

THE CITIZEN

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 2004

GLOUCESTER CLAW BACK TO WIN

MCRAE PIVOTAL TO TURNAROUND AFTER INTERVAL

ROTHERAM 21 GLOUCESTER 35

There was the very real threat that Rotherham, so far adrift at the foot of the Premiership they have just signed Stephen Hendry and Ronnie O'Sullivan because they required snookers, may have just pulled off their first victory of the season yesterday.

When you have gathered only two points during a tortuous campaign that finally confirmed their relegation – a number that would make the British entry in the Eurovision Song Contest blush with embarrassment – it would seem faintly ridiculous to replace your three most influential players at half-time in a pre-arranged plan just to introduce fresh legs against one of the form sides in the country.

But the decision left Steph Nel, Rotherham's confounded coach, admitting his idea to remove Neil Spence, a pain in the rear loosie, Des Tuavii, a serious handful at the breakdown and a menace in support, and his skipper and hooker Chris Johnson, had contributed to Rotherham's second-half collapse.

Without the scavengers and a skipper who contributed to a line-out in serious working order and a solid scrummage, Gloucester took full advantage to score 35 second-half points to claim their third successive bonus point victory.

Spence was all over the place with a near gale force wind at Rotherham's back in the first half – cleaning out ball on the floor, making the most of Gloucester's general lethargy and scrapping for every morsel, while Tuavii made sure nothing was easy for an away pack under serious pressure in the contact area.

Not only were Gloucester bad, no, worse still, utterly shapeless, they were at times brainless and hampered by basic errors so frequently they singularly failed to stamp any authority on the contest against a Rotherham pack operating at high temperature. They were bossed around at the breakdown and almost expected a route into the game that didn't come with such an uneasy, miss-shaped approach and they were heading in the same direction they had disappeared to at Leeds before Christmas.

Gloucester were already 9-0 down after three Jon Benson penalties when number eight Brad Macleod-Henderson – completing a back row trio who were terrific – took Terry Fanolua's pass on the intercept to score beneath the posts.

A penny for Dean Ryan's thoughts at that stage would have painted a thousand pictures and had the door slammed with extra vigour behind the visitors at half-time, it would have been totally understandable. It was easily Gloucester's worst 40 minutes for some time. Nothing was executed with much conviction but the game swung round after the interval.

Without Spence and Tuavii, the leading lights, as well as Johnson, Rotherham's potency on the deck subsided as did their ability at the line-out where Alex Brown set about them.

Using the wind, Duncan McRae kicked into the corners to establish a positional foothold before the pack, where Peter Buxton produced another fiendishly committed performance and Andy Deacon spat blood for the cause, rolled up their sleeves and established a platform Gloucester would not relinquish.

But it was McRae, Fanolua and Robert Todd who turned the wheel full circle. McRae's experience glared through the uncertainty like a beacon – his ability to find holes close to the tackle area cut Rotherham apart – while Fanolua and Todd tore into defenders with crushing power in two excellent performances.

It was McRae's dash and then a fast and furious piece of support play by the impressive Andy Hazell that created a try for Fanolua that got Gloucester moving. Then Fanolua, Buxton and Deacon controlled possession through any number of phases to engineer room for James Forrester to score.

Forrester's introduction gave Gloucester an added dimension of the unknown. He does things that should not be possible – spins out of contact superbly, is blindingly quick and always in support – and Rotherham could not cope when Gloucester got into some sort of rhythm.

They did manage one more try, a potentially fatal wound had they truly believed that victory was still a possibility when Bernardo Stortoni cut through down the blindside and fed Giscard Pieters who weaved to the line.

But McRae nudged and probed and Fanolua and Todd ran threatening lines. Todd has been outstanding in recent weeks and as Rotherham began to sink, they attempted to kill Gloucester's momentum at the breakdown.

McRae pleaded with referee Ashley Rowden for a card of some description but he let his hands and vision do the talking.

The third try was not long in coming and it was created by a quick break from scrum-half Alex Page, who scooted between a thicket of defenders from close range.

When play was recycled, Page and McRae sent Fanolua over from short range on the short side as Rotherham ran out of defenders.

Gloucester were simply more organised and committed, able to keep possession through a variety of options the home side could simply not defend.

And with Brown and Mark Cornwell setting about the 'Titans' line-out, McRae snapped over a mammoth drop-goal to take Gloucester a converted try clear with 11 minutes remaining.

