

THE CITIZEN

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CITY'S ECLIPSE AT LEICESTER

FROM W.B.'s NOTEBOOK

Gloucester's crushing defeat at Leicester was one of the big surprises in club football last week. Gloucester experienced one of the biggest defeats the team has had for a long time at Leicester. I have seen the City defeated by heavier margins – in Wales, at Twickenham, and at Oxford – but I question if ever the side shaped so feebly, as a whole, as at Leicester on Saturday. I can well understand home supporters questioning the score – 21 points to nil – at half-time, and hoping that it was a misprint.

But there was no mistake, and to be honest I am forced to admit that the heavy scoring did not exaggerate Leicester's superiority a little bit, so completely were the City dominated.

Gloucester, up to the interval, never got a grip on the game; they played like a team with no understanding, and the defence at times was an apology for tackling. Even the forwards could not get going properly, and so hopelessly was the team overrun that a record defeat was quite possible.

Fortunately the City realised the desperate position, and made a far different show in the second half. But it was not until the last ten minutes that Gloucester really found their form; too late to wipe out the heavy arrears piled up by Leicester in the early stages. What was the matter with the team ?

To give a satisfactory excuse is beyond me, for the showing was altogether inexplicable. But there is this remarkable fact. At Coventry the previous week Leicester had been through a similar experience.

The team, I gathered, could do nothing right – backs or forwards – and a decisive reverse was recorded. A re-arranged side had to accomplish something to get back into favour and they did it to some purpose at the expense of the City.

If Gloucester followed the example of last week's opponents against Cardiff this afternoon some lost reputations at Leicester would have been retrieved. But there was a big "if" about it.

Boughton's defection was a serious loss to Gloucester, especially when it was found Tom Stephens could not deputise owing to an injury. Orpin had to be fetched from his business early on Saturday morning to complete the team, and Gloucester were weakened in two positions – at wing three-quarter, and full back.

James has officiated as custodian in an emergency before, but the captain would have been far more useful in the third line. Not that the City at full strength, on the run of the play, would have had any hope of reversing the result. I don't think that for a moment, but James' presence at three-quarter, with Boughton's big kicking at full back, would have given the side more confidence.

Gloucester have given some indifferent displays in the back division this season, and at Leicester it was weaker than ever. The marking at times was very bad, and Gadney's try in the second half was the climax. The home scrum half was allowed to break through from half-way to James, when he stopped, feinted to pass, and darted off again to score near the posts without being touched !

Buckingham's try, too, was the result of an interception, and there were other occasions when the City's handling was so inept and lacking in judgment that opponents were made a present of the ball. And the tackling, except in the case of McCanlis and Andrews, was too weak for words. The mistake was always made of trying to collar too high, and with Flewitt handing off in rare style it was a fatal policy.

There was a striking contrast between the two sets of backs as a whole. Leicester had a splendid worker in Gadney at the scrum. Last season it was this young player who contributed largely to his team's success with strong individual dashes; last week he concentrated more on his job of feeding Greenlees, and he did it admirably.

The Scottish International was in a delightful mood and tricked the defence continually. Behind him were two dashing centres in Buckingham and Flewitt – players who moved quickly and saw that their wings were given a good service. Buckingham scored three of the tries and he always had the pace of the opposition. White, a newcomer from the R.A.F., shaped extremely well on the left wing, and Farndon was always too smart for Orpin.

The passing of the Leicester backs was for the most part clean and accurately carried out, and more than once forwards joined in the bouts when the ball came back to the centre of the field. It was an object lesson to the City team, but will they benefit by it ?

How to strengthen the Gloucester third line is a difficult problem, and no one will envy the selectors the task in hand. Stephens is hardly strong enough to check big, dashing centres, and his tendency to kick too much discourages a wing man.

At present there does not appear to be that necessary understanding between the players behind to make attacking movements really effective, and until this is accomplished, better results will not be obtainable.

Last week McCanlis was called upon to do more than his fair share of tackling, and the few attacks made by the City were on his wing. Andrew did as well as could be expected with the chances given him, but he must have envied the opportunities provided White on the opposite side. Orpin, a last-minute substitute, played pluckily, but as I remarked last week, he is not a wing three-quarter, and for myself I would just as soon have seen Hiam or Franklin given the position.

The Gloucester half-backs, for the most part, were overshadowed by the Leicester pair. Meadows' try in the last few minutes was a clever solo effort, but up to that point he had been kept rather quiet, due largely to the raiding tactics of the Leicester wing forwards, and the orthodox methods of Price at the scrum.

The latter has his good points – he works hard and is not afraid to go down to forward rushes – but he has not yet been able to master the quick pick up and fast service to enable his partner to take the ball on the run, which means so much in speeding up outside movements.

The City have been very fortunate in the past in finding half-backs who had a perfect understanding combined with initiative and individual cleverness.

Ball and George; George Hall and Goddard; Gent and Jim Stephens; Dix and Millington! Playing behind such combinations must have been a delight for the three-quarters, but the standard of play set up by the players mentioned was not achieved without constant and hard practice.

Dai Gent tells us in his book on Rugby Football that he spent hours with Jim Stephens talking over tactics, trying new movements, and practising finding his partner with swift transfers from various positions. And the reward? They were little removed from being the best club pair in the country. And the same may be said of Dix and Millington.

Do the players to-day give the same amount of time and attention to gain proficiency? I should say not, or we should see better results on the field of play.

The Gloucester forwards did not reproduce the form exhibited against Bristol, though easily the strongest part of the team. Their best work as a pack was accomplished in the concluding stages, when they were fairly on top and pressed continuously.

In the scrums the City did not assert superiority as in previous games, and in the open Leicester displayed more dash and confidence, and were the more dangerous set. Davies did a lot of brilliant work in the loose, and of the others Wadley, Hemming, Carpenter and Russell (until he was injured) were very noticeable.

But there was something wanting in leadership, and the rally, which the men showed they possessed, should have been forthcoming much earlier.

Gloucester were 27 points in arrears before they opened up their account, and then a goal and a try came in quick succession. In this brief period the City crowded a lot of fast, dashing work into their play, and they swarmed on the Leicester line. If only the recovery had come a little earlier ?

Leicester played above their form in this match; nearly everything they attempted came off, and with the opposition bewildered with the variety of tactics and speedy running and passing, scoring was made to look very easy.

Greenlees was the inspiring force behind, and he was splendidly supported all round. The forwards were very fast in the open and mistakes of the visitors were quickly taken advantage of. Manson kicked a good length, but he was none too sound under pressure. But it was only occasionally Gloucester were able to put him to a severe test.

JC