

GLOUCESTER RUGBY
HERITAGE



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RUGBY

**A SEASON OF
HUGE PROMISE
AND GREAT
ENTERTAINMENT,
ULTIMATELY
TINGED WITH
DISAPPOINTMENT**

2002-03

Captain Phil Vickery

Played 33

Won 25

Lost 6

Drawn 2

For 1003

Against 634



Few seasons in the history of the Gloucester club evoke the same mixed emotions of pride and regret (and perhaps even today, fifteen years later, a simmering resentment) as the season of 2002-2003. In the first season in which the Premiership title was decided by play-offs, Gloucester, having won the Powergen Cup at Twickenham with a handsome 40-22 victory over Northampton Saints on 5 April and clinched the league (which they went on to win by 15 points) on 27 April, had to wait until 31 May to play the Premiership Final. In that first play-off year, second placed Wasps played third placed Saints for the right to play Gloucester in the final. After a 3 week lay-off, and nothing to play for in the previous 5 weeks, an off-the-boil Gloucester were badly beaten by second-placed Wasps in the first-ever Premiership Final at Twickenham.

Gloucester had started the Premiership season in tremendous form. Home wins

against Sale (44-8), Bristol (45-18) and Saracens (44-14) were complemented by away wins at Harlequins and Newcastle and a 21-all draw at Bath. Unbeaten going into the European Champions (Heineken) Cup first round, they looked to be among the favourites to win the competition.

This belief was strengthened by a magnificent 35-16 victory over Munster, runners-up the previous year, at Kingsholm in October. In a fiercely competitive "group of death", Gloucester then shared the points with Perpignan, home and away, in December and when the Cherry & Whites visited Limerick on January 18 for the final round, Munster were left with the "impossible" feat of scoring four tries and winning by a margin of 27 points to go through at Gloucester's expense. To the joy of the home fans and the chagrin of Gloucester, they did just that, winning 33-6. Perpignan also progressed and went on to lose narrowly to Toulouse in the final.

In domestic competition, Gloucester



continued to carry all before them, narrow defeats at Wasps and Leicester the only blemishes in the Premiership until a third narrow defeat, at Leeds, when 1st place was already assured. Saracens were despatched 51-20 in the Powergen Cup quarter-final.

The highlight of this memorable roller-coaster of a season was the Powergen Cup Final at Twickenham. On a sunny April day, in front of a capacity crowd, Gloucester and Northampton produced a final to remember. It was a victory for youth over experience. Gloucester's four tries were scored by their trio of young star players James Simpson-Daniel (2), Jamie Forrester and Marcel Garvey. Ludovic Mercier kicked twenty points in the match. Simpson-Daniel scored the opening try in the first five minutes to take Gloucester into the lead 7-3 and Garvey the second as the lead changed hands six times in the first half. Although trailing 22-20 at the break Gloucester always had the edge and the promise of more to come – and so it

proved. In the second half with the wind and the sun at their backs, they scored early through Forrester and from then on Northampton were chasing the game. A second try from Simpson-Daniel proved to be the clincher. In the absence of injured club captain Phil Vickery, acting captain Jake Boer waved up the veteran Andy Deacon to collect the cup. Never had the future looked so bright for the Cherry and Whites.

Despite the disappointments, this was Gloucester Rugby's greatest season of the professional era. When even Stuart Barnes describes Gloucester as "far and away the best team in England" you know it must be right! The team had a combination of maturity and youthful promise. It was an outstanding squad with cover in every position from full back to loose-head prop. Above all there was the power and mobility of the mighty front row of Phil Vickery, Trevor Woodman and Ollie Azam, backed up by Andy Deacon, Rodrigo Roncero and Chris Fortey. Add

to this the line-out work of Rob Fidler and Mark Cornwell and the mobility of Adam Eustace in the second row and the pace and vision of Jamie Forrester and work rate and ball winning ability of Jake Boer, Andy Hazell, Peter Buxton and Junior Paramore at the back and you have a pack to challenge the best. The often underrated hero of the shed Jake Boer was voted Zurich Premiership Player of the Year nationwide. The speed and handling of the threequarters, where Sinbad and Marcel Garvey were in the form of their lives on the wings and Terry Fanolua, Robert Todd and Henry Paul formidable in the centre, was complemented by three talented fullbacks in Thinus Delpont, Chris Catling and Jon Goodridge. World Cup winner Andy Gomersall partnered master kicker Ludovic Mercier at half back. Mercier's game, once considered limited, had developed that season to the extent that he was chosen as runner-up to Jake Boer as Zurich Premiership Player of the Year. A team of all the talents.