

CHILLED TO THE MARO YET AGAIN

England lock remains a thorn in Glasgow's side as he seals the deal for Saracens late in the day

IT WAS Maro Itoje's turn to celebrate in Glasgow faces again. Although more legitimate on this occasion than his antics at Scotland in October, this outburst will have stung all the more.

The England lock's try, with 10 minutes remaining in the contest, dragged the game away from Dave Rennie's side at long last, and with it denied them what could prove to be a crucial losing bonus point.

This was a world away from the dour, niggly contest that these two sides played out in October. Five tries inside the opening quarter, a sixth before half-time and two sides going hell for leather on the scoreboard, rather than at each other.

Already through to the knockout rounds by virtue of Edinburgh's 19-10 win over Montpellier the night before, Glasgow still had the matter of top spot in the group, and a home quarter-final, to play for.

This was a Saracens side shorn of Owen Farrell, a late withdrawal due to a thumb injury, but still showing five of England's likely starting XV for the Six Nations opener in Dublin a fortnight from now.

But despite a commendable showing, particularly in the first half, Glasgow lost this game in all-too-familiar style. They struggled again at the lineout, gave away penalties with frustrating regularity and were unable throughout to bring either Itoje or Billy Vunipola to a halt unless three men clung to them.

It was a game that hinted at Glasgow's ability to challenge European rugby's elite but, in the

Saracens	38
Glasgow	19

By George Bond

end, the two-time Heineken Champions Cup winners stretched away from them to make it six wins from six in the group. With Glasgow ending their Pool Three assignment on 19 points, they will likely be making the trip back to north London for the quarter-finals at the end of March.

The odds will not be in their favour. This loss made it two wins in 20 games on English soil in this competition, while away sides have won just one of the last 12 quarter-finals — including Glasgow's 38-13 loss here in 2017.

The game was open from the off. David Strettle found space down the right flank before clipping into Glasgow's corner, where Ali Price was forced to clear into touch behind his own dead-ball area, handing Saracens a five-metre scrum against a troubled visiting pack. A Glasgow offside from the resulting passage of play handed Ben Spencer a simple opening three points.

Spencer was on hand again four minutes later to run in uncontested after Strettle broke through Adam Hastings' weak attempt at a tackle, hinting at the blowout for the English champs. But Glasgow hit back immediately. With Saracens down a man as Strettle recovered from a bruising

blow, the advantage paid. Sam Johnson spun a long pass out to Stuart Hogg, who teamed up two-on-one with Tommy Seymour and caught Alex Lewington to send the winger in out wide. Hastings was unable to add the extras.

Then the game turned on its head. Spencer's box-kick was tipped by Rob Harley and fell fortuitously into the arms of Price (left). He burst through two tackles before hauled over to level things. Hastings' conversion put the visitors in front.

With Saracens unrelenting, three



BEST OF ENEMIES: Tempers flare during the second period

minutes later Hogg was called into a superb last-ditch tackle on Stuart Hogg, who teamed up two-on-one with Tommy Seymour and caught Alex Lewington to send the winger in out wide. Hastings was unable to add the extras.

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prevented captain Ryan Wilson burrowing over to give Glasgow a third try, which Hastings converted.

After a brief pause for the sell-out crowd to catch their breath, the scoring resumed. Hastings had bled out Hogg with a sublime tackle to snatch the ball from George Kruijs' hands as he reached for the line, but was deemed to have carried the ball over himself and Saracens were awarded a scrum five metres out.

Vunipola, whose ball-carrying

tormented Warriors' defence throughout, was not going to be stopped from there. Spencer took his personal tally to 14 points with a third conversion as the English side took a 24-19 lead into the break.

Johnson's dancing feet set the visitors going again after the break, bringing them within 10 metres before Saracens flanker Jackson Wray got his hands on the ball to win a pressure-relieving penalty.

Reinstalled to the starting line-up after being three poor performances had seen him benched

down the line, teetering on the edge of touch before the England lock appeared to collect and run in from five metres out.

Saracens' bonus point was sealed and, with it, Glasgow's hopes gone.

Will Skelton's converted try with the clock in the red added a gloss to the hosts' win that Glasgow will feel justifiably aggrieved by.

Head coach Richard Cockerill has called on their fans to turn out in their numbers for the game at BT Murrayfield — and so they should. He has worked wonders in his 18 months in charge and his players deserve all the praise that comes their way.

There were nearly 12,000 fans inside the stadium when they beat Montpellier on Friday night in their final group game.

It would be great if they could break the 20,000 mark in their last-eight fixture? I was incredibly impressed by Edinburgh throughout their Champions Cup group games. You can't forget they came up against — and beat — top sides such as Montpellier, Toulon and Newcastle Falcons, who finished fourth in the English Premiership last season.

