

## FIVE EPIC CONFRONTATIONS WITH THE IRISHMEN OF CONNACHT

Connacht was founded in 1885, when six small clubs in the province came together to form the Connacht branch of the Irish Rugby Football Union. Connacht has only 8% of the population of Ireland, and as a result, it has a much smaller base from which to pick players, when compared to the other three provinces of Leinster, Munster and Ulster. In addition, it has to compete with traditional Gaelic sports such as Hurling and Gaelic Football.

The first Connacht player to play for Ireland was Henry Anderson, who in 1903 played against England. He would go on to become President of the IRFU.

In 1946-47, the Interprovincial Championship was inaugurated, and each season all four provinces would compete. To compensate Connacht for its reduced player base, it was decided that any English born Irish international player must play for Connacht in the Championship. It was still the case however, that most seasons Connacht struggled for success. They never won the Championship outright, but did share the title in 1956, 1957 and 1965.

All the provinces turned professional when the regulations changed in 1995. For many seasons Connacht played in the second tier European Challenge Cup, and from 1996 to 1998 were coached by Warren Gatland.

Connacht first qualified for the Heineken Cup in 2011, and were drawn in the same group as Gloucester. This would be the first time the two clubs had met.

### 10 DECEMBER 2011, HEINEKEN CUP CONNACHT 10 GLOUCESTER 14

This result was a welcome one for the Cherry and Whites as it followed four defeats in a row. It was won the hard way. Connacht were up for it, and pressed hard from the kick-off, but two Freddie Burns penalties eased Gloucester's worries. After thirty minutes Eliota Fuimaono-Sapolu made a lovely off-load to James Simpson-Daniel who streaked home. Just minutes later Connacht struck back. A high kick was not dealt with by Gloucester, and the Connacht skipper, Gavin Duffy, caught the ball and scored. With the wind in the second half,



Connacht looked quite capable of taking the game away from Gloucester. Niall O'Connor quickly kicked a penalty, and the gap was just one point. However, the Gloucester pack held firm and slowly turned the tide. Freddie Burns kicked another penalty, and Gloucester just held on to win.

### 17 DECEMBER 2011, HEINEKEN CUP GLOUCESTER 23 CONNACHT 19

The following week, Connacht could consider themselves very unlucky to lose this game as they dominated for long periods. Tim Taylor kicked a penalty for an early lead, but when Gloucester over-elaborated in the backs, wing Tiernan O'Halloran intercepted and ran in a try. Against the run of play Tim Taylor nipped over from short range to restore the home side's advantage. After that Connacht dominated and four penalties from Niall O'Connor, two from Freddie Burns, meant that the Irishmen were leading 19-16 after 72 minutes, and well worth it. With fewer than four minutes left Jonny May fended off flanker Jonny O'Connor, and at great speed scored in the corner. Freddie Burns kicked the difficult conversion.

### 3 APRIL 2015, EUROPEAN RUGBY CHALLENGE CUP QUARTER-FINAL GLOUCESTER 14 CONNACHT 7

Pat Lam was now coaching Connacht, and would lead them to the Guinness Pro12 Championship in 2016.

Gloucester did all of their scoring in the first half. After 20 minutes, James Hook fielded a high kick

and counter attacked. He made a break and handed on to Steve McColl who in turn put Charlie Sharples away for a try. Ten minutes later, following intense pressure, Hook figured again. He kicked through and the ball popped up for Billy Meakes to go over. Both tries were converted by Greig Laidlaw. Connacht were far from out of it, for they came back hard in the second half. After 65 minutes a 13-man maul rumbled towards the Gloucester line before it was taken down, to concede a penalty try. However, hard as Connacht then attacked, Gloucester held firm, aided by a vociferous crowd.

Gloucester went on to win the Challenge Cup, defeating Edinburgh in the final. There then followed two further games to gain qualification for the subsequent season's Champions' Cup (formerly the Heineken Cup). The outcome was that Gloucester met Connacht again in the first of those.

### 24 MAY 2015, CHAMPIONS' CUP PLAY-OFF GLOUCESTER 40 CONNACHT 32



This was a very exciting game which switched back and forth, and Connacht seemed on two occasions to have the game wrapped up. Gloucester started with a bang, when after only two minutes the pack drove over for Moriarty to touch down. Greig Laidlaw converted and Gloucester seemed to be on their way. Connacht had other ideas. First Jack Carty kicked a penalty, and when Billy Meakes made a poor pass to Charlie Sharples, the ball went clear for John Cooney to pick up and run in from 50 metres. Laidlaw restored parity with a penalty, and then Meakes gave a well-timed pass to James Hook who charged through a gap to put Sharples in for a try. The Cherry and Whites were now 15-10 up, but back came Connacht. A neat off-load from wing Fionn Carr created a try for Carty, which he converted himself.

Early in the second half, Laidlaw restored Gloucester's lead with another penalty. But yet again Connacht stormed back, and following a cross-kick, Matt Healy gathered and scored. With only a minute to go Carty kicked a penalty for a 25-18 lead, and Connacht seemed safe. With time up Meakes eluded three tacklers to score, and Laidlaw's conversion meant there would be extra-time.

Now Gloucester took the lead yet again when James Hook kicked a magnificent 60 metre penalty. After two minutes of the final period of extra-time Healy scored his second try. Carty converted. Connacht were 32-28 up, and again seemed to have the game won. Gloucester gathered themselves for a final effort, and against 14 men, following a sin-binning, the forwards managed to drive replacement Darren Dawidiuk over for a try. A minute later Jonny May side-stepped four tacklers deep in Gloucester's half, linked with Twelvetrees and Hook, before receiving the ball again to score a magnificent try. Laidlaw converted, and Gloucester had got out of jail.

A week later Gloucester lost the second play-off tie against Bordeaux Begles, a home game played at Worcester because Madness were performing a concert at Kingsholm!

### 31 MARCH 2018, EUROPEAN RUGBY CHALLENGE CUP QUARTER-FINAL CONNACHT 28 GLOUCESTER 33

This was yet another game where fortunes fluctuated throughout. James Hanson started the ball rolling for Gloucester when he pounced on a poor line-out tap, gathered the ball and ran in from 30 metres. But this only roused Connacht, and tries by Kieran Marmion and Bundee Aki, either side of a yellow card for Ben Morgan, put them in the lead. Gloucester struck back with two tries of their own. The first was from Tom Marshall, followed by a jinking run from Henry Trinder to score the second, to put Gloucester 17-10 up at half-time.

Early in the second half Owen Williams struck a penalty to increase the lead. Yet, again Connacht rallied. A try from Niyi Adeolokun, and a Carty penalty, cut the lead to two points. Gloucester seemed to have made the game safe after John Afoa rumbled over, for Williams to convert and kick another penalty for a 30-18 lead after 67 minutes. But then Lewis Ludlow was yellow carded. Connacht took advantage with a try from Matt Healy, which Craig Ronaldson converted. Then a penalty by Jack Carty cut the lead to two points. A late Billy Twelvetrees penalty settled Gloucester's nerves.

Gloucester made it to the final only to lose unluckily to Cardiff Blues 31-30.

