

Gloucester

RUGBY FOOTBALL CLUB



**FORTEY BACK WITH
A POINT TO PROVE**

HEAD 2 HEAD

FANS EYE VIEW

**WIN 6 NATIONS
TICKETS**



vs Saracens

POWERGEN CUP QTR FINAL
SATURDAY 25TH JANUARY 2003
KICK-OFF 3.00PM

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NIGEL'S NOTES...

Nigel Melville

Director of Rugby

Good afternoon and welcome to Kingsholm for this afternoon's Powergen Quarter Final tie against Saracens.

The last seven days have undoubtedly been the toughest since my arrival at Kingsholm just under a year ago. The Munster experience will live with us all for a very long time, lessons must be learned if we are to achieve our goals, but we have to move forward no matter how difficult that may seem and get on with the season.

"THE FANTASTIC SUPPORT WE RECEIVED WAS SOMETHING VERY SPECIAL, SOMETHING THAT WILL LIVE WITH ME FOR THE REST OF MY LIFE – THANKYOU".

In terms of rugby occasions there are few club matches in world rugby that could compete with the sheer intensity of last Saturday afternoon. The fantastic support we received was something very special, something that will live with me for the rest of my life – thankyou.

The response we have received since the final whistle blew is nothing more than we deserved, we did not play well and as a result we will take no further part in this season's European Cup. As professional sportsmen we have a responsibility to the Club and our supporters, we get credit when things go well, but we will be criticised when they don't. This afternoon we must begin the process of regaining the respect of our supporters whose loyalty to Gloucester Rugby Club cannot be questioned.

The Powergen Cup remains one of our ambitions for the season. There is something special about a

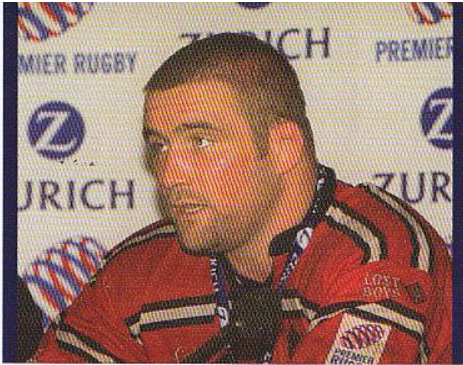
national knock-out cup, we don't have the romance of soccer's FA Cup, with minnows knocking out the big guns. What we do have is great one-off games between the top sides all trying to secure a place in the next round and ultimately a place in the final at Twickenham.

Today it gives me great pleasure to welcome the Saracens players, management and supporters to Kingsholm for what promises to be a fascinating afternoon of Cup rugby. Saracens have a host of international stars in their squad, they are coached by former All Black (and Northampton) legend, Wayne Shelford and will be well prepared for this afternoon's game.

Talking of preparation for matches, the news that some of our team plans for last week's game were found in a Limerick taxi the night before the game are typical of the problems we face when travelling away. They demonstrate the lengths opponents are now going to in search of an extra edge and a valuable win. Hidden camera's at training sessions and even satellite pictures have been used by international teams preparing for this year's Tri Nations games. It is for all these reasons that we now have to be self-sufficient when travelling away. Modern technology including computers and powerpoint projectors are the only way of keeping things confidential. Team Rooms in hotels are no longer safe, flip charts have to be destroyed after use, we simply cannot trust anyone – a disappointing fact of life!

I hope you enjoy today's game. ■





CAPTAIN'S CORNER

Phil Vickery

Club Captain

Last weekend was a very disappointing one for all involved with Gloucester Rugby Club, not only because we didn't progress into the knock out stages of the Heineken Cup but also because of the manner of our defeat to Munster and because of the expectations of our supporters and ourselves, who really wanted to have a crack at the latter stages of the competition.

We have all hurt this week, none of us played well, but I am disappointed with some reports singling out individual players. For me that is not fair; the team didn't perform, the team didn't help out those players. If we had gone out and performed as a team, then the pressure would not have been so high on those players.

But that is all done now, it will hurt for a long time but the important thing is that the experience is learnt from and we move on to another big game this weekend. We have a job collectively to take the loss on the chin but pick ourselves up. We have all read the comments and reports, journalist, whoever they are build you up to

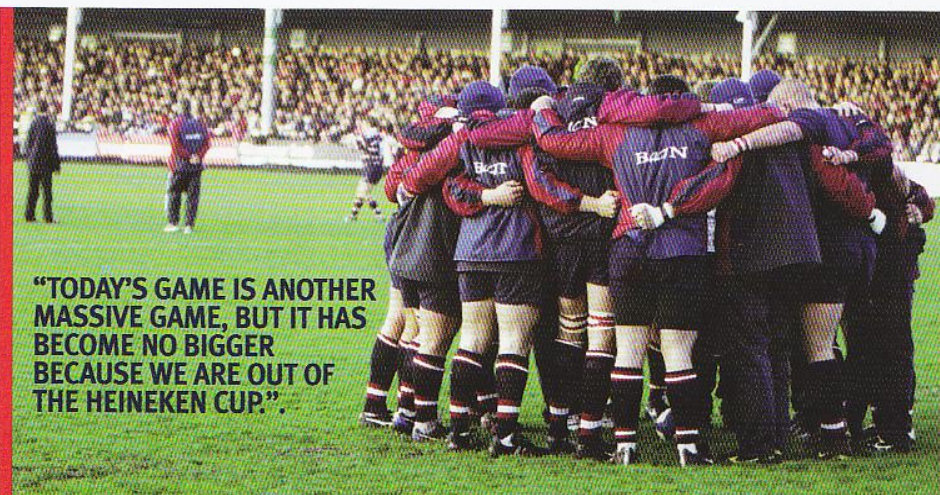
knock you down, but inside the Club we must remain positive. We have a fantastic group of coaches and management and we know where we want to go, we are all working hard to push this Club forward. I hope that all the supporters realise this and will stick by us and help us recover and get back on track.