The unit of Cockerill's team that did more than any other to ensure their qualification was their front five. Ben Tools and Grant Gilchrist were magnificent in the second row.

Then you have the props Pierre

Townsend is given perfect boost by Scots' Euro double

GLASGOW WARRIORS' defeat by Saracens didn't take the shine off what was a historic weekend for Scottish rugby.

To have Edinburgh and Warriors qualify for the knockout stages of the Heineken Champions Cup in the same season is a real cause for celebration.

For Glasgow to make it through is fantastic. For Edinburgh, even more so — considering they were the bottom seeds in an incredibly tough group.

We are in uncharted territory with both qualifying. It adds to the excitement in what has the potential to be the best-ever season for our two professional teams.

The timing of their qualification could not be better. All the Edinburgh and Glasgow players who are part of the Scotland squad for the Six Nations will be arriving at the team hotel tonight to prepare for the tournament with a real spring in their step. They will take the confidence they gained from doing so well in Europe against such tough opposition into the tournament, which is great news for Scotland head coach Gregor Townsend.

I know from personal experience there is nothing better when you have players coming into the Scotland team room who are part of successful club sides. They help sprinkle stardust around the whole squad.

The self-belief of Edinburgh and Glasgow players will bring to Scotland ahead of the Six Nations will be huge.

Out of the two teams, Edinburgh have the advantage of playing their quarter-final, which could be against Munster, at home.

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Jason White

FORMER SCOTLAND CAPTAIN WRITES EXCLUSIVELY FOR THE MAIL ON SUNDAY

Schoeman and W P Nel either side of Stuart McInally, who has captained the side superbly well. If I have one concern about Edinburgh, it is their front five is so far and away better than the back-up players in those positions that they need to stay fit for the club to progress further than the quarter-finals.

Their win over the French outfit put Glasgow through as well, even though they lost to Saracens yesterday.

There was nothing at stake in that match apart from deciding who got home advantage in the quarter-finals. Saracens' stronger second-half performance meant they were deserved winners.

Unless Bath upset Toulouse in France today, it looks likely that Glasgow will return to Allianz Park for their last-eight tie.

Obviously that will be tough but I am not among those who think Glasgow have no chance of beating them down there. Don't forget, Warriors were in the hunt up until 69 minutes. They were behind just 24-19 up until then.

They have lost twice at Saracens in the Heineken Cup, but they will learn from those experiences and there is no reason why they can't make it third time lucky.

If Glasgow have the likes of Fraser Brown, Zander Fagerson, Matt Fagerson and George Turner back fit, and Jonny Gray able to play the full 80 minutes, which he could not manage yesterday because of injury, then they have a real chance of victory.

A first-choice, injury-free Glasgow pack is vital and can compete with anybody. They didn't have that luxury against Saracens and were a bit light up front. Because of that, the likes of Billy Vunipola and Will Skelton, when he came off the bench, were able to gain the upper hands in the forwards.

What pleased me a lot, and would have been a relief for Glasgow coach Dave Rennie, is the way Adam Hastings played. He had been off the boil for a few weeks but did all that was asked of him against Saracens.

YESTERDAY'S RUGBY RESULTS & SPORT IN BRIEF

EUROPEAN CHAMPIONS CUP POOL ONE			EUROPEAN CHALLENGE CUP		
Saracens	P	W D L F A B Pts	POOL ONE		
Glasgow	P	W D L F A B Pts	PLAYED FRIDAY		
Cardiff Blues	P	W D L F A B Pts	NORTHAMPTON	P	W D L F A B Pts
Wrasps	P	W D L F A B Pts	DRAGONS	P	W D L F A B Pts
			Clermont Auvergne	P	W D L F A B Pts
POOL TWO			Northampton	P	W D L F A B Pts
Munster	P	W D L F A B Pts	Dragons	P	W D L F A B Pts
Castres	P	W D L F A B Pts	Timisoara Saracens	P	W D L F A B Pts
Cardiff Blues	P	W D L F A B Pts	Worcester	P	W D L F A B Pts
Leinster	P	W D L F A B Pts	Worcester	P	W D L F A B Pts
Munster	P	W D L F A B Pts	Worcester	P	W D L F A B Pts
Castres	P	W D L F A B Pts	Worcester	P	W D L F A B Pts
Leinster	P	W D L F A B Pts	Worcester	P	W D L F A B Pts
			Worcester	P	W D L F A B Pts
			Worcester	P	W D L F A B Pts
			Worcester	P	W D L F A B Pts
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