

# THE CITIZEN

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 22, 2003

GLOUCESTER BEATEN AT IRISH

DEACON INJURY COULD PROVE A CRUSHING BLOW

LONDON IRISH 16 GLOUCESTER 10

LONDON IRISH : M. Horak; P. Sackey, G. Appleford, N. Mordt (M. Cannon 67), J. Bishop; M. Mapletoft (B. Everitt 18), D. Edwards; N. Hatley, N. Drotake (A. Flavin 77), R. Hardwick, R. Strudwick (c), B. Casey, P. Gustard (P. Murphy 53), K. Dawson, C. Sheasby.  
Reps: P. Durant, A. Flavin, K. Roche, P. Murphy, M. Cannon, K. Barrett.

GLOUCESTER : R. Teague; M. Garvey, R. Todd, H. Paul, S. Thomas; B. Davies, A. Page (S. Amor 69), P. Johnstone, S. Brotherstone, A. Deacon (N. Wood 46), A. Eustace (M. Cornwell 40), A. Brown, J. Boer (c), A. Hazell (P. Buxton 70), J. Paramore (J. Forrester 49).

Referee : C. White (Cheltenham).

Attendance: 9,968

The immediate future of Gloucester's Premiership season lies in the fitness of a 38-year-old prop with a potentially serious calf injury. If that sounds ever so slightly over-simplified, then consider this – with the remarkable Andy Deacon at the beachhead, Gloucester only just about achieved parity against London Irish in the tight and at the breakdown during a hellishly frenetic meeting at the Madejski Stadium yesterday.

Without him, they were utterly rudderless. When he was dragged limping around the side of the pitch with almost 30 minutes of the game remaining, Gloucester were forced into such a reshuffle of the front row, it allowed the Irish to tighten the screw so mercilessly, they extracted a strangling victory.

It was more grunt at the grunt end and more control from the decision-makers away from the pack that separated two poor teams.

Deacon plays in the most pivotal position of all at tighthead and when Paul Johnstone was switched to compensate, Gloucester were shunted about with alarming ease at the set piece.

Their scrummage was reduced to a shambling collection of bodies and while their line-out had been effective, the ferocious competitiveness of Ryan Strudwick's men ensured they never got in any position to drive possession.

Gloucester will pray Deacon's injury is not serious because any more disruption to a pack already without Phil Vickery, Trevor Woodman and Rodrigo Roncero will leave Gloucester in a state of impotence they have not faced in years.

Without the efforts of Jake Boer and Alex Brown yesterday, they would have suffered more indignity.

Deacon's injury will cause Nigel Melville and Dean Ryan some concern – almost as much concern as the catalogue of errors that contributed to the defeat.

Two defences, schooled in the rigours of ferocious first-up tackling, contributed to a game with so many handling errors and turnovers it was amazing either side found enough space to win.

The quality was low but the physicality mountainous and Gloucester never remotely threatened a second successive victory.

The Irish were better because they had the one controlling influence in the game – Barry Everitt – and when his pack was on the shunt, the replacement number 10 kicked wonderfully well into the corners to turn Gloucester and their inexperienced back-three.

But they had powerful contributors all over the field – from the menacing Rob Hardwick in the front row who was outstanding and Paul Gustard on the flank, to the pace and direction of Paul Sackey on the wing, the Irish were better, but only just.

In comparison, Gloucester are static at present. There is no platform for them to build on up front and against a defence so well drilled as the Irish, Henry Paul needed his entire range of close-up ball control skills to keep the whole thing stumbling forward.

They are clearly still a team fumbling their way towards a successful formula, but Alex Page did enough at scrum-half to suggest he has a future and Paul's sleight of foot was always a threat. But against a backdrop of natural uncertainty. Gloucester would have craved a solid start. They didn't get one.

Only two minutes had gone when Mark Mapletoft sent Sackey on a burst that swept him past the feeble tackles of Stephen Thomas and Rory Teague and behind the posts from 60 metres for the try.

Gloucester huffed and puffed their way back into the contest but lacked any continuity and control of the ball to release Paul and Marcel Garvey. Too many of the vaunted players are nowhere near the peak of their game and it is a serious problem.

One of those not at his sharpest, Andy Hazell, did get Gloucester going. It was his tackle on Darren Edwards and Alex Brown's follow-up that created a try when the Irish made a hash of a line-out.

Page foraged well to maintain possession up the short side but Paul did even better on a slaloming run across the field before straightening the attack.

The Irish may have thought the move was petering out, but Junior Paramore, a hard-working mover and shaker at number eight, picked up and thundered to the line.

Somehow, Gloucester then found themselves ahead when Paul kicked a penalty and if the Irish had been left scratching their heads at the injustice of it all, they were not alone.

When the Irish could take the ball through a number of phases they looked dangerous, but both teams coughed up so much first-phase ball, it was criminal.

The second period was more of the same – kick, chase, tackle, fumble, turnover, but it was the home side who had slightly more control. They drew level with an Everitt penalty before the same player kicked them into the lead.

When they went six points ahead with 15 minutes remaining, the victory was all but complete and confirmed when Deacon departed.

Gloucester unleashed a rally of late assaults but when in good positions, the line-out was static or the ball turned over. In fact, they could have stolen the victory had Teague been able to gather Paul's kick but it would have been a robbery on a grander scale than the one that involved a train some 40 years ago.

Melville will be delighted to have stolen a point and although in their current state it is too early to assess their capabilities; they need a quick remedy.

If they could capture a victory against Saracens on Saturday, nine points would be a solid return, but without Deacon, it will be a struggle.

#### Match Facts.

Two Minutes: The Irish are off and running immediately when they launch an attack down the right and Mark Mapletoft's pass finds Paul Sackey in space. He brushes past Steve Thomas and Rory Teague to surge beneath the posts to score. Mapletoft converts.

London Irish 7, Gloucester 0

Seven Minutes: Gloucester are struggling to get into the game and concede a penalty for off-side. Mapletoft kicks to the right of the posts.  
London Irish 7, Gloucester 0

18 Minutes: Irish are forced into a change when Mapletoft is left in the midfield after a tackle. He appears seriously injured but walks to the sideline to be replaced by Barry Everitt.

26 Minutes: There had been no attacking threat from Gloucester in the opening quarter but Andy Hazell pulls down Darren Edwards and Alec Brown's tackle shoots the ball to the blindside.

Alex Page picks up and makes ground but when the ball comes back, Henry Paul is forced into a sideways break before straightening the attack and suddenly Junior Paramore bursts away to score. Paul converts.

London Irish 7, Gloucester 7

37 Minutes: Gloucester increase their unlikely advantage when Paul kicks a penalty after the Irish are penalised for coming over the top.

London Irish 7, Gloucester 10

45 Minutes: Paul has the chance to stretch Gloucester's lead to six points but his long-range attempt drifts to the right of the posts.

47 Minutes: The miss proved costly inasmuch Irish drew level immediately after the re-start with an Everitt penalty after a series of short-range forward drives got them to beneath the posts.

London Irish 10, Gloucester 10

51 Minutes: The home side regain a thoroughly deserved lead when Marcel Garvey drops Everitt's high kick and Brad Davies is penalised for offside after picking up loose possession. Everitt kicks the penalty.

London Irish 13, Gloucester 10

65 Minutes: Gloucester have hardly launched an attack of note in the second period. Their pack has struggled in the set-piece and Everitt has kept them on the back foot with well-placed kicking. He seals the victory with a drop-goal after the Irish's pack power pays off again.

London Irish 16, Gloucester 10

Star Man: Jake Boer.

JC