As a player, you have to do your talking on the pitch, our expectations remain high; we do our business on the pitch. Last weekend we failed, this week we have to go out and collectively put in a very strong performance to beat what is a very talented Saracens side.

Today's game is another massive game, but it has become no bigger because we are out of the Heineken Cup. The Powergen Cup has always been a priority to us, as are all the competitions we enter. But this weekend is about us going out and performing, and getting things right on the field, which we didn't last week.

I said after the game last week that there were still positives to be taken from the game in Ireland; some players had never played in that kind of environment, trying to ply their trade under that kind of pressure. If we can draw on this experience, remember it deal with it and learn from it, then I believe we will all become better players and better people for it.

The Munster game was last weekend, we have all seen the videos, had the debrief and this week we have all been focused on Saracens. Anyone that has seen Saracens this season will have seen them rattle the top teams already this year. Given any sort of time and space they will create all sorts of problems, so today really is a massive game for us. ■



"TODAY'S GAME IS ANOTHER MASSIVE GAME, BUT IT HAS BECOME NO BIGGER BECAUSE WE ARE OUT OF THE HEINEKEN CUP."



Gloucester
RUGBY FOOTBALL CLUB



ACADEMY REVIEW

28 GLOUCESTER RFC U21

25 LONDON IRISH U21

21 GLOUCESTER RFC U19

12 LEEDS TYKES U19

Gloucester's junior sides brought some hope to the Club this weekend as the U21's mounted a massive second half fight come-back to beat London Irish 28-25 at Oxstalls and the U19 side defeated Leeds Tykes for the second time this season 21-12.

The U21 side found themselves down 25-nil at half time, but the Young Cherry and Whites scored twenty-eight unanswered second half points to maintain their second place in the U21 Zurich Premiership.

Tries for Andy Frost, who also kicked all four conversions, Duncan Murray, and flanker Pete Knight, to add to a penalty try for the home side, was enough to seal a dramatic win and earn the side a try bonus point.

In the end the margin of victory could have been even wider, but Gloucester had two more efforts disallowed.

"We lacked precision in the first half", said Academy director Carl Douglas.

"We failed to provide a platform, and paid for it. All the players responded very well though and a massive effort on the part of all the forwards helped us to get the result we wanted in the end", he added.

Gloucester U21's next fixture is against Saracens at home on 31st of January.

The U19s meanwhile enjoyed their second win in as many weeks, 21-12 against a young Leeds side, the two Clubs playing on a home and away basis this term.

Although they enjoyed a narrow win in Leeds, the U19 management had set specific targets as they sought to improve the play of Gloucester RFC's youngest representative side.

With added focus put on their set piece, adding width to their game, and improvements on the overall shape of the back play, the U19 side were able to build on their win against the same opponents the previous week.

The shape and cohesion of the young side's back play was made all the more impressive as the back line had to be re-jigged at the eleventh hour. With the late withdrawal of Nev Codling and James White.

This meant first starts for young scrum half Nick Runciman and centre Stuart Taylor. Both coped well with the step up and were proficient in attack and defence.

The Cherry and Whites scored three tries from, fly half Rory Teague, who also kicked a penalty, lock Waldron and back row player Tidswell.

An increasing number of local boys are being invited for trials with the Gloucester Rugby Club Academy. The Schools and Clubs represented were Crypt, St Peters, Pates Grammar, Hartpury College, Hereford 6th form, Worcester GS, Bournside, Spartans, Old Richian's and Edwards of Oxford.

Thank you to those who have brought these boys forward.

Next U19 games are 8TH FEB V Blackheath in National knock Out Cup, and 15TH, 22ND FEB V Leicester Tigers

In other Academy News Andy Frost and Clive Stuart-Smith have been called up for the England U21 training squad, ahead of the U21 Six Nation's, which start in February.

Frost, who joined the Academy in the summer, made the Gloucester 1st team squad during the autumn international release period, whilst Stuart-Smith made his first Premiership start against Leicester Tigers last November.

HEAD 2 HEAD

Thinus Delport

Strengths

12 times capped Springbok full back Delport joined Gloucester in the summer as he sought a new challenge.

The strong running, big hitting former Natal Shark and Golden Lion is particularly strong going forward. Given space, his lines of running, added to natural pace and power make him devastating.

Delport also has the ability to play in any of the back three positions. This means he has a greater affinity with the skills and roles of the other players in the back three and makes him a better player.

"To be a better full back you need to know how to play on the wing. You need to know what all three positions need to do".

Weaknesses

Strangely enough, Delport considers his versatility as a possible weakness as his ability to play anywhere in the back

three can mean that he doesn't always get a run in one position.

Delport was signed by the Cherry and Whites as a possible back up kicker to Ludovic Mercier, he has yet to kick a single goal this season though as he has taken a back seat in that department. He says that given his time again he would like to put more focus on that part of his game.

High Points

Playing for one's country is always an honour, scoring a try is even better and doing so against the world's top team in one of the worlds most impressive stadium is something few can only dream about.

"I would go back to 2000 when I regained my place in the Springbok side. I had a great year that year and I scored a nice try against the All Blacks in Ellis Park in July. I think the highest point of my career was that test in July 2000".

Low Points

I toured Europe with the Springboks in 1997 and a lot was expected of me in 1998. For one reason or another that didn't happen and 1998 was disappointing for me.

Also last week; generally being with Gloucester has been a high point for me but losing in Munster was disappointing".

Delport on the Powergen Cup

"The thing with domestic competitions is that there is a lot of culture, history and tradition behind them. After losing out in the Heineken Cup our focus is going to be much more on the Powergen Cup and making a success out of that".

We have two very key games in the next two weeks against Saracens, one in the Premiership and one in the Cup. We have another away game in the Premiership, and a win in your away games is so valuable, it can be more important than one at home".

