

THE CITIZEN

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2004

GLOUCESTER CRUSH THE SHARKS

MALLINDER'S MEN ARE OUTCLASSED AT KINGSHOLM

GLOUCESTER 38 SALE 12

Jim Mallinder, one of rugby's seriously good guys and a near-miracle worker in his current position as Sale Sharks' commander-in-chief, could do with a break right now.

It would not have come as a great surprise that his vastly inexperienced team – flanker Hugh Perrett, number eight Phil Davies and half-backs Scott Benton and Mike Hercus, who have roughly 120 minutes experience between them in Sale colours – were given a serious going over at Kingsholm on Saturday, considering his current predicament at the club.

Without his game-shaping first choice duo of Bryan Redpath, the outstanding Scotland scrum-half, and Charlie Hodgson, the England number 10, in his key decision-making areas, let alone the freakish Chris Jones, Mallinder's job is hard enough without throwing in his sticky relationship with Brian Kennedy – the Sale owner who seems certain not to offer Mallinder a new contract next season.

It would seem faintly ridiculous that another English coach could bite the dust with the current bias towards all things Antipodean because Sale were competitive and physically more enduring than Gloucester's last Premiership scalp, Newcastle.

They also have a potentially excellent recruit in the shrewd signing of Hercus and a back division as creative and deadly as anything in the country, even without Jason Robinson.

Gloucester were scratching at the bottom of their resources barrel too – the back three were almost straight out of kindergarten, Alex Page did an excellent job as Andy Gomarsall's replacement at scrum-half, while there were also two changes in the front row.

The alterations would have been enough to cause Nigel Melville the odd anxious moment, particularly with Steve Hanley and Mark Cueto, the deadliest finishers in the business, up against Josh Frape and Mark Foster, a man making his debut in the absence of James Simpson-Daniel on the Kingsholm wing.

But Gloucester reverted to what they know best, went so far back to basics it was almost Neanderthal compared to their last few displays, and outpowered Sale good and proper in a relentless pack-based performance. It was a win that owed everything to old fashioned forward dominance and a level of experience Sale could not match, despite the bloody-mindedness of Alex Sanderson and Perrett in the back row.

With Duncan McRea, a man versed in the arts of controlling a game in rude health, Gloucester simply had better players in more positions and he nursed Page through with an excellent display.

Given the week of disruption – Melville was without 10 players because of international call-ups until Thursday – a fourth try and a bonus point was more than he could have wished for and massively significant in the context of their climb up the Premiership.

The first hint at what was to come burned a massive hole through the Sale forwards when Alex Brown, a totem of control at the line-out, won possession 15 metres from the line and Gloucester drove Jake Boer, the exceptional skipper, over for the try.

When the power came on – whether it was through Boer – who hardly ever stopped in his quest for a tackle or the ball, or Terry Fanolua and Robert Todd, the crash, bang, dent centres – Gloucester dominated.

With the advantage set in stone, the hosts went in again with a carbon copy of their first try. Brown's telescopic instincts set up the drive and Rodrigo Roncero, a nuisance from loosehead, emerged with a try and a very big grin.

It was impossible not to feel slightly sorry for Sale and as befits a team in trouble, they competed on the edge of legality, while Hercus was the victim of any number of jarring collisions.

Not only did Fanolua explode into one contact in the first half that almost cut him off at the knees, but his delightful kick should have created a try for Hanley after Jon Goodridge slipped and stumbled and Jos. Baxendall hacked into the danger zone before the ball bobbed dead.

GLOUCESTER : J. Goodridge; M. Foster, T. Fanolua, R. Todd, J. Frape; D. McRea, A. Page; R. Roncero, C. Fortey, A. Deacon, A. Brown, M. Cornwell (A. Eustace 60), J. Boer (capt.), P. Buxton (J. Forrester 54), J. Paramore.

SALE : V. Going; M. Cueto, J. Baxendall (C. Mayor 66), G Bond, S. Hanley; M. Hercus, S. Benton (M. Simpson-Daniel 75); K. Yates (A. Sheridan 45), M. Cairns (J. Roddam 73), S. Turner (B. Stewart 45), L. Fullerton (B. Lloyd 70), D. Schofield, A. Sanderson (capt.), H. Perrett, P. Davies.

Star Man : Alex Brown.

REFEREE : T. Spreadbury (RFU).

Attendance : 10,933

MATCH FACTS

12 MINUTES: From a line-out, Mark Cornwell is pulled down to win a penalty and Duncan McRae kicks into the corner. Gloucester make the best use of the attacking position when Alex Brown takes the catch and the pack drives forward for skipper Jake Boer to be awarded the try. McRae converts from the touchline.

GLOUCESTER 7 SALE 0

33 MINUTES: Sale's skipper Alex Sanderson is yellow-carded for tripping McRae and Gloucester launch another powerful attack from the penalty. McRae kicks to touch and from another hugely effective line-out, prop Rodrigo Roncero burrows over for the try. McRae again converts.

GLOUCESTER 14 SALE 0

41 MINUTES : Gloucester's lead increased with a McRea penalty after the Sharks are penalised for off-side in the shadow of their own posts.

GLOUCESTER 17 SALE 0

47 MINUTES : But Sale, who have battled hard throughout, grab a try they deserve when Gloucester are turned over in midfield. Sale launch a counter-attack through the powerful Steve Hanley and when he gets behind the first wave of Gloucester defence, he sends an inside pass to Scott Benton, who races in for the score. Mike Hercus converts from the touchline.

GLOUCESTER 17 SALE 7

52 MINUTES : The points continue to flow but it is Gloucester who dominate. Jon Goodridge's powerful thrust through midfield takes Gloucester to within striking distance and after long passes from Alex Page and McRae, Terry Fanolua chips towards the line. He is tackled late by a Sale defender and referee Tony Spreadbury awards a penalty try. McRae converts again.

GLOUCESTER 24 SALE 7

72 MINUTES : The only question remaining is whether Gloucester can earn a bonus point and it arrives eight minutes from time. Sale's desperation to get back into the game forces Hercus to chip five metres from his own line, but Junior Paramore charges down and dives in to score. McRae adds the extras.

GLOUCESTER 31 SALE 7

77 MINUTES : However, Sale do get on the scoreboard again when replacement Chris Mayor carves through a gap to collect a brilliant individual try. Hercus cannot convert.

GLOUCESTER 31 SALE 12

80 MINUTES : But it is fitting Gloucester have the final say when Roncero, lurking in mid-field, intercepts a pass from Hercus and charges 50 metres upfield to grab his second try of the game. McRae converts.
GLOUCESTER 38 SALE 12

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