

THE CITIZEN

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 15, 2003

GLOUCESTER BOW OUT DESPITE FIGHT BACK

POWERGEN CUP DREAM OVER AS IRISH WIN AT KINGSHOLM

GLOUCESTER 29 LONDON IRISH 35

Gloucester's defence of the Powergen Cup ended at Kingsholm as they failed to complete their fight back against London Irish.

The Cherry and Whites trailed 25-12 at the break but hit back in the second period.

However, despite attacking deep in Irish territory during the 10 minutes of injury time Gloucester could not score a match-saving try.

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

Reps: C. Collins, N. Wood, A. Olver, A. Eustace, L. Narraway, A. Page, J. Frape.

LONDON IRISH : M. Horak; P. Sackey, G. Appleford, R. Hoadley, J. Bishop; B. Everett, D. Edwards; N. Hatley (c), A. Flavin, P. Durant, N. Kennedy, B. Casey, D. Danaher, K. Dawson, P. Murphy.

Reps: D. Wheatley, N. Drotske, K. Burke, P. Gustard, E. Thrower, K. Barrett, M. Cannon.

Referee : G. Ashton Jones.

Gloucester's Twickenham dream died at the first hurdle with the Powergen Cup holders just failing to finish off a rousing second-half comeback with a win.

Ultimately, the failure to take their chances cost them this match along with Irish's deadly efficient counter-attacking and dogged defence at the death.

The tension was almost tangible before kick-off at a bristling Kingsholm as Gloucester faced the first hurdle in their defence of the Powergen Cup.

The anticipation was only heightened by the presence of several lesser known faces in the squad with 19-year-old flanker James Merriman making his competitive starting debut and fellow Gloucester Academy product Luke Narraway on the bench.

Their inclusion had been brought about by a back row crisis with Andy Hazell suspended, Junior Paramore out with a shoulder injury and James Forrester sidelined with a broken toe.

London Irish made a blistering start, collecting the ball from the kick-off with fly-half Barry Everitt's perfect cross-field kick establishing a fine attacking position.

When Gloucester infringed at the line-out just outside their own 22, Irish attacked from the penalty.

They found themselves going backwards, but when Gloucester prop Rodrigo Roncero strayed off-side, Everitt made the most of the kickable opportunity to strike Irish 3-0 in front after only two minutes.

Everitt had another opportunity five minutes later when Roncero was penalised for hands in the ruck but his kick from halfway did not quite have the distance.

Gloucester's response was swift with a rehearsed line-out move seeing hooker Chris Fortey feed number eight Peter Buxton on the burst.

Swift hands from scrum-half Simon Amor out of the ruck to fly-half Duncan McRae forced Irish to concede a penalty, slotted by Gloucester centre Henry Paul to level the scores on 11 minutes.

Having almost single-handedly conceded a try minutes before, Irish winger Paul Sackey then made perfect amends.

Irish moved the ball patiently through a series of rucks before centre Rob Hoadley fired an inch-perfect pass out to number eight Phil Murphy with Sackey bursting through on the overlap to collect and power past the last defender the score.

Everitt's conversion went wide and Paul punished the miss by cutting the gap to 8-6 with a penalty on 22 minutes.

Three minutes later, Paul kicked Gloucester in front after trademark jinking runs from wingers Simpson-Daniel and Marcel Garvey.

A poor pass out of the ruck by Amor cost Gloucester a try-scoring chance after good work by Boer and a dropped ball from veteran prop Andy Deacon allowed Irish to break out of defence with devastating effect.

Irish centres Geoff Appleford and Hoadley combined to move into Gloucester's 22 before feeding Sackey, who used his exhilarating pace to cross for his second try on 29 minutes. Everitt converted.

Two minutes later, Gloucester were made to pay for weak tackling when flanker Declan Danaher fed Appleford for a try. Everitt's conversion stretched their lead to 22-9.

Paul reduced the deficit with a penalty but Everitt's speedy reply almost from the halfway restored their cushion.

HALF-TIME :
GLOUCESTER 12
LONDON IRISH 25

Gloucester made only one half-time change with Nick Wood replacing Roncero at loosehead prop.

The home side were lucky to escape punishment after another raft of missed tackles early in the second half when Murphy was allowed to charge through their rearguard unhindered, but a knock-on thwarted the attack.

It was left to Paul to kick Gloucester out of trouble and when Irish full-back Michael Horak fumbled the catch, the Cherry and Whites attacked from a scrum 30 metres out.

McRae was swallowed up but the ball was recycled to Buxton, who set up the ruck with Amor then sniping over the top into a miniscule gap through the Irish pack and finishing off a fine individual try.

Paul added the extras on 45 minutes to cut the gap to 25-19 but they were fortunate not to concede a soft try soon after when a McRae clearance was charged down by Danaher. Fortunately, when the ball came off him, it fell into the arms of Garvey.

Gloucester supporters held their breath when a cross-field kick by McRae was almost collected by Garvey on the burst and they were able to keep Irish pinned back when visiting lock Bob Casey conceded a penalty.

The line-out was untidy but they secured possession and an Irish knock-on gave Gloucester a scrum on the 22.

Amor broke from the base before the ball was spread left and Irish conceded another penalty.

Gloucester attacked from the line-out but a lack of incisiveness in attack cost them the opportunity with the exceptional Jake Boer and centre Robert Todd both having gone close to making the telling break.

Their failure to turn pressure into points was punished when a rare attacking foray by Irish saw Everitt break blind and release winger Justin Bishop for a try. Everitt converted for a 32-19 lead after 67 minutes.

A cheer went up when McRae was replaced by Alex Page soon after, and he was immediately involved.

Amor, now at fly-half, kicked a penalty into the corner and although the line-out catch and drive did not quite come off, Page moved the ball quickly out of the ensuing ruck to Amor, whose precision pass to Paul reaped a try for the centre. His conversion cut the gap to 32-26 on 71 minutes.

When Irish moved into Gloucester's half, it seemed an Everitt drop-goal looked inevitable and it came on 77 minutes to stretch their lead to 35-26.

A yellow card for Bishop in the dying minutes when he illegally took out Amor allowed Paul to move Gloucester within six points but it looked to be too late.

A try for Horak was disallowed for a high tackle and Gloucester surged forward deep into injury-time, attacking through a series of penalties but eventually a knock-on meant the cup dream was over for another year.