Walking around Limerick last Sunday morning, the Irish inquisition was in full flow. No doubt it would have been just as intense in Longlevens after the most unimaginable match at Thomond Park. As Brendan Fanning wrote in the Irish Independent " anyone writing a script like this would have been placed in a strait jacket and carted away."

The Thomond mix is indeed a heady cocktail. Seeing the stadium empty on Friday

Munster getting one just when they needed it, and the crowd kept them going in between. Recalling our BBC Radio Gloucestershire commentary, there also seemed very few turnovers, the home side keeping the ball very well. If their performance was marked as an exam paper, it would be hard to find fault with the method or the final answer.

On the Perpignan trip before Christmas, I couldn't find a supporter who felt Gloucester



BY IAN RANDALL
BBC RADIO GLOUCESTERSHIRE

afternoon, the spartan concrete rectangle had little to commend it, but its transformation when full was as great as Munster's improvement from their tepid effort at Kingsholm. The place was vibrant throughout, and when Munster were all over Gloucester like a rash in the second half, I couldn't recall a more passionate - though not aggressive - atmosphere at a club fixture - an atmosphere generated by the surely impossible becoming probable and then ...well, you know the rest.

Many theories were expressed by the fans who walked up and down O'Connell Street in staggering disbelief, but there was some common ground. Munster's motivation - inspired by Coach Allan Gaffney and their pride in their 100% home record in the competition - was immense. They looked a mirror image of the Irish national team, scavenging for everything and playing at a tempo that doesn't exist in the Premiership. Henry Paul's tentative performance made it look as if the defences were built on sand, and no foothold was ever gained. The tries were evenly spaced, each time

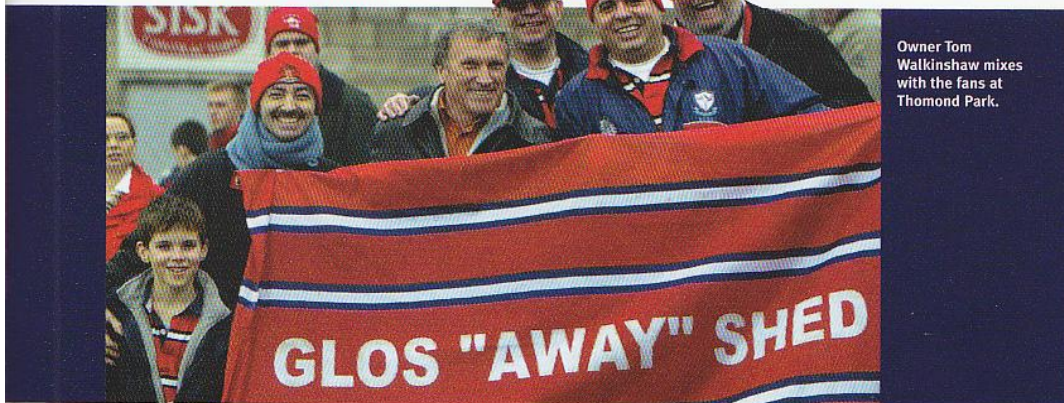
would lose. This time around, the straw poll was again unanimous - a universal acceptance that the most likely result was a narrow defeat - and there, perhaps, was the nub of the problem. Despite all the talk that Gloucester would play to win, somehow, in the inner sanctum of the dressing room, that drive to win was lost. What we saw was a team content to contain, leaving them with no impetus to raise their game when Munster got into overdrive. Whatever the quality of the Celtic League or the Irish Inter-provincial Championship. Munster's season is built around the Heineken Cup, and they now go to Leicester in a repeat of last season's Final. No complex combinations or intricate rules there. Saturday's backdrop even left our television colleague Eddie Butler rooting for a Gloucester win so he didn't have to interpret it as the match unfolded. His piece in Sunday's Observer beautifully illustrated the drama of the puzzle.

Gloucester's season is now bereft of the main course, but the team will not want to go hungry. There IS a gaping hole in the fixture list on April the 11th, but with only 4 home Premiership

matches after today, supporters (and management) will be keen to progress into the semi finals of the Powergen by beating Saracens in the first of two games on successive weekends. Recent history says matches between the teams are home bankers, and while a convincing win would be welcome, it shouldn't gloss over the failings in Thomond Park. Some fans suggested the team lacked spirit but I don't go along with that. The blunt truth was that a high tackle count alone was

the ship. The chasers in the League must be kept at arms length, and the prospect of a first Final in the main domestic knockout competition since 1990 isn't to be sniffed at. It is, after all, an insurance policy against an unthinkable collapse in the Premiership. Saracens lost here heavily here in October, but they now have Castaignede fit again, and the lively Shanklin will have a few tricks up his sleeve at centre. After last weekend, most

B B C



Owner Tom Walkinshaw mixes with the fans at Thomond Park.

not enough, as I'm sure Nigel and Dean know only too well.

These last three games before a spell of relative inactivity until early April must steady

fans have swallowed enough humble pie to last them a while....so let's hope there's a sparky backlash.

C'mon Glaws!

RADIO GLOUCESTERSHIRE

104.7 FM & 1413 AM

B B C

FIRST FOR COVERAGE OF THE CHERRY & WHITES

Action from last weekend's clash against Munster.



A TIME TO MOVE ON, THE FUTURE IS STILL BRIGHT.

BY ALASTAIR DOWNEY

What happened in Limerick last weekend? Tales of team orders lost or taken from taxis or hotels, a crushing defeat and the end of their Heineken Cup campaign made it a miserable trip to Ireland.

It is probably better we never know the exact sequence of events that tarnished Gloucester's exit from the European Cup and they will just be glad to get back on the field today.

Without doubt this is the most challenging period of Gloucester's season. The effect Munster's four try victory will have on morale, belief and potency at Castle Grim will be examined this afternoon.

