

THE CITIZEN

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 18, 2003

GLOUCESTER GRIND THEIR WAY TO VITAL VICTORY

AT THE STOOP

HARLEQUINS 0 GLOUCESTER 16

HARLEQUINS : G. Duffy; S. Keogh, M. Deane, A. Reay, U. Monye; P. Burke, B. Willis; C. Jones, T. Fuga, L. Gomez, B. Davison, J. Evans, P. Sanderson, A. Vos (capt.), T. Diprose.

Reps : J. Hayter, M. Worsley, J. Dawson, R. Winters, L. Sherriff, R. Jewell, A. Dunne.

GLOUCESTER : J. Goodridge; M. Garvey, R. Todd, H. Paul, J. Simpson-Daniel; D. McRae, A. Page; P. Johnstone, C. Fortey, A. Deacon, A. Eustace, A. Brown, J. Boer (capt.), A. Hazell, J. Forrester.

Reps : N. Wood, S. Brotherstone, A. Olver, M. Cornwell, P. Buxton, S. Amor, J. Frape.

Referee : S. Leyshon (RFU).

Three weeks ago, Nigel Melville planned a spot of 'rugby terrorism' at Newcastle – get in, get the job done and get out.

On that occasion they were smashed by Tom May's hat-trick, but against Harlequins they worked themselves to a standstill to earn a thoroughly deserved and much-needed away victory.

There was only one try – smash and grabbed by Robert Todd in injury time – and although it never approached an afternoon to enthral, the effort and control of the Kingsholm pack was something to behold.

If small is beautiful, Melville and Ryan will be delighted with the result, particularly their defence around the fringes that dented Quins backs time after time.

Finally, in the final five minutes of the half, we had some action. Until then it was a serious case of a stodge at The Stoop.

There was precious little to recommend in terms of action – the only points coming from a Henry Paul penalty – his third attempt – and before he was on target in the 37th minute, both teams appeared to [be] the first in history to chip away at a nil-nil scoreline.

By the end of the period, there were signs of life and they came from Gloucester. Duncan McRae, making his debut, looked safe and secure, kicked well and at every opportunity attempted a half-break.

He had also been involved early on. Quins looked to attack down the number 10 channel to exploit his unfamiliarity with his flankers in defence, but he held firm in the opening stages.

Harlequins made a bright start, although it was not a sign of things to come. Scrum-half Ben Willis was involved twice in an opening move that also included full-back Gavin Duffy and when play went right, James Simpson-Daniel was involved early to stop Ugo Monye in his tracks.

Paul's first penalty then struck an upright after five minutes but both teams struggled for territorial dominance and turned over far too [much] ball in the contact area.

For Gloucester, Alex Brown was his usual damaging self in the line-outs and stole two early Quins throws, while Andy Hazell was a livewire at the breakdown and made any number of hard-hitting tackles. Andy Deacon also set about Ceri Jones with a certain relish.

Away from the forwards, Gloucester threatened but never looked as if they truly believed they could make the killer pass.

Paul saw a lot of the ball in any number of positions, while Robert Todd broke the gain-line on half a dozen occasions, but Gloucester lacked sufficient control of the ball to make it count.

There was no doubt they dominated the opening period, but it took Paul's penalty after hands in the ruck to break the deadlock.

Just before, there were signs of life. Simpson-Daniel took advantage of a Quins slip in midfield to feed James Forrester, but he lost his footing, while, after the penalty, Jake Boer almost finished off a break from Jon Goodridge before being bundled into touch.

For Quins, it was not all going to plan. Andre Vos required stitches in a face wound while Monye limped off with a knee problem.

While the purists were quietly choking on their Pimms, the lovers of the seriously meaty side of the game were having a field day.

It had turned into a slugfest at the set piece. Gloucester, through Brown and Adam Eustace, controlled the line-out, while ahead of them Paul Johnstone, Chris Fortey and Deacon relished every scrum.

At times it is easy to oversee their contribution but they concentrated to the bitter end and marshalled by Boer and McRae, Gloucester bossed the second period.

There was no opportunity to be flash – composure was the watchword – and they gradually wore the hosts down.

Paul missed an early second half penalty but doubled Gloucester's money in the 50th minute with his second three points and in terms of its significance it was crucial.

Both sides had appeared to have given up the ghost of playing attractively but there were still a couple of lovely little breaks by McRae.

Harlequins, who struggled at the set-piece, had no territory to work in and even less ball but they were not helped by two missed penalties from Paul Burke that would have tied the scores.

Meanwhile, Gloucester systematically and methodically went about their business. Peter Buxton replaced Andy Hazell and continued where the tyro left off – at the hub of the action in the mauls and at the breakdown.

Tony Diprose and Vos were as energetic as anybody but lacked the platform ahead of them to cause any lasting damage and when Paul landed his third penalty 11 minutes from time, the writing was on the wall.

Content to hammer them back at the line-out, where Boer led the charge at the heart of the mauls, and McRae demanded concentration, Gloucester worked themselves into crucial positions. As a strangling operation, it was perfect.

When they had it they kept the ball better and regardless of how it looked on the eye, four crucial points were heading back to Kingsholm.

By the end, Quins were so short of ideas it was criminal and they were reduced to living off scraps. It was no surprise when Gloucester's weight of pressure finally told.

From a scrum, Andy Reay looked to launch a late attack but Todd was up so quickly he gathered the pass and headed off to the posts unopposed to score. Paul converted and Gloucester led 16-0.

It was no surprise most of the pack were offered private congratulations. They had done as much as anybody to force the pressure.