

GLOUCESTER RUGBY
HERITAGE

SEASON 1971-72

FIFTY YEARS AGO, GLOUCESTER WON THE FIRST NATIONAL KNOCK-OUT COMPETITION

SEASON RECORD: PLAYED 49 WON 37 LOST 9

DRAWN 3 FOR 821 AGAINST 414

CAPTAIN: MIKE NICHOLLS

The 1971-72 season would prove to be one of the best in Gloucester's history. Under the inspiring leadership of Mike Nicholls, the club won the inaugural RFU National Knock-Out Competition. Much of the success stemmed from a mighty set of forwards. The front row was made up of Robin Cowling, Mike Nicholls and Mike Burton, supported in the second row by Alan Brinn and Jim Jarrett. The back row of John Watkins, Mike Potter and Dick Smith was one of the best, if not the best, in the country. The pressure exerted by the forwards was relentless and when the opposition offended Eric Stephens would kick the penalties, and Bob Clewes score the tries. Before each game Mike Nicholls would give a pep talk which was apparently a frightening experience, even to the Gloucester players! But the fact remains that Nicholls was one of the most inspiring captains in the long history of the club.

In the seventies, the RFU was still very conservative, and only grudgingly conceded that it might be necessary to introduce a competition to spark national interest in rugby union. They could not countenance something called a "cup", and so named it the National Knock-Out Competition. All the same everybody called it "The Cup". 32 clubs were selected to take part, but there were no fixed dates for the games, so the clubs had to make their own arrangements, and the first-round ties were usually played when two clubs would be meeting in the normal course of fixtures.



30 SEPTEMBER 1971: BATH 3 GLOUCESTER 12

Team: Ron Etheridge; Bob Clewes, John Bayliss, Richard Jardine, Eric Stephens; Tom Palmer, Mickey Booth; Robin Cowling, Mike Nicholls, Mike Burton, Alan Brinn, Nigel Jackson, John Watkins, Jerry Herniman, Dick Smith

The very first tie played was between Gloucester and Bath at the "Rec" in a mid-week evening game. After early Bath pressure, Gloucester got well on top, with Nicholls winning several strikes against the head. At half-time Gloucester led by two Stephens penalties. It was the same story in the second period, and although Bayliss and Jardine came close to tries, it was Stephens who kicked another two penalties to see Gloucester home.

8 DECEMBER 1971: BRISTOL 4 GLOUCESTER 15

Team: Ron Etheridge; Bob Clewes, John Bayliss, Bob White, Eric Stephens; Tom Palmer, Mickey Booth; Robin Cowling, Mike Nicholls, Mike Burton, Alan Brinn, Jim Jarrett, John Watkins, Mike Potter, Dick Smith

Gloucester played the game they knew best. The pack won the ball, and Potter and Booth would kick the ball high and chased. Bristol had little answer. Bayliss was at his best, running straight and very hard. After 30 minutes Stephens opened the scoring with a penalty, and four minutes later Booth put Clewes in for a decisive try in the corner, which Stephens converted



Mickey Booth and Bob Clewes

for a nine point interval lead. Early in the second half, Stephens landed another penalty, but Peter Knight scored a try for Bristol, only for Pearn to miss the conversion from in front of the posts. Gloucester soon gained ascendancy again, and a further Stephens penalty sealed the win.

4 MARCH 1972: LONDON WELSH 4 GLOUCESTER 9

Team: Eric Stephens; Bob Clewes, Richard Jardine, John Bayliss, John Dix; Tom Palmer, Mickey Booth; Robin Cowling, Mike Nicholls, Mike Burton, Nigel Jackson, Jim Jarrett, John Watkins, Mike Potter, John Haines

Gloucester had now reached the quarter-final, but were drawn away to London Welsh, at that time the best club side in the country. Nobody gave Gloucester a chance. The Welsh fielded 11 internationals, four of whom were also British Lions, Gerald Davies on the wing, John Dawes in the centre, John Taylor and Mervyn Davies in the back row. But the game would prove to be one of the greatest in Gloucester's long history. Playing against a strong wind in the first half, Gloucester won the first scrum against the head, and thwarted any attempt by the Welsh to mount sustained attacks. They scored a try through scrum-half Billy Hullin, but in the second half, with the wind at their backs Gloucester turned the screw, and the back row of John Watkins, John Haines (Dick Smith was injured) and in particular Mike Potter made life increasingly difficult for the home team. Eric Stephens kicked a penalty and then, with 18 minutes remaining, Mickey Booth lofted a kick almost to the Welsh try line and Potter was on hand to drive over. Stephens kicked the conversion. London Welsh fought back but Gloucester were not to be denied and hung on for a 9-4 victory, which no-one at the ground would ever forget.

25 MARCH 1972: COVENTRY 6 GLOUCESTER 6

Team: Eric Stephens; Bob Clewes, Richard Jardine, John Bayliss, John Dix; Tom Palmer, Mickey Booth; Robin Cowling, Mike Nicholls, Mike Burton, Alan Brinn, Nigel Jackson, John Watkins, Mike Potter, Dick Smith

The semi-final at Coventry was a hard, bad-tempered game, where according to one reporter "fear stalked the pitch". No tries were scored. In the first half Eric Stephens kicked a penalty, whilst Peter Rossborough replied in kind for Coventry. However, just before half-time Stephens kicked a huge drop goal from near halfway. In a very rough second half the only score was a Rossborough penalty. The game ended 6-6, and Gloucester went through because they were the away team in a game of no tries.

29 APRIL 1972: GLOUCESTER 17 MOSELEY 6 (TWICKENHAM)

Team: Eric Stephens; Bob Clewes, Roy Morris, John Bayliss, John Dix; Tom Palmer, Mickey Booth; Robin Cowling, Mike Nicholls, Mike Burton, Alan Brinn, Jim Jarrett, John Watkins, Mike Potter, Dick Smith

Gloucester had reached the final having played all their games away from home. On a wet day, the Cherry & Whites ran out under a canopy of elver nets. Within a minute Moseley scored a try. A poor clearance kick was run back by Swain who scored in the corner. Sam Doble converted. Four minutes later, the Moseley forward Nigel Horton was sent off for punching Dick Smith. After nine minutes Bayliss worked a scissors move with Alan Brinn. Dix was on hand to burrow over for the try. On a windy day Stephens missed the conversion. Before half-time, injury reduced Moseley to 13, and Gloucester took advantage when Morris crossed for another unconverted try.

In the second half, Moseley lost yet another player to injury, but fought bravely with only 12 men. Even with that advantage Gloucester could not score another try, and had to rely on a penalty from Stephens, and very late on, drop goals from Palmer and Booth.

A measure of how tough Gloucester were that season is shown by the fact that just two days after the exhausting semi-final at Coventry, the team had to travel to play Newport. Gloucester won 9-3. Twelve of that team had played in the semi-final.



The winning team receive their caps