Perhaps, in the future, Gloucester can remember back to their Thomond Park experience in the course of becoming a great side.

How they react in the face of such a calamity is the greatest question. While the support for them will be greater than usual today - the roar slightly louder and more warming - there will be a sense of uneasiness around the ground.

Nobody is quite sure what to expect. This has been a city in deep depression but nobody feels that greater than the players or the management.

The best thing for them now is to move on - get into Saracens and target a return to form that would see them move into the semi-finals of the Powergen Cup.

But not all the problems will go away. It is not a mystery how their 27-point lead evaporated because Munster were superior in most aspects of the game.

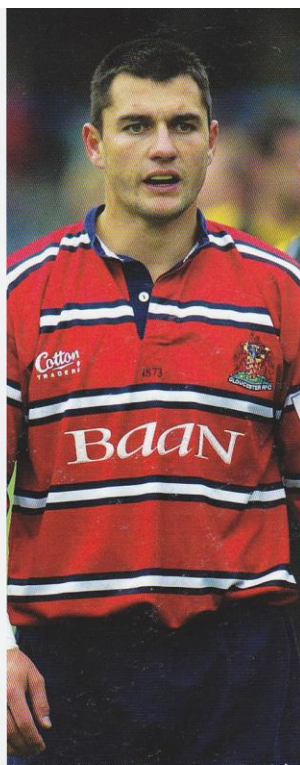
They managed to overpower and control Gloucester and won all the personal battles to fully deserve their victory. Gloucester now know what it must be like for teams coming to Kingsholm and, in my opinion, no team in Europe could have coped with the control, power, penetration and sheer will to win Munster displayed last weekend - not even Gloucester.

Gloucester are a good side - but they were beaten by a potentially great one on Saturday. It might be worth remembering in such a torrid week that Munster have suffered their own fair share of European disappointments, a couple even greater than Gloucester's last week.

Perhaps, in the future, Gloucester can remember back to their Thomond Park experience in the course of becoming a great side.

As Phil Vickery said this week, the Cherry and Whites are not ready to win the Heineken Cup. That might be a strange thing for a captain to admit, but at present, they still have too many deficiencies in key areas to reach the summit of the competition. I say fair play to him for recognising that fact and standing up to it - ironically enough, only 24 hours after their defeat.

One day they will be good enough, of that there is no question, but for now, get over it and cheer them to victory today.



The Powergen Cup Qtr Final

51 

Thinus Delport	5
Tom Beim	4
Terry Fanolua	3
Robert Todd	2
James Simpson-Daniel	1
Ludovic Mercier	0
Andy Gomarsall	9

Rodrigo Roncero	1
Olivier Azam	2
(c) Phil Vickery	3
Adam Eustace	4
Mark Cornwell	5
Jake Boer	6
Andy Hazell	7
James Forrester	8

Clive Stuart-Smith	6
Henry Paul	7
Simon Amor	8
Andy Deacon	9
Chris Fortey	0
Rob Fidler	1
Pete Buxton	2

 20

Thomas Castaignede	5
Tom Shanklin	4
Ben Johnston	3
Tim Horan	2
Darragh O'Mahony	1
Andy Goode	0
Kyran Bracken (c)	9

Christian Califano	1
Matt Cairns	2
Jonny Marsters	3
Craig Yandell	4
Stuart Hooper,	5
Tony Roques,	6
Richard Hill	7
Kris Chesney	8

Aston Croall	6
James Parkes	7
Robbie Russell	8
Ben Russell	9
Kevin Sorrell	0
Brett Sparg	1
Richard Haughton	2

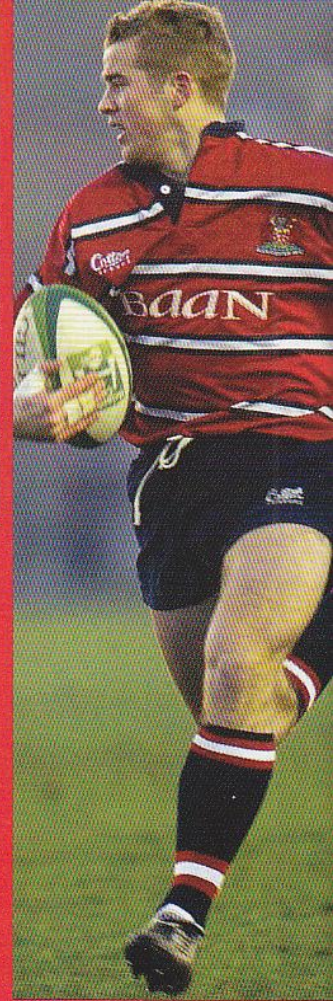
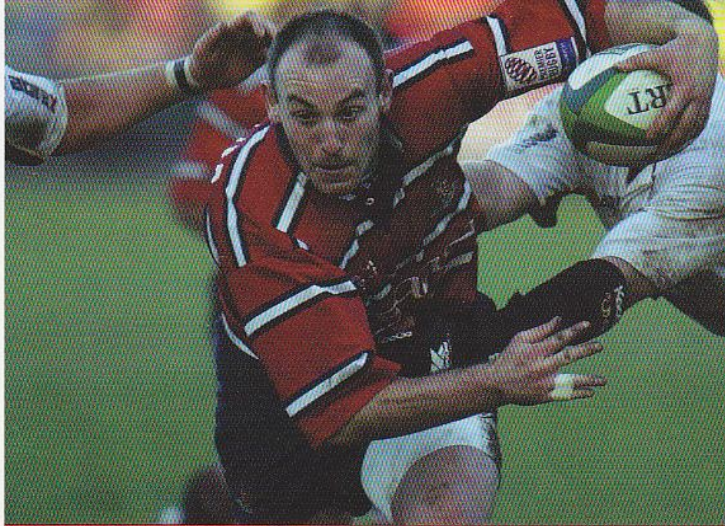


