

GLOUCESTER RUGBY
HERITAGE



**THE SEASON
GLOUCESTER
FLIRTED
WITH
RELEGATION**

1995-96

Captain Dave Sims

Played 34

Won 17

Lost 16

Drawn 1

For 758

Against 643

LEAGUE

Played 18

Won 6

Lost 12

For 275

Against 370



In the mid-nineties Gloucester faced possible relegation on more than one occasion. But the threat almost became reality in 1995-96. Dave Sims had been named as captain, and the Director of Rugby was the newly appointed Richard Hill. Hill had been recruited, initially, on a part-time basis, but by the summer of 1996 that position became full-time. Any initial optimism was soon dashed, as the first two league games were lost to Sale at home, followed by a 37-11 thrashing at Bath. West Hartlepool were defeated 27-19, Paul Holford scoring two tries, but there followed a sequence of seven consecutive defeats. In January, the return game against West Hartlepool was a battle of the bottom clubs. With time running out Gloucester led 17-11. Then, West's full-back Tim Stimpson cut past Tom Beim, who was filling in for the injured Tim Smith at full-back, and scored by

the posts. The conversion appeared a formality, but incredibly Stimpson hooked the ball wide. It was a very lucky Gloucester win. A sweeping 27-0 win over Orrell, in the next league game, with Gareth Fenwick kicking four penalties and a conversion, relieved some of the pressure.

Meanwhile the Cherry and Whites were having more success in the Pilkington Cup. Walsall were despatched 47-0, followed by a 36-10 win at Nottingham, with Chris Raymond scoring two tries and Lee Osborne kicking four conversions. In the quarter-final Wasps were beaten 22-9 at Kingsholm, leaving a juicy semi-final contest at Bath. Here the success ended as Bath ran out 19-10 winners, and went on to triumph in the final against Leicester.

However, more important matters



were developing in the league. By April Gloucester were still perilously close to the two relegation places. Then there was a Wednesday night game, again against Bath at Kingsholm. Bath were riding high and would go on to win the league title. It did not help Gloucester's cause that no fewer than seven first choice players were missing from the line-up. No matter, the team tore into their opponents, and within four minutes had scored a try. Scrum-half Scott Benton, one of the big successes of the season, took a tap penalty, and weaved his way through the Bath defence, and when finally tackled, found Paul Holford on his shoulder to score in the corner. Tim Smith kicked the conversion from the touch-line, and added a penalty for a 10-0 lead, after only ten minutes. Inevitably Bath fought back, scoring a try through Phil de Glanville, and a Butland penalty, but two more

Smith penalties saw Gloucester home 16-10, despite heavy late Bath pressure. It was a remarkable win against all the odds. As the Times put it, "They feature the local cathedral on the match programme and the prayers of the supporters were answered by a display of raw courage that downed the Courage Championship leaders".

The win over Bath was not enough on its own. By the last game of the season West Hartlepool were already doomed, but the second relegation place was a straight fight-out between Gloucester and Saracens at Kingsholm. Early on in the game Mark Mapletoft kicked two penalties, and then to thunderous cheers from the 12,000 crowd, prop Tony Windo scored a try. Fly-half Martin Kimber kicked a drop goal and by half-time Gloucester were 14-3 up. Another Mapletoft penalty

stretched the lead, and although Saracens fought back in the second period, Richard Hill scoring a late try, the Cherry and Whites survived comfortably enough to win 17-10. The Times again, "Led superbly by Sims whose powerful lineout work was invaluable, Gloucester knew the game plan they sought to play and followed it rigidly. Scrummage power overwhelmed Saracens and allowed Kimber to dictate the match with some accurate kicking".

So, Saracens were relegated. Well... no; after the end of the season the RFU decided that the league was to be extended, and no teams were relegated after all.

In May 1996 Dave Sims became the first Gloucester player to sign professional terms. Rugby Union had changed forever.