

GLOUCESTER RUGBY  
HERITAGE

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# VIVA L'ITALIA!



**W**ith England playing in Rome last weekend, and Marco Bortolami winning his 104th cap for Italy, what better time to remember Gloucester's Italian connections, the matches played against Italian club sides and the Italian players who have played at Kingsholm.

## THE FIRST MATCHES

Gloucester played Italian sides three times in the amateur era. The first match took place on 18 September 1958 in front of 10,000 spectators at Kingsholm. Rugby Milano, the most successful club in Italy at the time, were playing the opening match of an ambitious three match tour.

The Italians handled well in difficult conditions and the match was close until the last quarter when lack of possession finally told and they conceded four tries, Gloucester running out 23-3 winners.

Gloucester played twice more against touring Italian opposition before the game changed forever in 1996. In September 1974 they entertained the Italian side L'Aquila at Kingsholm in a one-sided

encounter that ended in a 75-0 Gloucester victory.

Much more competitive (and satisfying) was a 25-15 victory at Kingsholm in April 1993 over a Benetton Treviso XV which included Australian outside half Michael Lynagh and All Blacks wing John Kirwan.

## EUROPEAN COMPETITION

With professionalism came European competition and, starting with the first match against Petrarca Padova on 7 September 1997 in the European Shield, Gloucester have been drawn seven times against Italian clubs.

All fourteen games have been won and only one game was truly close: a 38-29 victory over Roma in 2000-01 in the Heineken Cup – the year that Gloucester went on to reach their only Heineken Cup semi-final.

## THE GLOUCESTER ITALIANS

Gloucester players were now recruited from all over the world and among the signings were four leading Italians.



Cristian Stoica

## CRISTIAN STOICA

When the 25 year old Cristian Stoica (also known as Alessandro) arrived at Kingsholm as a Philippe Saint-Andre summer signing from Narbonne in August 2001, he was described by the Citizen as "the Romanian-born golden boy of Italian rugby."

He was the current Italian full back, although he played centre (his preferred position) for his club Narbonne.

Stoica initially appeared to be an excellent acquisition in either position but, with the arrival of Henry Paul to join Robert Todd, Terry Fanolua and Joe Ewens in competition for centre places, it became obvious that his

future at Gloucester lay primarily at full back and things went downhill from there.

After starting in all four pre-season friendlies (including a 27-5 win over French champions Toulouse at Kingsholm) and the first six league and European games of the regular season, he was relegated to the bench for the Harlequins game on 13 October.

Within a couple of days, news broke in the French press that a discontented Stoica was moving to Castres. This was confirmed in *The Times* on 8th November. Three days later, Stoica captained Italy from centre against Canada in Rovigo and played in the centre throughout the 2002 Six Nations tournament. He went on to win 71 caps for his country.

### FEDERICO PUCCIARIELLO

More successful was the recruitment of Federico Pucciariello. Born in Argentina, Pucciariello, grandson of an Italian immigrant, had played for the country of his birth at Under 21 level before making his debut for Italy.

Like Stoica, he was a Saint-Andre



Federico Pucciariello

2001 summer signing from Narbonne and, like Stoica, had played in the May 2001 European Challenge Cup Final in which Narbonne lost to Harlequins in extra time.

Pucciariello was an outstanding scrummager who could play in any of the three front row positions. He was a formidable opponent and a daunting sight to see waiting on the bench. He played 24 games in his one season with the club and won four of his seven international caps in the Six Nations that season,

starting against England and Scotland and coming off the bench against Ireland and Wales.

Many fans were sorry to see him leave for Bourgoin after just one year at Kingsholm. He went on to play four seasons for Munster before retiring to work in his home town of Rosario, Argentina in 2009.



Marco Bortolami

### MARCO BORTOLAMI

26 year old lock Marco Bortolami from Padova, who had been Italy's youngest ever captain in 2002, already had a huge reputation both as captain and as one of the best locks in world rugby when he arrived at Kingsholm at the start of the 2006-07 season.

He did not disappoint. Bortolami proved to be a dynamic, committed and powerful performer who, coming straight into the side as captain, took Gloucester to the top of the 2006-07 Guinness Premiership table.

Chosen as captain of the Sky "Premiership Team of the Season" for 2006-07, he led Gloucester to a 50-9 rout of Saracens in the Premiership semi-final at Kingsholm and it was a huge loss when he had to miss the Twickenham final defeat by Leicester through injury, which he described in November 2012 as "... one of the toughest experiences of my life..."

Although not quite recapturing his 2006-07 form, Bortolami again led Gloucester to the top of the Premiership in 2007-08. Once again, only Leicester stood between Gloucester and the ultimate prize, but they suffered an agonising 26-25 semi-final defeat at Kingsholm in a match they should have won.

A string of injuries, which were to lead to three shoulder operations, affected his form for the remaining two years of Bortolami's Gloucester career and he spent much of 2009-10 on the sidelines. He joined the newly formed Aironi in Italy at the end of the season after playing 73 games for the club.

Although continuing to perform well at international level, Marco Bortolami believes that he was at the peak of his career while playing for Gloucester in 2006-07.

### CARLOS NIETO

A second 2006 signing was another Italian-Argentine prop, Carlos Nieto, who transferred from Viadana to join his international captain, Bortolami at Kingsholm.

Until his recall in 2005, he had won just one cap for Italy, coming off the bench to replace Pucciariello against England in Rome in 2002, but the 29 year old from La Plata was now, like Bortolami, in the form of his life.

Nieto joined a formidable front row pool including French veterans Patrice Collazo and Christian Califano, Nick Wood and Jack



Carlos Nieto

Forster, and hookers Ollie Azam and Mefin Davies. He turned in consistently dominant performances in his three seasons and started in 60 of his 65 games. He was an essential ingredient of Gloucester's 2006-2008 successes and was sorely missed when he left for Saracens in 2009.

Carlos Nieto played the majority of his 34-match international career while a Gloucester player and retired from international rugby on joining Saracens. After four successful years with Saracens he retired at the end of last season, aged 37.