TODAY'S MATCH OFFICIALS Referee: Dave Pearson - RFU
 1st TJ: Wayne Barnes RFU
 2nd TJ: Hue Jones Williams RFU

Gloucester RUGBY FOOTBALL CLUB 

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KINGSHOLM SATURDAY 11 JANUARY 2003



GLOUCESTER 64

TRIES: PARAMORE (2), TODD (2), AZAM, COLLINS, FORRESTER, GARVEY, DANIEL, BEIM

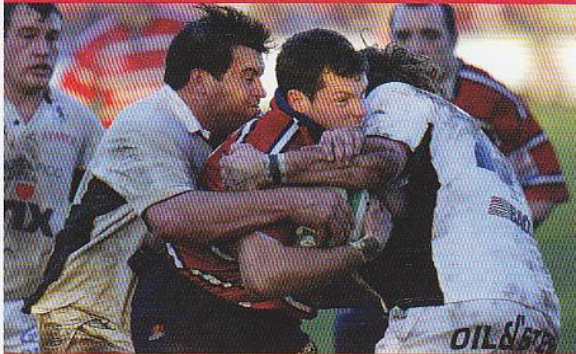
CONVERSIONS: MERCIER (7)



VIADANA 16

TRIES: STEYN

CONVERSIONS: STEYN PENALTIES: STEYN (3)



(Top Left) Ludovic Mercier breaks through the Viadana defence.

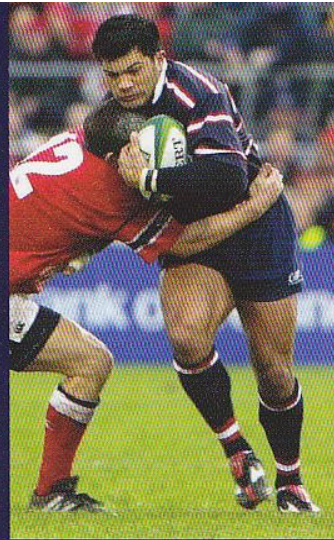
(Top Right) James Simpson-Daniel flies down the wing to score a second half try.

(Middle Left) Tom Beim is halted by Viadana's Aaron Persico (right).

(Middle Right) Fabio Gumiero wins the line out as Gloucester's Mark Cornwell reaches over.

(Bottom Left) Andy Gomarsall tackles Viadana's Cristian Bezzi.

Pictures courtesy of Bruce Seabrook - GPA



THOMOND PARK SATURDAY 18 JANUARY 2003



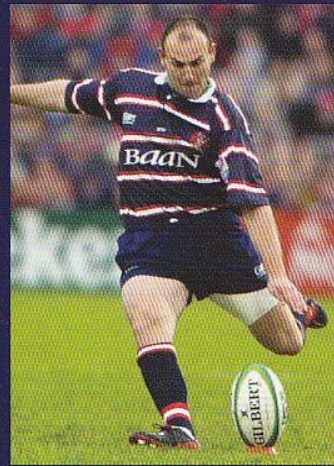
MUNSTER 33

TRIES: KELLY (2), LAWLOR, O'DRISCOLL
CONVERSIONS: O'GARA (2) PENALTIES: O'GARA (3)



GLOUCESTER 6

PENALTIES: MERCIER (2)



(Top Left) The two packs scrum down.

(Top Right) Robert Todd is held by Munster's Jason Holland.

(Middle Right) Ludovic Mercier scores a penalty.

(Bottom Left) Alan Quinlan wins another lineout.

(Bottom Right) Chris Collins.

Pictures courtesy of Bruce Seabrook - GPA

Fans Eye View

With Bob Fenton

I'm finding this very hard to write this week. Two reasons really - firstly the disappointing nature of the way we lost in Limerick kind of knocks the edge off the humour a bit, secondly the fact that I only managed about 7 hours sleep over the weekend, such was the party.

I don't want to dwell on the match, enough will have been written, read and said about it by the time this match programme comes out. Time to consign it to history and move on. That said we can but hope that the team and the management have learned some lessons from it. I'm pretty sure they have, and hopefully today Saracens will feel the backlash.

What a weekend it was though. Our trip got off to a slightly odd start, as the first person we ran into at Heathrow airport was Chris Fortey making his own way over as he could not get a seat with the rest of the team on the flight over. He was lucky enough to get a change of flight to Shannon otherwise he could have squeezed himself into the car with us for the long drive from Dublin.

According to the trip meter on our car it was 136 miles from Dublin Airport to Limerick - it took us four hours! The road was wild, dual carriageway one minute then not much better than dirt track the next. We made it though and after a quick change we were in a taxi into town.

Having arranged to meet various people in Clohessy's Bar we wandered in to a sea of cherry and white jerseys - it was like being in the Jockey on matchdays, only much bigger and noisier. It seemed that just about everyone from Gloucester was in there, you had a vision of the Kings Walk shopping centre totally deserted with the odd tumbleweed blowing down the middle of it.

And just to make it more like home, every now and then a chant of "Gloucester... Gloucester" or a raucous version of "We are the Gloucester Boys" would ring round the place, starting at one end,

working its way through the three bars before rolling back like an echo. Awesome.

