

# THE CITIZEN

SATURDAY, MAY 15, 2004

GLOUCESTER HOLD OFF LATE SALE FIGHTBACK

LIMP PAST SALE AFTER REMARKABLE COMEBACK

GLOUCESTER 44 SALE SHARKS 35

Gloucester came close to throwing away their Zurich Wildcard semi-final as Sale mounted a late Kingsholm fight-back.

The Cherry and Whites led 37-14, but Sale scored three converted tries in five minutes to close to 37-35 before Robert Todd scored a late try to seal a victory and a place at Twickenham.

GLOUCESTER : J. Goodridge; M. Garvey, T. Fanolua, H. Paul, J. Simpson-Daniel; D. McRae, A. Gomarsall; T. Woodman, C. Fortey, A. Deacon, A. Eustace, A. Brown, J. Boer (capt.), A. Hazell, P. Buxton.  
Reps : D. Du Preez, R. Roncero, N. Wood, M. Cornwell, S. Amor, R. van der Bergh, R. Todd.

SALE : J. Robinson; M. Cueto, C. Mayor, C. Rhys Jones, S. Hanley; C. Hodgson, S. Benton; B. Stewart, A. Titterell, S. Turner, C. Day, J. White, C. Jones, H. Perrett, P. Davies.  
Reps : J. Rodham, M. Halsall, D. Schofield, M. Lund, V. Going, M. Hercus, R. Wigglesworth.

Referee : R. Maybank (RFU).

Star Man : Duncan McRae

Heart attack material for Gloucester but their Heineken Cup hopes remain alive – just –after a simply remarkable semi-final against Sale at a disbelieving Kingsholm.

Home and hosed at 37-14 ahead with 15 minutes remaining Jason Robinson inspired a Sharks comeback that almost produced one of the biggest turnarounds of the season.

Had Gloucester lost, it would have been an almost ludicrous giveaway, but they got through thanks to their first half work that established a big enough lead, just, for the victory.

It all seemed slightly criminal really. The sun shone down gloriously onto a far from full Kingsholm. Gloucester had ended the regular Premiership season in fourth place but were still not sure of their place in the Heineken Cup next season. Odd, very odd.

Three avenues remained open to them for qualification – the one they directly controlled was by ensuring a victory over Sale in a Wildcard semi-final and then by winning the play-off final in a fortnight.

Gloucester could still lose and end up qualifying – the reasons are more than a bit bizarre and even more crackers and not worth going into here – but they made a more than satisfying start against the Sharks to leave that for another day.

Two tries in the space of five first half minutes at the end of the period set them on their way to a potential Twickenham showdown after a fizzing 40 minutes full of helter-skelter attacking rugby, the odd zany moment and three super tries.

Two of them were to Gloucester, their pace and power digging out vast holes in the Sale defence and when they kept the ball through a series of phases, were too hot to handle.

Duncan McRae was a mixture of the brilliant and barmy but when he was hot, he was hot.

He had a hand in both Gloucester tries and generally buzzed about behind a pack of forwards enjoying the upper-hand in most areas.

The Sale line-out was more than a lottery – Andy Titterell failed to find the telescopic reach of Chris Jones at three successive set-pieces and despite some excellent tackling from Jason White and Hugh Perrett, were on the back foot.

They were also not helped away from the forwards by Charlie Hodgson. He may be one of the best footballing number 10's in the business, and he did improve, but kicked badly and threw out a couple of even worse passes.

Gloucester were already 6-0 ahead thanks to two Henry Paul penalties after 14 and 17 minutes before Sale hit back with a try following their first real attack.

Hodgson and Scott Benton combined in midfield, Phil Davies took it into the contact and when it came back, Jason Robinson's electric legs took him past Alex Brown to score. Hodgson converted for a 7-6 lead.

But back stormed Gloucester, Paul kicked a penalty before sending McRae through a midfield gap, James Simpson-Daniel looped round in support and Andy Hazell scored.

And minutes later McRae was involved twice [in] a move that created space for Terry Fanolua to score. Paul converted both for a 21-7 Gloucester lead.

HALF-TIME :	
GLOUCESTER .....	21
SALE .....	7

Sale could not match Gloucester's superiority in the close quarters – where Adam Eustace and Jake Boer got through a good deal of work – while McRae continued to run the show.

And the Sharks must have serious reservations about Hodgson defensively because every time Gloucester had an attacking platform at the set-piece, he was packed off the full-back[*sic*]. Gloucester were more powerful and better organised and immediately built on their first half lead.

Hodgson looked to clear from a defensive line-out but Simpson-Daniel took the catch and the result was a third Gloucester try. McRae took over and kicked deep for Garvey to chase and he easily had the legs on Hanley to slide in and score.

Paul then landed a 58th minute penalty to take Gloucester 31-7 ahead and there was the very real danger they could do some real damage.

Sale struggled to get anything together behind a pack second best in key areas, particularly the line-out and scrum, but did hit back with a second try for Robinson.

And it was a beauty. Chris Major cut a lovely angled run through midfield and with Robinson scorching up on his outside, Major produced the scoring pass.

Paul then landed two more penalties to stretch their lead to 37-14, but then Sale produced the type of attacking rugby that is their haul mark[*sic*] as Gloucester began to tire.

First, Robinson's dancing feet left Gloucester seeing stars in a cutting break and he sent Steve Hanley away for a try. Both wingers are seriously dangerous when on the attack and it breathed life into the Sharks.

From the restart, Cueto started a break and Mike Hercus, on for Hodgson, produced a lovely pass to Hanley. He made ground before finding Vaughan Going on an arching run into midfield. Titterell arrived in support and from the ruck, Chris Jones romped to the line. Hercus converted.

And Robinson then scored Sale's third try in a minute. White drove it up into a maul, and when the ball came back, Robinson stepped a defender and was away from 50 metres for the score.

Hercus's conversion left Sale trailing by only two points – 37-35 – in one of the most astonishing turn-arounds at Kingsholm this season.

The points continue to flow but it was Gloucester who shut out the game when Robert Todd, ironically Sale bound, intercepted a Hercus pass in stoppage time to score.

JC