

THE CITIZEN

MONDAY, DECEMBER 29, 2003

GLOUCESTER 18 HARLEQUINS 17

WIN SOURED BY SENDING OFF

DOUBLE TROUBLE USHERS IN PROBLEMATIC NEW YEAR

GLOUCESTER : T. Delpont (T. Fanolua 69); M. Garvey, R. Todd, H. Paul, J. Simpson-Daniel; D. McRae, A. Gomarsall; R. Roncero (T. Woodman 59), C. Fortey, A. Deacon, A. Eustace (M. Cornwell 59), A. Brown, J. Boer (capt.), P. Buxton, J. Paramore (C. Collins 75).

Replacements: P. Johnstone, J. Merriman, A. Page.

NEC HARLEQUINS: G. Duffy; R. Jewell, W. Greenwood, C. Bell, S. Keogh; A. Dunne, S. Barnard; C. Jones, A. Tiatia (J. Hayter 56), J. Leonard (J. Dawson 56), B. Davison (K. Rudski 56), J. Evans, P. Sanderson, T. Diprose (R. Winters 64), A. Vos (capt.).

Replacements: L. Gomez, A. Jarvis, H. Barratt.

Referee : T. Spreadbury.

They may have secured four big Premiership points but two gigantic problems undermined a fumbling festive victory for Gloucester.

Never mind the fact Harlequins almost plotted the rarest of Kingsholm success stories on little more than their own spirit, damned determination and Gloucester's generosity, but a potentially calamitous injury to full-back Thinus Delpont and a red card for Chris Fortey, their first choice hooker, has left Nigel Melville with a mountain of problems to wade through. Happy New Year, Mr. Melville.

Delpont suffered what could be ligament damage in the process of creating the winning try for Trevor Woodman and is expected to discover the seriousness of the injury in the next 24-hours when he meets top surgeon Jon Webb.

Fortey's absence may not be as long but will cause just as much disruption – the red card he received was the second of his career after he swapped punches with lock Jim Evans in a fight he did not start but certainly finished.

Melville now has to find a new number 15 – either Jon Goodridge or Henry Paul appear the obvious choices – while Woodman or Chris Collins will be pressed into emergency hooking cover because of the long-term injury to Steve Brotherstone – hardly ideal preparation with back-to-back European encounters against Munster and the away leg in Bourgoin on the horizon.

It all appeared so unnecessary, particularly with Fortey in bullish good form. His control at the line-out has established Gloucester as the set-piece specialists of the Premiership, while his strike against the head from a scrum at the fag-end of the first half created the equalising try for James Simpson-Daniel.

But of equal concern to Melville will be the fact his team are undermining themselves from within at the moment.

Although they rediscovered their fighting qualities in a forward performance that required every ounce of reserve and determination, and although the conditions rendered anything slicker than a rolling maul almost impossible, Gloucester made far too many unforced errors in the contact area, coughed up possession and presented Quins with both of their tries.

They are simply putting themselves under too much pressure too often.

A stream of silly but costly errors are undermining their progress against opponents who are determined but hardly in the class of Wasps or even Bath and it was not until Andy Gomarsall steadied the ship at the end with some excellent directional kicking that they looked comfortable.

Before that it required a piece of remarkable skill from Delpont and Simpson-Daniel, who combined to go the length of the field with some vital help from the determinedly robust Robert Todd and the equally impressive Jake Boer, before Woodman scored the winning try to break Quins' resistance.

It was a score that arrived at just the right time because Harlequins were in sight of a famous victory based on resolve and the sheer effort of their pack.

Through their ability to disrupt at the breakdown, where Andre Vos was competitiveness exemplified and Pat Sanderson and Tony Diprose also got their hands dirty, Quins initially matched everything Gloucester presented to them in a mighty confrontation.

They also had the one midfield threat of genuine class on either side – Will Greenwood – who not only scored once but distributed possession with outstanding awareness in such filthy conditions and he helped Quins build on their limited but effective organisation to forge a 14-5 lead.

