

THE CITIZEN

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GLOUCESTER RUGBY

MELVILLE SET FOR 'CHESS CLASH'

'They will know each other like no other two teams in the Heineken Cup but Nigel Melville will take his team to former club Wasps confident Gloucester can produce the level of performance to pull off a major European upset.'

Before becoming the Grand Masters of Europe, Nigel Melville faces one of the greatest chess matches of his career, a purely domestic dispute against his former club Wasps, where every move on the Giant Causeway board will be plotted like no other.

There will be no overnight stays in musty old French hotels, the varying problems of air travel or a return to Thomond Park, but this is more than merely the two biggest clubs in England colliding to thrash it out for Premiership points.

This has attitude and tons of it, a deep-rooted tribalism, a French referee that throws in more than a whiff of the unknown – at least Lawrence Dallaglio's match commentary should fall on the deaf ears of Joel Jutge – and two hugely impressive teams, well matched and well coached.

The attitude will be incendiary, the commitment total and the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow priceless.

Gloucester will be happy to leave Wasps as favourites but if there is one team in England sufficiently talented to produce one of the greatest victories at the quarter-final stage of the Heineken Cup, it is Jake Boer's pack of hounds.

The evidence is unmistakable, even if Melville's men go in with only a fortnight of match hardness and preparation behind them and that before this weekend there had been only six away victories in the history of the competition at the quarter-final stage.

Melville was at pains to suggest that is how Gloucester like it – the delights of knockout rugby, away from the drudgery of a nine month campaign, and they will be well prepared and brimming with intent.

This is a real rugby match between two real rugby teams and the prize is enormous.

"I can almost guarantee one of the away sides will win this weekend, mark my words on that," Melville promised.

"The home teams will be favourites but this is the biggest game of our season.

"We are comfortable and will enjoy it. We have no history of form to look back on but we are in great shape.

"I feel it is a shame we are playing each other at this stage of the competition in some ways because it would have been nice to meet at a later stage.

"And you are usually always on edge in Europe because you don't know them well enough but in this instance, we know Wasps very well.

"Whether that makes it just like a Premiership game, we don't know, but I believe both teams can play at a higher level."

The feeling in the air was that despite the claustrophobic similarities and encyclopaedic knowledge, this will surpass anything the Premiership has to offer – the players believe so anyway.

There would appear [to be] no team better equipped to beat Wasps than Gloucester.

They are sure to attack the line-out, where Alex Brown has been one of the most impressive second row forwards in the Zurich Premiership. Although Simon Shaw is a bundle of trouble in the loose, the reason he is not in the England squad is his weakness at the set-piece and Brown, one of the arch line-out thieves in the business, could do real damage alongside Adam Eustace.

If the Kingsholm scrum, armed with England's Phil Vickery and Trevor Woodman, can do some serious damage and Boer leads the unsettling pyrotechnics of Andy Hazell and the powerful Junior Paramore, Gloucester can produce enough general forward mayhem to cause problems. But it is away from the usual modus operandi where the game will be won – in the generalship of Andy Gomarsall, the bewitching hands of Henry Paul and the lively uncertainty of James Simpson-Daniel.

In a game where the margins will be so fine as to be almost non-existent, Gloucester need quick ball, sharp minds and the ability to make the most of their chances, particularly against a midfield defence who forage almost always on the margins of off-side and possess the best defensive midfielder in the country in Fraser Waters. Judge's interpretation of the breakdown will also be crucial and the very fact a French referee, although a pretty good one, has control of an all-England quarter-final adds more than a touch of intrigue.

"We obviously have a French referee and his interpretation of certain aspects of the game will be crucial." says Melville's assistant Dean Ryan.

"We have had him a couple of times before and we are obviously keen to get on the right side of him. I would love the chance to sit down and have a chat with him, as I am sure Wasps would, but I would be surprised if that happened."

But there is enough familiarity with both the referee and Wasps for there to be no surprises and Melville is relishing the thought of cup rugby.

"There is no messing at this stage," he said. "We are in knockout cup football and if we lose a game we are out of the competition. It is a ruthless business.

"But we actually quite like that environment. There is an end too, this is cut-throat and we know we have either four or eight games left.

"It is in our hands and there is an edge.

"It is a comfort playing in England and the knowledge is crucial but we know one mistake or piece of brilliant play could see us knocked out of the competition."

Both teams earned outstanding victories in France – Gloucester's bonus point success in Bourgoin, while Wasps stunned Perpignan with a 34-6 victory that provides a more than passing hint at their threat.

Ryan was quick to add: "It is almost unique to get thrust into a game of this magnitude with only one week of preparation with this group of players behind us. But we will be ready. It will be a great occasion, of that you can be certain."

LONDON WASPS

15. Mark Van Gisbergen
14. Josh Lewsey
13. Fraser Waters
12. Stuart Abbott
11. Tom Voyce
10. Alex King
9. Rob Howley
1. Craig Dowd
2. Trevor Leota
3. Will Green
4. Simon Shaw
5. Richard Birkett
6. Joe Worsley
7. Paul Volley
8. Lawrence Dallaglio (capt)

GLOUCESTER R.F.C.

15. Jon Goodridge
14. Marcel Garvey
13. Terry Fanolua
12. Henry Paul
11. James Simpson-Daniel
10. Duncan McRae
9. Andy Gomarsall
1. Trevor Woodman
2. Chris Fortey
3. Phil Vickery
4. Adam Eustace
5. Alex Brown
6. Jake Boer (capt)
7. Andy Hazell
8. Junior Paramore

REPLACEMENTS

16. Tim Payne
17. Mark Lock
18. Ben Gotting
19. Martin Purdy
20. Harvey Biljon
21. Mark Denney
22. Ayoola Erinle

REPLACEMENTS

16. Delarey du Preez
17. Rodrigo Roncero
18. Andy Deacon
19. Mark Cornwell
20. Peter Buxton
21. Simon Amor
22. Robert Todd

JC