

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, MAY 18, 2019

AJ BELL STADIUM – GALLAGHER PREMIERSHIP RUGBY

**PRIDE AND BRAVERY TO THE FORE BUT GLOUCESTER RUGBY
DENIED AT THE DEATH BY SALE**

SALE SHARKS 46 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 41

A magnificent effort on the day from Gloucester Rugby, rarely will they score six tries on the road and lose, but it wasn't quite enough at Sale as the home team edged a thriller by 46 points to 41.

It could have gone either way, the much-changed Cherry and Whites outfit looked to have made a decisive move as they opened up a ten point lead with 15 minutes left to play, but couldn't quite hold off a determined Sale fightback as the home team roared back to take the spoils on the day.

A penalty from Lloyd Evans had made it 41-31 to Gloucester Rugby at that point but, had Lewis Ludlow's try been allowed, the flanker was adjudged to have been held up over the line, the gap could have been 14 points and could have been decisive.

But that's all conjecture. The performance on the day was one that all associated with Gloucester Rugby can be proud of. The likes of Matt Banahan and Jake Polledri were magnificent on the day, but were well supported by every single one of their team mates.

Head Coach Johan Ackermann had seen his selection for the game questioned in many quarters, but he insisted that his team had plenty to play for and had faith in their ability to deliver a performance; he wasn't wrong.

The Cherry and Whites had to overcome conceding a try in the game's opening exchanges as well as losing both starting wingers to injury in the first quarter. Yet, despite some understandable lack of cohesion at times, they went toe to toe with a Sale side desperate for a win to enhance their own top six ambitions.

It was thrilling rugby at times, aided by a number of errors from both sides, and no-one at the AJ Bell Stadium could complain about value for money as the lead swung this way and that.

It brings the regular season to a close, and Gloucester Rugby's thoughts now turn to next Saturday's semi-final away at Saracens. Those on duty will have given the coaching team food for thought in terms of selection and, crucially, morale in the squad will be high.

The Cherry and Whites fielded a team much changed from the side that started their previous Gallagher Premiership fixture, at home to Newcastle Falcons, two weeks earlier. However, with a semi-final fixture next weekend, there was plenty to play for.

But it was the worst possible start as the re-jigged defence was sliced apart within two minutes of the start. Faf de Klerk broke off the back of a lineout and put AJ McGinty into space. The fly-half drew the final man and put Tom Curry under the posts. McGinty had an easy conversion.

It could have been two as the Sharks just failed to take advantage of a handling error, but an attack from deep inspired by Thorley and Sharples saw the Cherry and Whites show what they could do with ball in hand.

It led to a good spell of pressure in the Sale 22. The home pack held out the catch and drive, but lovely hands from Banahan saw Tom Seabrook come around on the loop and glide home untouched. Lloyd Evans added the extras to level the scores after nine minutes.

A good spell followed for Gloucester Rugby, but the optimism was shattered by the site of Ollie Thorley staying down after what looked like a late hit on the right wing after he offloaded the ball to Tom Seabrook.

While the winger received treatment, the Cherry and Whites got into a muddle near their own line and conceded a penalty. The kick went to the corner and the catch and drive resulted in a try for hooker Rob Webber. The conversion missed and Thorley was replaced by Dom Coetzer.

The home side then benefitted from a huge stroke of fortune as the ball came back their way on the deck. The counter attack saw Byron McGuigan break down the left, Callum Braley got back to knock the ball down but it bounced kindly for Sam James to pick up and score, McGinty converting for 19-7 after 20 minutes.

Credit to the Cherry and Whites, it had been a rough few minutes as they also lost Tom Seabrook to injury. However, a thrilling counter from Jake Polledri as a Sale pass went loose saw him break downfield, before timing his pass superbly for Ben Vellacott to sprint away and score. Evans converted well to narrow the gap to 19-14.

Matt Banahan, on his 200th Premiership appearance, then stunned the home crowd as his dummy was bought in midfield and the big centre went over under the posts after breaking a tackle. Evans converted and gave his side a 19-21 lead on the half hour.

A fourth try almost followed, but the Cherry and Whites were penalised for holding on in the shadow of the Sale posts. The home team took full advantage of the escape, as a line break from Jono Ross saw the back rower link up with Faf de Klerk who put Chris Ashton over for his team's fourth try and a 24-21 lead.

Gloucester Rugby almost hit back immediately as Tom Savage charged down an attempted clearance to force a lineout near the Sale line. The catch and drive was held up over the line, before Matt Banahan then went close again.

However, the Cherry and Whites stayed patient and went to the corner as Sale strayed offside. The catch and drive was perfect and Lewis Ludlow claimed the bonus point score. Evans couldn't quite convert from the touchline but his team held a 24-26 lead at half time.

And for sheer character in adversity, Gloucester Rugby deserved that advantage. Written off before the game, they conceded straight from the restart and lost both starting wingers in the first quarter.

But they fronted up, played what was in front of them and were well worth their four tries at the interval. The home team and crowd looked bemused at what was being played out in front of them.

To be fair, the full-strength Sale side had scored four good tries of their own, but would surely have counted on being in the lead at half time, especially after the game's first few minutes.

There was still plenty of rugby yet to be played in this one, but Gloucester Rugby were at least giving their travelling fans something to shout about on a grey afternoon in Salford despite the obvious blow in losing Thorley.

The loose nature of the game continued from the restart as Gloucester Rugby threw an interception and then missed touch as they tried to clear their lines. Sale needed no second invitation, blowing one overlap before creating a second for Byron McGuigan to score. McGinty converted for Sale to regain the lead, 31-26.

But still the Cherry and Whites refused to throw in the towel. A series of big ball carries created momentum, before Matt Banahan floated a chip to the right wing to find Lewis Ludlow who offloaded inside for Dom Coetzer to sprint over and level the scores at 31 points apiece.

The Barbarians-style nature of the game continued. Jake Polledri was to the fore once again, carrying well and then timing his pass to perfection for Ben Vellacott to scoot over for his second try of the afternoon. Evans added a magnificent conversion for a 31-38 lead after 57 minutes.

Ludlow was then deemed to be held up over the line as the Cherry and Whites sought to extend their advantage, but Lloyd Evans added a penalty as Sale were penalised for offside.

The 10-point lead was fleeting. Another missed touch allowed de Klerk to counter, then link up with Solomona whose inside pass saw AJ McGinty step his way to the line. The fly-half then converted his own try to narrow the gap to 38-41 with 13 minutes left to play.

It only took a minute for the Sharks to strike, breaking clear up the middle from their own 22, de Klerk again involved but Solomona finishing superbly in the corner as the cover tried desperately to get across. 43-41 to the home side.

It proved to be the decisive score. Desperate, a couple of late flurries from deep within their own half, Gloucester Rugby couldn't work a position to re-take the lead, and attacking from deep ultimately cost them as a turnover led to a Sale penalty with the last kick of the game to make the final score 46-41.

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