Their first try owed much to Greenwood's determination and a self-induced Gloucester mess when Marcel Garvey and Delpont got in a muddle and the England centre ran on to Andy Dunne's chip to ghost silently past Duncan McRae and in for the score.

If it did one thing, it shook Gloucester into life.

The scrum had already been in mean and moody form, where Andy Deacon was at his most determined to disrupt Ceri Jones, and when Fortey struck against the head, Gomarsall fed McRae who slid his kick in for Simpson-Daniel.

The winger raced behind the cover to score and bring Gloucester to within two points at the break.

Of all Simpson-Daniel's latest exploits, this try was probably the most important, arriving as it did with his side in a serious slugging match.

It allowed them time to regroup and gather themselves for the task ahead.

That job took on near-Everest style proportions when Greenwood was the first to react when Gloucester spilled the ball and used his not inconsiderable footballing skills to blast Quins on to the offensive with some neat footwork.

The danger appeared diffused when Boer raced back to dive on the ball but it squirmed from his grasp, allowing Pat Sanderson and Evans to provide Jones with the perfect smash and grab score.

Lesser teams may have curled up in the mud at that point, but Gloucester got even tighter, played narrower and their forwards gradually assumed control – even without Fortey in the middle.

The arrival of Woodman provided greater power but there were excellent efforts from Adam Eustace and Alex Brown in the wearing down job and it allowed Henry Paul to kick two penalties to turn the screw.

However, they still needed a score and when it arrived, it was a beauty.

Delpport fielded Dunne's cross-field kick and sent Simpson-Daniel away down the wing. Delpport and Todd swept possession into the strike-zone before Boer gave the scoring pass to Woodman to complete a brilliant try.

It was enough to complete the turnaround and secure the victory but the thought of a trip to Welford Road in current form and with all their associated problems will hardly fill Melville and Co. with glee.

MATCH FACTS.

Attendance : 11,000

23 MINUTES: Harlequins, who have made an impressive start up front and dominated territory, score the first try. Marcel Garvey and Thinus Delpont get into a tangle following a punt down-field and Quins recycle possession. Stand-off Andy Dunne chips through and Will Greenwood runs past Duncan McRae to slide in and score. Dunne converts.

GLOUCESTER 0, HARLEQUINS 7

30 MINUTES: Henry Paul makes the first legitimate midfield break of the contest when his break takes him to within striking distance of the Quins line. But when the ball comes back, Robert Todd knocks on.

36 MINUTES: But the Gloucester pressure results in an equalising try. Chris Fortey makes a strike against the head, Rodrigo Roncero and Andy Deacon get a shove on, and Andy Gomarsall feeds McRae. The number 10 chips through and James Simpson-Daniel wins the race and touches down. Paul misses the conversion.

GLOUCESTER 5, HARLEQUINS 7

48 MINUTES: Gloucester start the second half well and take possession to beneath the Quins posts. But they cough up the ball and Greenwood is the first to react. He hacks possession the length of the field and although Jake Boer gets back in time, the ball squeezes from beneath him and Pat Sanderson and Jim Evans send prop Ceri Jones in for the try. Dunne converts.

GLOUCESTER 5, HARLEQUINS 14

50 MINUTES: However, Gloucester strike back when Paul lands a penalty after a forward drive is pulled down.

GLOUCESTER 8, HARLEQUINS 14

63 MINUTES: The game then takes an ugly turn when Fortey and Evans are red-carded following a fight Evans starts. But from the penalty, Paul lands a second penalty from in front of the posts.

GLOUCESTER 11, HARLEQUINS 14

65 MINUTES: Two minutes later, Gloucester then produce a brilliant try. Delpont catches a high ball and sends Simpson-Daniel on a mazy run. He links with Delpont again before Robert Todd and Jake Boer send Trevor Woodman in for an outstanding score. Paul converts.

GLOUCESTER 18, HARLEQUINS 14

72 MINUTES: Dunne causes an anxious finish when he lands a penalty to reduce the deficit to a point, but Gloucester hold on.

GLOUCESTER 18, HARLEQUINS 17

STAR MAN: Andy Gomarsall.

JC