardens crowd, so quiet a few minutes earlier, had now found their voices.

However, a crucial turnover from Val Rapava Ruskin proved to be vital. Matt Banahan cleared downfield, Furbank could only find touch on his own 22, and Gloucester Rugby had a good attacking position.

The Gloucester Rugby pack stepped up, launched their own catch and drive and Saints were unable to hold out, Franco Marais claiming the try. Twelvetrees, taking his time and getting some stick from the crowd, converted for 24-40.

However, the Saints weren't done just yet and Rory Hutchinson sliced his way through to give his team hope with just four minutes left to play. Piers Francis added the conversion to narrow the gap to 31-40.

Things could have got nervy as Northampton piled forward to try and secure at least a losing bonus point, but Franco Mostert rose majestically in the lineout to rob possession and snuff out any remaining glimmer of hope for the Saints.

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