

GLOUCESTER JOURNAL

SATURDAY, MARCH 21, 1891.

The Week's Sport.

The downfall has come at last – not of the Gloucester team, whose record still stands out as the best in the country – and after being spared the bitter experience of defeat for nearly two seasons, Gloucestershire have met their superiors. Three months ago he would have been voted a blind partisan who ventured to predict that anything Gloucestershire could put into the football field would stand a chance with either of the great Northern counties, but so consistently fine has been their form, and so regularly has one good performance been followed by even a better, that many in the county had almost brought themselves to believe that their favourites would win on Saturday.

Though we scarcely dared anticipate a victory, we shared the opinion that a closely-contested game would result from the meeting, and as try after try and goal after goal was piled on by the Lancastrians we must confess to a large measure of disappointment. Still, after the match, after what appeared in the eyes of the country to be an ignominious thrashing, we stick to the opinion that a close game would represent the true relative strength of the two counties.

That everything was against the visitors was perfectly clear. A wet ground, heavy and treacherous; a consequently inevitable forward game; eight forwards against nine; and a back division robbed of its backbone by illness. The play being chiefly confined to that portion of the team in which Lancashire naturally had an advantage, whilst that portion to which Gloucestershire trusted for success had next to nothing to do but check the advances of the opposing pack, tremendous responsibility would in the same natural course of things rest with the full back, and when the individual occupying that most important and trying position is more fit for a sick bed than a football field, the result which followed on Saturday may, also as a natural outcome, be regarded as a certainty.

Though we most distinctly believe that had Hughes played as he did at Bath the score would not have been half so large as was the case, the Lancastrians left no room for doubt but that they were the better team when playing under such circumstances as prevailed on Saturday, being clearly much stronger forward than the Gloucestersians.

Whether the latter's backs on a dry ground would have been so far ahead of the Northerners in the same positions as to make up for the disparity in the forwards can only be a matter of conjecture, and probably very varying opinions exist on the point. To sum up the game in a sentence, it was won by the Lancashire forwards and lost by the Gloucestershire full-back.

The Lancashire forwards were a grand lot. Their combination was such that could only be acquired as the result of playing often together; they packed quickly and compactly; wheeled superbly; and exhibited skill and smartness in the open. Any eight men, who could have opposed them successfully must have been very paragons of strength and skill, and it was not at all to the discredit of the visitors that they were not equal to this magnificent combination, but had they played as they did at Bath with the same spirit and determination to "do or die," we cannot think they would have been so far behind even a perfect forward team, as the home men might almost be termed.

However, they were thoroughly beaten, though occasionally they responded to the example set them by Witcomb, and made a big effort. As each one ended in failure, however, they seemed less ready to institute another, and had to take a very back seat in the end. Wheeling was the most telling feature of the play of the home forwards, and, indeed, the way they went round in a body and swept over the Gloucester halves, who spent a good portion of the time amongst the feet of the overwhelming nine, enjoying the agreeable associations and the pleasant experiences inseparable from such advantageous employment, was fine in the extreme. Their loose rushes were very difficult to stop, and a number of the points scored were the outcome of these combined efforts.

Kent and Pyke appeared to be the best of a keen, hard-working, skilful, and last but by no means least, very fast forward contingent. Witcomb did wonders on the visitors' side considering the great disadvantage at which he was placed, and Nicholls, Cromwell, and Jenkins backed him up well in all his efforts. Page was conspicuous for two things – standing outside the scrums, and occasional flashes of clever dribbling, whilst A. Collins assisted him in the former arduous occupation. All the rest did their best in the tight scrummages.

Berry outshone all the other halves, and, always on the alert, never failed when an opportunity of benefitting the position of his side presented itself. He is strong, clever, and reliable, and, though he had every chance of shining behind such a successful pack, his display was in every way worthy of his great reputation.

