

THE CITIZEN

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 1, 2003

GLOUCESTER BLITZED IN THE FIRST HALF

SECOND HALF FIGHTBACK NOT ENOUGH TO PREVENT DEFEAT

NORTHAMPTON 30 GLOUCESTER 17

Gloucester were blown away in the first half at Franklin's Gardens and trailed 27-0 at the break.

NORTHAMPTON : N. Beal; J. Sleightholme, C. Hyndman, M. Tucker, B. Reihana; S. Drahm, M. Robinson; B. Sturgess, D. Richmond, C. Budgen, M. Lord, R. Hunter, M. Connors, D. Fox, A. Blowers (c).
Reps: M. Miles, J. Golding, J. Phillips, G. Seely, J. Howard, J. Brooks, O. Ripol.

GLOUCESTER : J. Goodridge; M. Garvey, J. Simpson-Daniel, H. Paul, J. Frape; D. McRae, A. Page; N. Wood, C. Fortey, A. Deacon, A. Eustace, A. Brown, J. Boer (c), A. Hazell, P. Buxton.
Reps: S. Brotherstone, A. Olver, M. Cornwell, J. Forrester, S. Amor, S. Thomas, A. Frost.

Referee : R. Goodliffe (RFU).

This had it all – attitude by the bucket-load, passion verging on the obsessive, desperation, the odd punch-up, so many cards it could have been Christmas and in the end a victory for Northampton.

It was a quite intoxicating mix. Add in a home crowd in such good voice, Franklin's Gardens rocked at the sound of the final whistle and it was a contest that went the full nine yards and then some.

Despite a brave recovery that brought three tries – one to Andy Hazell and two for James Forrester – Gloucester found themselves on the end of a third away defeat in the Premiership.

For Northampton, this ended a quite dire run against Gloucester. They scored twice, but by the end were down to 13 men following the sin-binning to Andrew Blowers, a colossus in the back row, and red card victim scrum-half Mark Robinson.

If Gloucester had shown a little more brain power in the second half, they could have won because they were always attacking against 14 or 13 men but they paid the ultimate price for a frustrating first half during which time they could never get their hands on the ball.

It was a little odd why Gloucester waited until the last seven minutes before introducing Forrester because his impact was immediate, but the Saints have to be commended for their outstanding backs to the wall defence that cemented their victory.

Apart from the disgraceful fighting at the end of the first half – and there will be more to follow for sure when the tape gets a good airing in the week – this was a cracking contest.

Blowers, Mark Connors and the rest of the Saints pack caused so many problems Gloucester simply could not cope.

The Cherry and Whites were 27-0 down before Hazell, concentrating on his rugby, powered home on the short side, before Forrester was driven over from a line-out and then a push-over scrum with the minutes ebbing away.

They desperately went for the bonus point try, but Saints held firm and the relief at the end was palpable.

However, if discipline is the key to the modern game, when Gloucester get themselves into such a straightjacket, you might as well throw away the key.

As heinous as it is these days to lose men to the sinbin, one might be slightly unfortunate but two is downright suicide; they can be thankful at least one of the cards was not red.

Adam Eustace, no stranger to a spell in the cooler, followed Andy Hazell for a time-out after a spell of all-in brutality at the end of a simmering first half that erupted quite uncontrollably following Hazell's late challenge on Shane Drahm.

Quite what started a near 30-man brawl is anyone's guess but Northampton's scrum-half Mark Robinson was red-carded for his involvement in the trouble amid flying fists that spilled 30 yards.

Thankfully, we have not seen anything as vicious as that for seasons. Duncan McRae needed a head wound bandaged – it is always better to get the handy ones first – and the savage nature of it all took the gloss off Northampton's outstanding start.

But it was coming. Referee Robin Goodliffe had such a tenuous grip on proceedings around the contact area, that the game was always on the nasty side, but Gloucester cut their own throats because they could not control themselves and their frustration.

Hazell went for a late charge at Shane Drahm, one of the cooler members during the first half, and from then the game lost control and balance.

Heads and elbows were used at the tackle area but away from that, Gloucester had been awful. It took them almost half an hour to get any meaningful possession and when they did they kicked it away or turned over ball in midfield.

Leading the wrecking spree at the breakdown was Andrew Blowers, by some distance the best forward in the first half, although Mark Connors and Matt Lord were not too far behind, and two tackles, one on Eustace and one on James Simpson-Daniel, were right out of the top drawer.

Gloucester were already 6-0 behind when the Saints scored their first try. Lord was on duty at a line-out and although Gloucester held the initial surge, Chris Budgen mined his way over the line to score.

Drahm converted and chipped away with three more penalties to stretch Northampton's lead to 22-0 after 33 minutes.

Gloucester had been all over the place – ragged and unable to maintain any possession or structure to their game.

It was another Blowers tackle that stunted a rare Gloucester attack and produced Northampton's second try. Nick Beal grabbed possession down the short side and suddenly the Saints were four on one. A quick dummy took Beal racing away inside Gloucester territory and Jon Sleightholme was on hand to finish off.

It was a lead that proved too great for Gloucester to pull back but the repercussions from this will run and run.

JC