

THE CITIZEN

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 8, 2003

GLOUCESTER'S GREAT RUN ENDED BY BATH

UNBEATEN RECORD GOES AS BATH EDGE TO VITAL VICTORY

GLOUCESTER 14 BATH 20

Gloucester's 24-match unbeaten run at home was ended by arch-rivals Bath, giving former Cherry and White Rob Fidler a happy return to Kingsholm.

The Cherry and Whites led at the break but were unable to score in the second half as their West Country rivals snatched victory.

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

Reps: C. Collins, N. Wood, A. Olver, M. Cornwell, J. Merriman, S. Amor, J. Frape.

BATH : M. Perry; W. Human, A. Higgins, R. Fleck, J. Williams; O. Barkley, M. Wood; D. Flatman, J. Humphreys, D. Bell, S. Borthwick, R. Fidler, A. Beattie, M. Lipman, Z. Feaunati.

Reps: R. Blake, L. Mears, M. Stevens, R. Kydd, P. Sampson, J. Scaysbrook, S. Gray.

Referee : R. Maybank.

It took the Premiership leaders to do it as Gloucester's proud record of 24 successive league wins at Kingsholm was brought to an end by Bath.

A match riddled with penalties had three sparkling tries and the inevitable edge of a derby to lift the spirits, although Bath's better discipline in the open and some impenetrable defence earned them the win.

It was not long before the Shed's good-natured cheers welcoming Rob Fidler back to his spiritual home of more than nine seasons dissipated. Favourite or no favourite, the honest lock forward now wears the blue, black and white of Bath and no amount of nostalgia could infiltrate Gloucester's hunger to give their rivals a hiding.

Fidler was once again in the engine room of a pack unchanged for the ninth game in succession, although Bath's back line dilemmas brought a debut for new loan signing, Wylie Human on the wing, with points machine Ollie Barkley moving to 10 for the first time this term.

Having imposed a club ban on Andy Hazell for his involvement in last weekend's fracas at Northampton, James Forrester was reinstated to the starting back row, with Peter Buxton moving to the blind-side.

While there were welcome returns for Argentinian prop Rodrigo Roncero following his World Cup exploits and centre Robert Todd, who had recovered from 'flu, there was no time for either to settle when the battle lines were drawn.

The Bath eight immediately set their stall out, hauling down two line-outs in the first eight minutes. Paul converted both from distance, yet failed from closer range with one in between amid the stop-start opening.

But Gloucester were not getting all the decisions. Foolish diving into the ruck by Adam Eustace and then a little backchat was greeted with a penalty 10 metres further inside the half for Barkley and he made no mistake with his first kick of the game.

Then the tit-for-tat tussle started to take shape. Sweeping the ball from left to right towards the Shed, fast hands through the three-quarters sent Marcel Garvey in at the corner in the game's neatest piece of play so far.

Paul barely had time to assess how his conversion had clattered off the upright when Bath wiped out Garvey's try with an opportunist one of their own.

Barkley charged down Duncan McRae's tentative clearance kick from inside his 22 and the Bath fly-half won the race to get downward pressure on the ball, adding the two points to keep his side within one of Gloucester.

Galvanised, Nigel Melville's men started to pull their game together. With Forrester charging around like a man possessed, his appearance on the wing on the end of James Simpson-Daniel's flip pass was little surprise. He, however, was flabbergasted when Roy Maybank ignored Steve Borthwick's late tackle on the number eight as he chased after his chip down the line.

But Bath did not get away with other infringements. Off-side handed Paul another shot at the posts from 30 metres, which he slotted, although he was unable to punish Bath's problems around the tight a couple of minutes later.

And that was to prove telling as Bath got the chance to test their strength. After driving Gloucester's pack back from their own line-out, their next effort was to form the platform for Barkley's next three-pointer.

Fidler, of course, was the foundation, winning clean line-out ball to send the backs racing through a confused midfield cover. As Gloucester foundered, so Barkley was gifted a 20 metre penalty he was never going to miss.

Gloucester's efforts became more and more frustrated. Jon Goodridge's short pass was too flat to unleash Simpson-Daniel and, when the ball came ball[*sic*], Paul sent it into touch from outside his 22.

And, with another missed penalty by Paul three minutes into injury time, Gloucester could only take a one-point lead into the interval.

HALF-TIME :	
GLOUCESTER	14
BATH	13

The fire and brimstone of the derby was quietened at the start of the second half, when Robbie Fleck suffered what appeared to be a serious leg injury in a tackle; the 51-times capped Springbok centre having to be stretchered off after receiving five minutes of treatment on the pitch, in only his second game for Bath.

His replacement, Robbie Kydd wasted no time introducing himself, storming over at the end of a rapid-fire attack from the scrum, that saw Barkley, then Andrew Higgins make ground and leave Gloucester's defence clutching fresh air before the New Zealander raced in.

Barkley's conversion stretched their lead to six points and so it remained for the last 30 minutes.

The pendulum of power swung first Bath's way, then Gloucester's as their packs tried to prove the dominant force, neither edging the ascendancy.

Yet in the loose the errors kept coming – although this time Barkley's sights were off target with the Bath kicker missing two chances to extend their lead midway through the period.

But then Gloucester got the bit between their teeth. Paul had a go, then McRae, who was taken high, although Maybank penalised Bath for the charge.

Garvey took his chance, finding an opening that was not entirely there to leave Higgins for dead, only to be felled once again by Perry. Garvey was left to limp through the remainder of the match, but Andy Beattie spent the countdown in the sinbin after killing the ball at the ensuing ruck.

Against 14 men, Gloucester sliced and cut their way into Bath's 22, but against some brick wall defending and the odd misplaced pass, they never got any closer.

And, by the final whistle the smile was once again on Fidler's face.

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