Considering what had gone before, the very thought of a Gloucester bonus point was probably beyond their wildest dreams but with six minutes to go, it arrived.

Deacon's front row chums got the squeeze on close to the Rotherham line and with his pack in total disarray, scrum-half Charlie Harrison lost his whereabouts and Forrester jumped on the ball for the try.

The final outcome will please Gloucester no end but will not hide their deficiencies against better opponents. While they can look forward to a well-earned break and came through a bear-trap of a fixture, Nel will be cursing his pre-planned idea that spectacularly backfired.

MATCH FACTS:

ROTHERHAM: B. Stortoni; A. Elliott, J. Pritchard (J. Jorgensen 60), P. Jones, G. Pieters; J. Benson, C. Harrison; N. Lloyd (R. Olckers 60), C. Johnson (capt.) (A. Long 40), C. Noon, G. Kenworthy (B. Volschenk 60), L. Gross, D. Tuiavii (G. Lewis 40), N. Spence (R. van der Merwe 40), B. Macleod-Henderson.

GLOUCESTER: J. Goodridge; M. Foster, T. Fanolua, R. Todd, J. Frape (R. Van der Bergh 50); D. McRae, A. Page; R. Roncero, C. Fortey, A. Deacon (capt.), M. Cornwell (A. Eustace 70), A. Brown, P. Buxton, A. Hazell, J. Paramore (J Forrester 44).

Referee : A. Rowden (Kent)

Attendance : 2,250

Star Man : Duncan McRae.

FOUR MINUTES: Rotherham start with considerable fire and earn an early penalty when Gloucester are penalised for coming in from the side at a ruck and Jon Benson kicks the three points.

ROTHERHAM 3, GLOUCESTER 0

18 MINUTES: The home side continue the offensive, are damaging in the scrum and competitive at the breakdown and when Duncan McRae is penalised for a high tackle on Charlie Harrison, Benson kicks his second penalty.

ROTHERHAM 6, GLOUCESTER 0

37 MINUTES: Gloucester have struggled for a way into the game and as the home side push forward, the Cherry and Whites are penalised at the breakdown close to the line and Benson makes no mistake with his third penalty.

ROTHERHAM 9, GLOUCESTER 0

40 MINUTES: In their desperation to get back into the contest, Gloucester aim to launch an attack from deep but Terry Fanolua's pass is picked off in midfield by the hugely impressive number eight Brad Macleod-Henderson who goes in to score. Benson converts.

ROTHERHAM 16, GLOUCESTER 0

41 MINUTES: Gloucester finally get on the board when Duncan McRae kicks a penalty following a superb break by Terry Fanolua.

ROTHERHAM 16, GLOUCESTER 3

44 MINUTES: McRae is then at the hub of a cutting move from a scrum and links with Andy Hazell close to the line, who puts Fanolua in for the try. McRae converts.

ROTHERHAM 16, GLOUCESTER 10

49 MINUTES: Gloucester then get within one point with a second try following a multi-phase attack. Fanolua is again involved alongside Andy Deacon and Pete Buxton before James Forrester goes over from short range on the blindside. McRae misses the conversion.

ROTHERHAM 16 GLOUCESTER 15

51 MINUTES: The points continue to flow and Rotherham snatch back the initiative when full-back Berardo Stortoni cuts up the blindside and finds Giscard Pieters, who weaves his way to the line for the try.

ROTHERHAM 21 GLOUCESTER 15

52 MINUTES: But Fanolua, in riotous form, carries possession 30 metres into the danger zone and when Rotherham kill the ball in front of the posts, McRae kicks the penalty.

ROTHERHAM 21 GLOUCESTER 18

63 MINUTES: Fanolua's great second half continues when he takes the ball from McRae after he links with Alex Page and goes over for his second try. McRae again converts.

ROTHERHAM 21 GLOUCESTER 25

69 MINUTES: McRae then belts over a drop-goal from 40 metres after Alex Brown steals a line-out on the Rotherham throw just over the halfway line.

ROTHERHAM 21 GLOUCESTER 28

74 MINUTES: Gloucester's recovery is complete six minutes from time when a Rotherham scrum wheels and when scrum-half Charlie Harrison loses the ball, Forrester pounces to score. McRae converts.

ROTHERHAM 21 GLOUCESTER 35

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