

MONTPELLIER AND OTHER FRENCH CONNECTIONS

A LOOK AT OUR VISITORS TODAY AND FRENCH HEROES OF THE NOUGHTIES.

A BIT OF MONTPELLIER HISTORY

When Gloucester took the field against today's visitors at Montpellier's GGL Stadium in November, it was the first-ever meeting between the two clubs. This is less surprising than it might appear.

Unlike other cities on the Mediterranean coast, notably Toulon, Perpignan, Narbonne and Béziers, Montpellier has been first and foremost a football town with a famous football club who were founding members of the French Ligue 1, and who have never been relegated (Eric Cantona played a season for them in 1989-90, scoring 10 goals).

The rugby club, Montpellier Hérault RC, founded in 1986 through the merger of two local clubs, has only been a force in French rugby since 2003, when they won promotion to the Top 14 for the first time and the following season won the European Shield. Despite that, the city has produced some outstanding players in recent years, notably Louis Picamoles, Francois Trinh-Duc, Julien Thomas and Fulgence Ouedraogo and are now a major force in both the Top 14 and European rugby.

GLOUCESTER'S FRENCH PEDIGREE

With no previous encounters to look back on, there's the opportunity instead to take another look at the great Gloucester teams of the noughties and the great French players (and great French characters) who contributed to the club's success in a decade when they only once finished outside the top 6 and topped the table at the end of the regular season three times.

PHILIPPE SAINT-ANDRÉ (1997-2002)

Philippe Saint-André, at the time France's most capped wing, was Gloucester's first major signing of the professional era. His debut at Kingsholm against Bristol in 1997 was greeted with berets and Breton jerseys and the singing of the Marsellaise, as only the Shed could sing it.

He did not let them down, scoring two tries, one of them a brilliant solo effort, and went on to score 12 tries in 19 appearances and to add to his total of French caps.

In February 1999, after a patchy start to the following



season, Director of Rugby Richard Hill was dismissed and replaced by Saint-André. Initially Philippe was to be player-coach, but he quickly realised the difficulties involved and played the last of his 41 games in April.

His first full season in charge was very encouraging, the club finishing third. Notable signings were All Black legend Ian Jones and formidable back row Junior Paramore. In his second season the club managed only seventh place but reached the semi-final of the Heineken Cup for the only time in their history, losing narrowly to Leicester. Ludovic Mercier and Henry Paul were further good signings, outstanding young players such as Simpson-Daniel and Forrester were coming to the fore and the future looked bright.

However, success was not coming quickly enough and, in February 2002, Saint-André was replaced by Nigel Melville. Philippe went on to win the Premiership with Sale and manage the French national team for four years.

SERGE SIMON (1999-2001)

Prop Serge Simon only played 18 games for Gloucester between 1999 and 2000 but in that short space of time became a folk hero (especially in the Shed) for his tough uncompromising style and obvious enthusiasm for the game.

Whether coming off the bench, punching the air (apparently a red card waiting to happen) or waltzing an opponent round the field in a successful attempt to defuse an ugly situation, he was always good value for money.

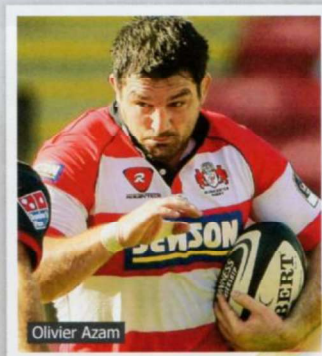
After a stint with Gloucester in 1999-2000, he received

a hero's welcome in August 2000 when he returned in answer to a front row crisis. A true character, his shambling appearance belied the fact that he was a doctor working for the French government and a talented artist. His two international caps were won in 1991, the year he helped Begles win the French Championship.

OLIVIER "OLLIE" AZAM (2000-2011)

When Philippe Saint-André recruited French international hooker Olivier Azam from Montferrand in the summer of 2000, it was the start of a Gloucester legend.

Saint-André knew Azam well as they had played alongside each other for Montferrand (now Clermont Auvergne). Gloucester's success in the three years 2000-01 (Heineken Cup semi-finalists), 2001-02 (third in the Zurich Premiership and Zurich Championship winners) and 2002-03 (Zurich Premiership table toppers and Powergen Cup winners) owed much to the power of "Ollie" Azam who was in the form of his life.



Olivier Azam

After a break in 2003-04 when he returned to his old club Montferrand where he won Man of the Match in the European Challenge Cup Final, he returned to Kingsholm to the delight of his many supporters and the cries of "Ollie, Ollie" rang out once more in the Shed, whenever he got the ball. He played 240 games for Gloucester and will always be remembered as part of the greatest-ever Gloucester front row of Phil Vickery, Trevor Woodman and Ollie Azam.

DIMITRI YACHVILI (2001-2002)

Brive-born scrum half Dimitri Yachvili, son of French international forward Michel, made 26 appearances for Gloucester, his first senior club, in 2001-2002, playing in the Zurich Championship Final victory over Bristol at Twickenham.

Aged 20 on arrival at Kingsholm, he showed huge promise and, on moving to Biarritz where he made 289 appearances, gained his first French cap in November 2002. He went on to win 60 caps for France and play in the 2011 World Cup Final.

LUDOVIC "LUDO" MERCIER (2001-2007)

Although he had played French Top 16 rugby for Beziers, Ludovic Mercier was at tier 2 side Aurillac when signed by Saint-André in 2001 and was still relatively unknown.

This all changed in his first season at Kingsholm, when he scored

508 points, including 17 dropped goals. His prodigious place kicking (the posts at Kingsholm had to be extended to accommodate it), immaculate line kicking and sound positioning (which more than compensated for any lack of pace) made him a match-winner and he quickly became a cult hero.

The following season he scored 101 points in Gloucester's six Heineken Cup games and was outstanding in the magnificent Powergen Cup win over Northampton at Twickenham. Returning after a two year break, he played in the 2006 European Rugby Challenge Cup win over London Irish at The Stoop. In all he played 105 games for Gloucester, scoring 1325 points.

PATRICE COLLAZO (2001-2008)

Prop Patrice Collazo played for Begles against Gloucester at Kingsholm in the 1996 European Conference game, as a promising 22-year-old. He joined Gloucester from Begles in 2001, playing 78 games for the club in 2001-03 and 2005-08, with two seasons at Toulouse in between.

Accomplished in tight and loose, he won an international cap while with Begles and, but for the strength of the French front row at the time, could have won many more. Collazo played for Gloucester in both the Zurich Championship Final victory against Bristol in 2002 and in the European Rugby Challenge Cup Final victory against London Irish in 2006.

CHRISTIAN CALIFANO (2006-2008)

Like Saint-André, Christian Califano was one of the great names of French rugby, when he joined Gloucester from Agen in September 2006. The tight head prop had won 69 caps for France and had a reputation as one of the most destructive scrummagers in the game, on either side of the scrum.

Although in the twilight of his career he made a major contribution in his first season when Gloucester topped the Premiership and reached the play-off final at Twickenham. He was a formidable opponent from the start of a match, but even more so when coming off the bench against a tiring pack.

His performances earned Califano one last recall for France and he played in the two autumn internationals against the All Blacks in 2007.

He played 36 games for Gloucester in his two seasons with the club, announcing his retirement in February 2008. A motorcycling enthusiast, he went on to compete for three successive years (2009-10-11) in the notorious Dakar Rally.



Ludovic Mercier