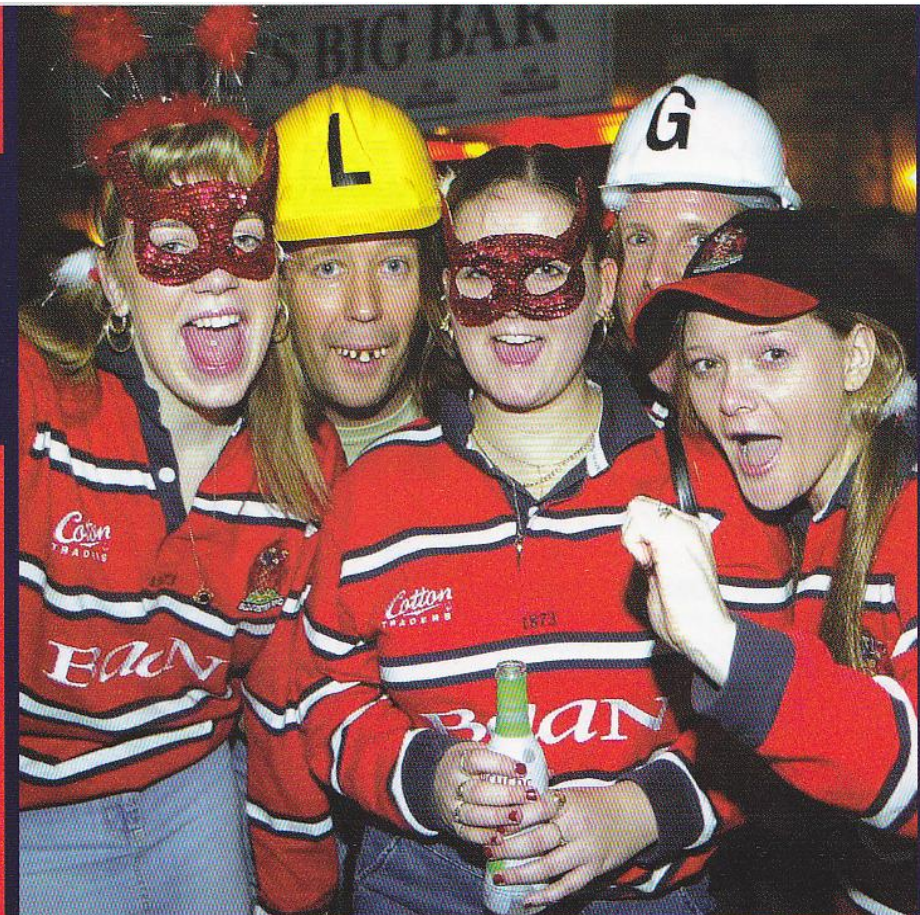
And great conversations with the local lads. Late on Friday evening the general feeling was - among supporters of both sides - that Munster were about to win the battle but lose the war. Even the most diehard among them thought that the need to four tries would be beyond them. Shame they didn't pass those feelings on to their players...

Come Saturday and after a bit of messing about - we had to get out to Shannon Airport to pick up a late arrival - we were off to Thomond Park. Walking into the ground at around an hour or so before kick-off you wondered how this vast concrete bowl would be capable of creating any sort of atmosphere.

By 5pm that evening we were left in no doubt. The support was fantastic, it was very much like being back in Kingsholm except bigger, noisier and even more passionate. Non-stop singing - even in the grandstand, though we could have done without the guy singing the Munster anthem over the PA system after the match had kicked off. Fortunately someone had the sense to pull the plug out on his microphone.

In the bar in the evening the Guinness flowed as fast as the River Shannon outside the window, great conversations and terrific hospitality. All except one guy - who I am certain had not been at the match and was not remotely interested in rugby - who seemed hell bent on picking a fight with Peter Buxton for some reason. And fair play to Bucko for ignoring him in the face of some pretty obvious and aggressive provocation.

One of the funniest sights had to be an Irish lad attempting to teach Chris Fortey how to do an Irish jig - for a start the place was so packed you could hardly breathe and to watch this determined bloke trying to clear



space enough to dance was hilarious. Nearly as funny as Foro's half-hearted attempt at the dancing, mind!

Late on in the evening Tim Ballam and I were talking to a couple of Munster lads and Tim told them I scratched out a few words for the match day programme at Gloucester. Immediately one of the Irish guys grabbed my arm and said "Will you tell all the Gloucester supporters a couple of things for me!

"First of all tell them that we think they are the greatest supporters to come over to Limerick - you lot are just like us. Great support, singing and cheering your team on even when things are going badly, and never giving up on them. And then afterwards you are all out, enjoying the party and being great company even though you took a terrible beating today.

"Second, tell the Gloucester supporters that we all hate Bath! When they came over here they wouldn't talk to us or drink with us, they just got on their buses and went. They were really stuck up!" Tim and I couldn't believe it - we just stood there and laughed. Can you twin rugby clubs? If so I suggest we start the ball rolling now.

Anyway, home now and time to concentrate on other issues, like the Powergen Cup. With the income that would have come to the club from the Heineken now being no more I guess this competition becomes more important as a revenue stream. While we want to get there for a different reason, you can imagine that another Twickenham pay-day would be more than welcome by the clubs accountants.

More importantly for the supporters we want to see a performance on the field of the likes we enjoyed at the start of the season - something like the game when we dispatched Saracens with a 44 - 14 thumping in October would do nicely.

I try not to speak for other people - and let's face it the average Gloucester supporter is pretty good at saying what he means for himself - but I'll make an exception today. I don't think we could cope with another set back like we just experienced in Limerick, so come on boys, get out there today and do the business for us.

You owe us one.

Peter Arnold

ALWAYS LOOK ON THE BRIGHT SIDE OF LIFE (DE DUM, DE DUM, DE DUM)".

Pardon me for breaking into song, but if I hadn't done that I would probably have burst into tears. No doubt about it, last Saturday's Limerick experience as a complete and inexplicable disaster. However, it's now ancient history, and there's no point at all in picking away at the scars left by old wounds. What we have to do now is to review the situation, and take issue with where we go from here.

So what 'bright side of life' can we look on? Well, to start with, one competition is now dead in the water, and we can now look forward to two others, both of which we could well win.