Cross, though not so capable a half-back as his confrère, played a sound game. Ball and George literally had no chance, and only got the ball some three or four times throughout the match. They did their best to stop the dashing Lancashire forwards, but the latter repeatedly came upon them like a flood, and swept the ball away. Their exhibition was of the pluckiest description, and they deserve every commendation for the way in which they tried to stem the tide of adversity, unsuccessful though their efforts proved.

Jackson and Bagwell were also very much engaged in the same way as the half-backs, and each attained some measure of success, but their endeavours, being unsupported by the full back, were not sufficient. When they did get the ball, either from the scrum or from their opponents, which was very seldom, they showed that they could handle it if they had the opportunity. Neither could do himself justice under the circumstances, but Jackson occasionally plied his kicking propensities to advantage. Hooper was the star on the Gloucestershire side, and with more offensive work he would have been certain to score. His running was admirable, his tackling sound, and his all-round play entitled him to the distinction of being voted the best back on the field.

Taylor had not many opportunities, but he demonstrated very clearly the fact that he could give the "idol" of the Manchester mob, Valentine, a long start in the matter of pace, for, besides running round him, and being only stopped by the full-back near the line, he gave him ten yards start from the half-way, and caught him at the goal line, but not in time to prevent his scoring. Altogether Taylor did his work well, his only blemishes being that he once or twice failed to bring down "Val" when the latter had the ball chucked to him in the vicinity of the Gloucestershire end and dodged over the line.

Valentine played well, but in estimating the merit of his display it should be remembered that the whole team played into his hands. His strength and dodging ability rendered him a difficult man to stop, and one of his tries was a particularly taking and praiseworthy effort.

Gwynne and McCutcheon worked very well together, the centre man passing with splendid precision sometimes. The team did not do much passing, but what was done was neat and effective. McCutcheon possesses a fair turn of speed and disported himself in finished style, and Gwynne was, perhaps, the best of the three, kicking effectively and giving a capital all-round exhibition. The three-quarters were undoubtedly a first-class trio, but would probably have been unequal to coping with the four opposite them had the latter had a chance to distinguish themselves.

Of Hughes we have already spoken, and we will simply add that his form was not such as to justify a place in the Gloucester Juniors, were such a team in existence. However, he must be exonerated from all blame, as a man who has been ill for a week and has not recovered cannot be expected to discharge the duties which fell to his lot on Saturday. It is only to be deplored that a substitute was not found for him.

Coop was a great contrast to the Gloucestersians, for he proved himself to be one of the finest full backs of the season, doing everything that came to him with despatch and effect.

It is only necessary to add that the score was four goals, two tries, two minors to nil; the tries were scored by Valentine (3), Berry, Atkinson, and Rothwell; that from 200 to 300 persons journeyed to Manchester by excursion train from Gloucester; and that the visiting team were handsomely entertained by the Lancashire Club.

The names of the players were as follows : –

Gloucestershire. – A. F. Hughes (Gloucester), back; C. A. Hooper (Cambridge University), T. Bagwell, W. Jackson, and W. H. Taylor (Gloucester), three-quarter backs; S. A. Ball and W. George (Gloucester), half-backs; H. V. Page (captain), G. J. Witcomb, T. Collins, A. Collins, C. Williams, A. Cromwell, R. C. Jenkins (Gloucester), and S. H. Nicholls (Cardiff), forwards.

Lancashire. – T. Coop (Leigh), back; J. Valentine (Swinton), D. A. Gwynne (Oldham), and W. McCutcheon (Oldham), three-quarter backs; J. Berry (Tyldesley) and W. Cross (St. Helens), half-backs; T. Kent (Salford), T. Whittaker (Manchester), W. Atkinson (Wigan), J. Pyke (St. Helen's Recreation), T. Melledew (Rochdale Hornets), T. Rothwell (Swinton), R. P. Wilson (Liverpool Old Boys), T. Craven (Salford), and E. Bullough (Wigan), forwards.