

GLoucester RUGBY
HERITAGE

SEASON 1996-97

THE FIRST SEASON OF PROFESSIONAL RUGBY
PLAYED 42 WON 23 LOST 18
DRAWN 1 FOR 1053 AGAINST 1003
CAPTAIN: DAVE SIMS

For some years it had been common knowledge that even though Rugby Union was supposed to be an amateur sport, many players, especially in the southern hemisphere, were being paid. The practice had become so wide-spread, that there appeared to be no way of stopping it. Consequently, on 27 August 1995, the International Rugby Board declared that Rugby Union would go open. In other words, it was accepted that, at the top level at least, rugby would cease to be an amateur sport. The announcement was too late to have much effect on the 1995-96 season, but by the start of the following campaign, the brave new world of professional rugby was becoming a reality. In May 1996, Gloucester's captain, Dave Sims, became the first player to sign a professional contract with the club.

Richard Hill was director of rugby, and had guided the team through the previous season when relegation was for some time a real prospect. In the first league game of the new season, Hill decided to take a team



Dave Sims

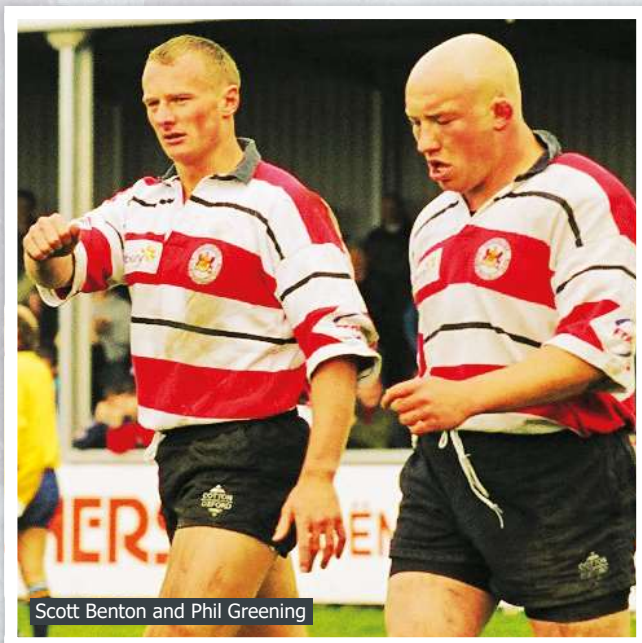


Mark Mapletoft

of virtually second fifteen strength to Harlequins, and paid the penalty with a 19-75 defeat. Things did not improve, and the next four league games, against Sale, Saracens, Bath and Leicester, all ended in defeat, and an accumulation of 134 points against. However, fly-half Mark Mapletoft had been kicking consistently, and he scored six penalties against Wasps at Kingsholm. This, coupled with tries from Alistair Saverimutto and Chris Catling, saw Gloucester home 28-23. A win at last!

In fact, the tide had turned, and the Cherry and Whites won seven league games in a row, and safety was assured. By the end of the season Gloucester finished in mid-table at seventh. A significant feature in the reversal of fortune was down to Mark Mapletoft, whose kicking was remarkably consistent. In league games he scored 259 points, and in all contests 458 points, which included 16 tries, the most of any player. He was aided in the backs by sparkling performances from

full-back Chris Catling, wing Mike Lloyd and Audley Lumsden, a recruit from Bath. Mapletoft had a sound partnership with his scrum half partner Scott Benton, a firm Shed favourite. The forwards turned in some stirring performances, led superbly by Dave Sims, and supported by an abrasive front row of Andy Deacon, Phil Greening and Tony Windo. Rob Fidler was a power in the second row, whilst Simon Devereux, Pete Glanville and Nathan Carter were never outfought at the back.



Scott Benton and Phil Greening

In the Pilkington Cup, after wins against Leeds, Bristol and Wakefield, Gloucester made it to the semi-final, but were defeated at Kingsholm by Leicester 26-13. Only two weeks later, the clubs met again at Kingsholm for a league game. It was one of those mid-week flood-lit games which always seem to produce drama. But this game was exceptional even by those standards. Early on Joel Stransky kicked two penalties to Mapletoft's one. Then after 14 minutes Stransky broke to send Craig Joiner in for a try, which the former converted. Mapletoft kept home hopes alive with a penalty, before John Liley scored another try to stretch the Tigers' lead. There was then an exchange of penalties, so that half-time Leicester led 18-9.

In the second half Mapletoft kicked his fourth penalty, before Audley Lumsden picked up and ran in a spectacular try from 50 metres. Mapletoft's conversion put Gloucester ahead for the first time, and he stretched it with yet another penalty. Tigers were not finished and Adel Kardooni scored a short range try, and Stransky's conversion put Leicester 25-22 up. Mapletoft's sixth penalty squared things. But with time running out Leicester appeared to have won when Rory Underwood scored a try. Only a couple of

minutes remained, when from a 15 metre line-out the Gloucester pack hurled Tigers back, and Phil Greening was driven over, to a tremendous roar from the crowd. But another even greater roar saluted Mapletoft's conversion from the touch line, to put Gloucester 32-30 ahead. Time was nearly up, but those were the days before the clock would tell exactly how much time was left. The referee seemed to play endless injury time, and Leicester gained a five-metre line-out. Somehow Gloucester held on, and the final whistle signalled wild celebration. It was a game that those present would never forget. It was noticed that an interested visitor at the game was Philippe Saint-André. Perhaps he was impressed by the passion of both the Gloucester team and supporters. Anyway, he signed a contract to come to Kingsholm for the following season.



Audley Lumsden

Gloucester took their first steps into European rugby that season, competing in the Heineken European Conference. They were drawn in a pool consisting of Begles-Bourdeaux, Bourgoin, London Irish, Swansea and Ebbw Vale. There were two wins only, against Ebbw Vale and London Irish. Bourgoin went on to win the competition.

By the end of the season, the club was beginning to find its feet in the new professional era. By the start of the following season, as well as Saint-André, the club could call on Terry Fanolua and Richard Tombs, to produce a formidable back division. In addition a recruit from Cornwall arrived at Kingsholm... Phil Vickery.