"Not if we play like we did last week," I hear you mutter, but that's not going to happen, is it? Just because it all went pear-shaped on one occasion, doesn't mean that the side has suddenly become a bunch of no-hopers. The quality and talent of the squad hasn't changed, and neither has the acumen of the back-room team. Few of us can remember a Gloucester side which has given us as much pleasure and

satisfaction as this season's crop of players has, and there is no reason in the world why they shouldn't continue to dazzle. All things considered, I'd rather be a Gloucester supporter than a Bristol one, at the moment.

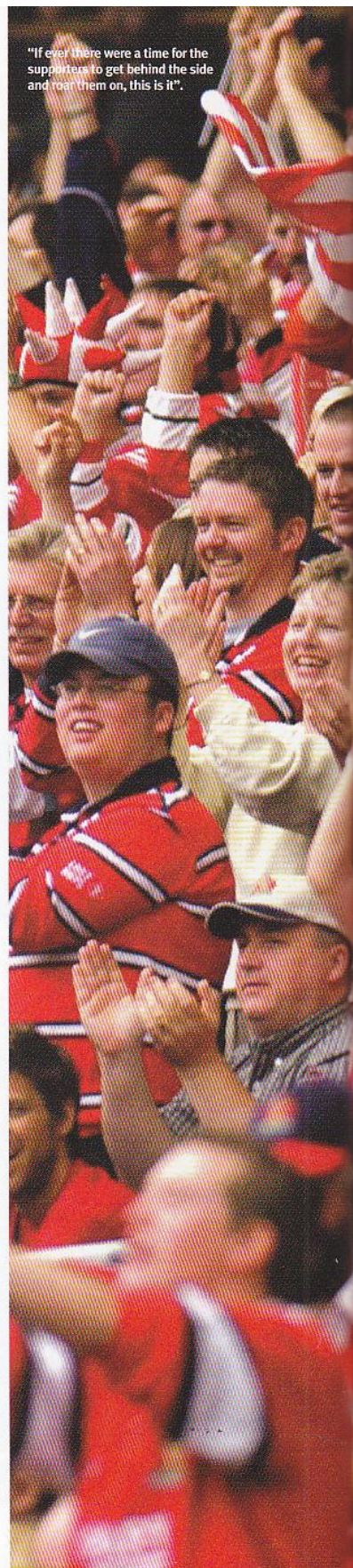
One thing may have changed, however. The lads wouldn't be human if their confidence, always a fragile commodity, hadn't taken a knock. And that's where we come in.

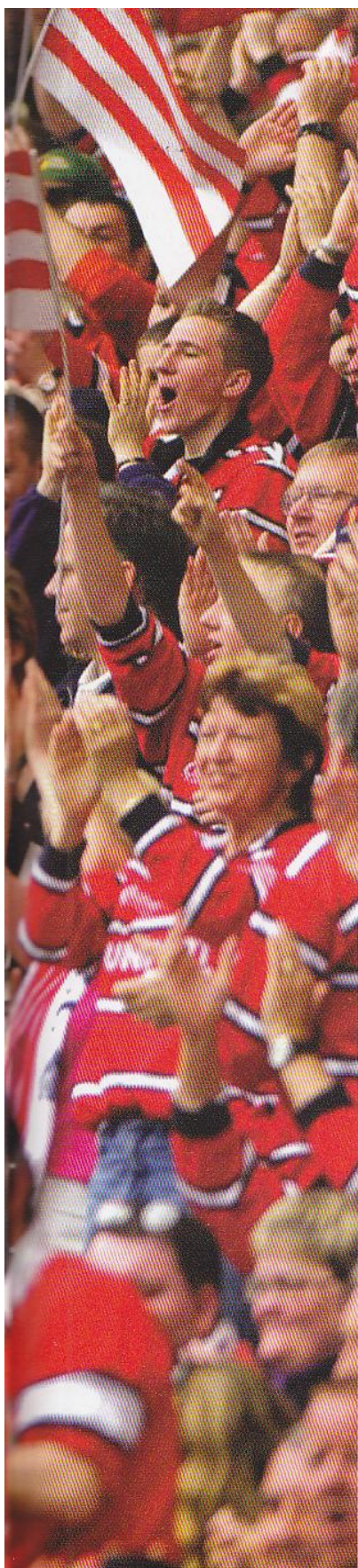
If ever there were a time for the supporters to get behind the side and roar them on, this is it. We've never been fair-weather fans, and this is no time to go wobbly. Can you imagine a better occasion on which to demonstrate our loyalty and affection than today, a day when we face formidable opposition in the Powergen Cup right here on our own turf? Remember, we have a proud record in this competition, and were, in fact, the very first winners of it.

I firmly believe that there's a comeuppance coming. Someone, sooner or later, is going to suffer for Thomond Park, and it could even be Saracens this very day.

Today's the day we have to help the boys bounce back. Let's do it.

"If ever there were a time for the supporters to get behind the side and roar them on, this is it".





WORDS FROM THE WISE

The Wit and Wisdom of Kingsholm's Shed is famous wherever thirty people conspire with intent to commit rugby, although I do have to say that I've heard very pithy comment from all parts of the ground over the years. However, one remark heard at the Viadana game certainly did come from a Shedhead, and deserves to stand up there with the best of them.

As Andy Hazell left the pitch after playing the first hour or so of his long-awaited come-back match, some shouted the immortal comment, "Mind the step !"

If you don't understand the reference, then hard luck. It's far too good to explain, but the following might give you a clue.

Trawling through the reports of that match, I came across the following headline.

ITALIAN COACH WARNS GLOUCESTER ON MUNSTER

I expected to find a reference to the undoubted quality of our forthcoming Irish opposition; a caution we hardly needed, but I was quite wrong. Here's what Viadana's assistant coach actually said.

"Thomond Park is a dangerous place to go to. The visitors' dressing room has holes all over the floor, and you don't know when the roof is going to cave in !"

Fair enough warning. If one of our players can lay himself up for four months simply by stubbing his toe while running out on the pitch, imagine

what a perforated dressing room floor could do.

