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Cheltenham Tigers 1st XV – 18

Chipping Sodbury 1st XV -28

Cheltenham Tigers have a long, rich history stretching back 125 years. They have blazers belonging to Gloucester legend Phil Blakeway; they even have a photo of their players after playing the All Blacks in the early 1900s, alongside a blazer belonging to Sean Fitzpatrick.

However, Sodbury have their own history-maker, a man many said should be the new Dr Who due to his ability to bend time to his will. This man is Alan Keeping, who, at 45, threw down a destructive masterclass for an hour. He still tackles hard while each breakdown is hit with the precision of a cruise missile. His single-handed counter-rucking slowed down the Tigers and forced penalties, although it was the much younger Jon Cook who had the Sods six points ahead within 5 minutes.

After 10 minutes, the Tigers started to fire up and it was Sodbury's turn to concede penalties. This led to easy territory for the hosts but the travelling support were treated to a masterly display of disciplined defence. There followed an extended period where Sodbury's pack were commanding round the fringes of the breakdown. They repelled, held up, and generally smashed down all efforts at scoring. Prominent in this effort was the back row of Otto Avent, Matt Cook, and Jason Petchey, who looked like he had fresh batteries for this game. When the Tigers tried their luck out wide they found men with equal desire to send them back from whence they came.

Dan Bradley always puts himself about but it was the efforts of no.12 Dan Cole that really caught the eye. On his way to being the day's top tackler, he forced knock-ons as he raced up and never missed his man. During this torrid period the Tigers slotted two kicks at goal, but the real hammer blow was when Sodbury conceded a scrum on halfway from the kick-off following the Tigers' second penalty. The ball was spun wide right quickly, only this time tackles were missed and Tigers had an 11 – 6 lead that the visitors could scarcely believe.

Early in the second period, Sodbury got a chance to create. Avent hit his man hard on halfway and stripped the ball free of his grasp. The rest of the pack swept forward like an avalanche to give space for Bradley, who darted left. One quick ruck and the ball was moved right at speed – four passes later, the ball was with Jon Cook. Cook is devastating in

a little space: the defence had no chance despite him being 40m out. He broke two tackles and dragged the final defender over the line as he scored.

Joe Horton, who topped the carry count, exploded onto the ball at the restart. Smashing through the onrushing Tigers like Godzilla through Tokyo, he stayed upright and kept the ball alive. Jon Cook once more set off upfield but was hauled down 30m out. The pack got involved and their work sucked in the fringe defence, which created a slim gap for someone like Tom Head to explore. Head seldom wins the tale of the tape in any match-up, he's a true surprise package. Discount him at your peril - as his opposite number discovered when Head was all over him at every scrum. As the ball was spat out on the 22, Head spotted the hiatus. He flew past the big men and outpaced the cover from 25m out for a fantastic solo effort. J.Cook converted.

After getting the restart under control, Head launched a box-kick from his own 10m line. Horton once more rose above the melee and set up a ruck. Now Sodbury were flowing, now they showed their class. They swept the play from the right to the far left and back again, with some wondrous handling interspersed with direct physicality. Eventually things ground to a halt in a pile of bodies 5m short of the Tigers' tryline. On hand was Horton, who grasped the ball in his outstretched hands and threw himself forward like an uprooted skyscraper, using his full weight and height to stretch out for the try. J.Cook converted from a mad distance.

On the hour, as Keeping made way for Lee Ralph, Sodbury had a rare second half penalty; J.Cook made easy work of it from 25m, and the Sods thought about the bonus point. The Tigers had other ideas and the last quarter of the game was more resolute defence by Sodbury until they leaked a try at the end. However, this couldn't take the gloss off a win on the road and the togetherness this huge physical effort produced was well worth it.