

Weekend in Galway, anyone?



By Leipziger
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The Falcons secured top spot in pool 5 tonight but could yet face a trip to Connacht in the quarter-finals after failing to notch the crucial bonus point against a combative Petrarca Padova. Much will depend on the results of Leeds v Bourgoin and Toulon v Castres, but after making a great start to the competition our lads have limped into the last eight.

A penalty try and another score from lively replacement Gcobani Bobo were not enough to ensure a quarter-final at Kingston Park, although perversely this may be a good thing as a win away in the last eight would give us a home semi-final. And as has been mentioned – with our form this season, playing away rather than at home may not be a bad thing.

What makes tonight's performance more disappointing is the fact that Steve Bates started with pretty much the strongest team available, although Rob Miller made possibly his first senior start in the number 12 shirt, while Micky Ward sat in for the injured Jon Golding and Laurence Ovens. James Hudson returned to the second row alongside Mark Sorenson, while again Padova looked set to rely on the experienced boot and brain, and slightly rounding stomach, of fly-half and captain Ludovic Mercier.

Padova came straight out of the blocks with an intent to take the Falcons on and not just sit back and wait for a hammering, and their forwards competed well with ours all night.

Although we struggled early on Jimmy Gopperth got the scoreboard ticking with a long-range penalty that went over off the post, and the lead was increased when Danny Williams chipped down the wing for Rob Vickerman to chase. Vickerman went to ground and looked to have knocked the ball on, but the referee spotted that he had been pulled back by a defender.

Roberto Bertetti was sin-binned and the Falcons were awarded a penalty try, which Gopperth easily converted, and the one-try walkover was underway. Padova did not let their heads drop though and Mercier kicked a penalty, though his second, more central though further out, went wide.

Alex Tait and Charlie Amesbury attempted to make progress both with kicks and the ball in hand but came up against some strong Italian defence. The first half ended with Gopperth knocking over a penalty with the last kick, giving us an uninspiring but just-about acceptable 13-3 lead.

The second half did not look any better initially but a good chip and run down the left by Amesbury that would have resulted in a try had a defender not kicked behind galvanised the crowd (kind-of, there weren't that many of us).

The Falcons had a good spell of possession, inspired by replacements Adam Balding and Grant Shiells who both made metres. Shiells almost got over in the right hand corner but was put into touch right on the flag.

A potential scoring pass on the left was blocked by Mark Sorenson to the disbelief of the home fans, however once the ball was recycled Bobo, on as a replacement for Gopperth, ran through the defence from 15 metres to score under the posts.

Miller converted and the win seemed secure – as competent as Padova were they rarely looked like scoring. There were no further scores, with the Falcons' temporary fluidity deserting them and both Bobo and Williams dropping low passes.

Padova attacked late on but our defence kept them out to ensure the win, that at least keeps us in the competition.

James Hudson was awarded man of the match and played his part in a solid lineout, although at one point in the second half I watched him for a minute or so and he promptly dropped the ball! Shiells also looked very promising when he came on, and I at least am pleased that Filippo Levi did what he does well (running through opponents) before Balding came on to inject some pace and dynamism. This could be the way to run these two in the back row.

Job done I suppose, but it could and probably should have been better and I'm still to really enjoy a home game next season. Wasps in the LW Friendly Cup might be the one? Or perhaps Irish or Bath in the league. At least we still have our annual home win over Leicester to come.