It makes Wasps' Warren Gatland's fictitious team sheet look positively amateur.

NICE TO HAVE THE COUNTY BACK

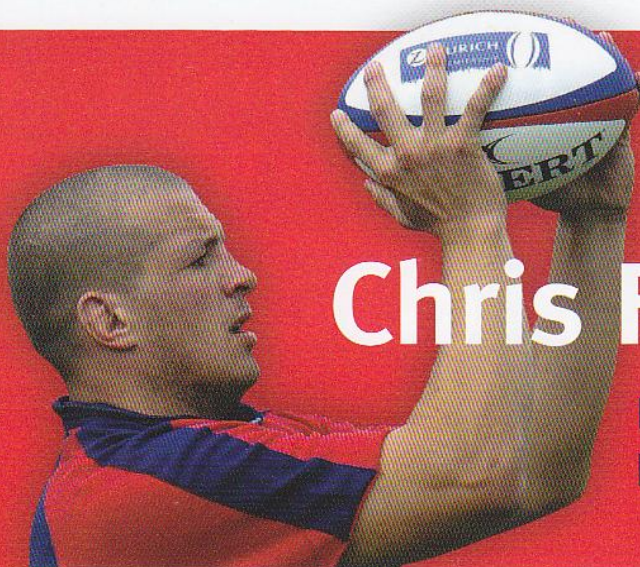
Did you notice that there are moves afoot to bring Gloucestershire back to Kingsholm ? What a good idea !

Many people will recall that County games attracted enormous support in the old days. Kingsholm was usually a sell-out for those matches, and I can - just - remember a time when it was virtually impossible to get a car along Worcester Street before a County match, because supporters from all over Gloucestershire were arriving at both bus and railway stations, and marching shoulder to shoulder up from Northgate Street.

The County Championship was organised on a regional basis, and we always had to get past Cornwall, Devon and Somerset to make progress. That was regarded as the toughest group to qualify from, and on several occasions, we progressed by points difference, only, and then strolled through to the Final.

We're not going to see those days again, but it would be nice to see a Gloucestershire side - current County Champions, I would remind you - containing such players as Dave Sims, Tony Windo and Chris Raymond, defending their title, once again, here at Kingsholm.

If it all comes off, I do recommend you to come along and watch. On the evidence of last season's Final, you'll see some good rugby.



Chris Fortey

Back with a point to prove.

"I'm fit and ready to play... if selected", exclaimed a rather sheepish Chris Fortey this week.

At Gloucester's Woodlawn training venue, after a lung-burning defence session with Gloucester coach Dave Ellis, Chris Fortey felt he was ready to get back into action.

Eleven weeks after an innocuous collision with London Irish's Captain Ryan Strudwick, which left Fortey with little or no feeling in his arm, the Gloucester hooker is back and keen to challenge once again for the Gloucester number two shirt.

He feels Olivier Azam has had it too easy of late and is ready to battle to be Gloucester's number one, number two again.

"Hopefully, I am just taking each session as it comes, I have been stepping things up gradually and the aim this week is basically to do more contact, do more scrummaging, more set piece work and then, if there is no reaction and I am selected, then I will be more than happy", said the former Gordon League player.

After the disappointment in Munster the Gloucester coaches were keeping their selection cards for this weekend's crucial Powergen Cup tie close to their chests. Having waited this long however, Fortey says he is just glad to be back.

"My sole aim throughout has been just to get back as

quick as possible and do what I do best. If it is not this weekend, then I'll wait until next weekend, either way I can't wait", he explained.

The usually hyperactive Fortey has described his three months on the sidelines as easily the worst time in his playing career. His frustration at being out of the side was compounded by nature of his therapy, simply rest and relaxation.

The collision with the London Irish lock left Fortey with nerve damage in his shoulder, which left his arm powerless. The doctor's prognosis was that the bruising to the nerve would heal in time, but that it needed between nine and twelve weeks rest.

This meant that although there were no obvious scars or plasters, under doctor's orders, Fortey was banned from any upper body strength work for almost seven weeks.

"The hardest thing about the injury is that there is no physical sign that I had done anything to my shoulder, it was only when I had complete power loss in my arm that I knew something was seriously wrong. All I could do though was rest. The hardest part of this job is getting an injury that stops you from doing something you really love, it is very frustrating. But that is part of the job and you have to learn how to manage it. I didn't know what to expect, this was the longest length of time I have been out of rugby".

THE HARDEST PART OF THIS JOB IS GETTING AN INJURY THAT STOPS YOU FROM DOING SOMETHING YOU REALLY LOVE, IT IS VERY FRUSTRATING.

The nature of Fortey's injury also impacted on the specific skills he needed for the key position he plays within the team.

"I wasn't able to do any throwing in for nearly seven weeks, and because of the damage to the nerves I lost a lot of muscle memory, I have had to re-educate myself on the basics", he explained

Like an excitable child waiting for Christmas, Fortey has been counting down the days left on his imposed exile. He has waited patiently and is now chomping at the bit to play again.

"The doctors said nine to twelve weeks, last week was the tenth- I have been counting them down- it will be a real bonus to come back a week early. I just want to get back into the team environment", he said.

Such is his love for the Club he has supported as man and boy that Fortey has made daily bike journeys to Kingsholm just to be involved. Many injured players find watching from the sideline too painful and frustrating as they often feel helpless when fortunes turn bad, and feel left out when things go well.

Not Fortey. He made the journey to Limerick off his own back, acting as tee boy for Ludovic Mercier. He described the experience as terrible but was adamant that he wanted to remain part of the tight knit group of Gloucester players.

"It has been hard, the team has been going so well, we have only lost four games this season and it's hard not being hard of something successful.

"I like to be part of it even when I am injured. Like any spectator, I was bitterly disappointed with last

weekend but we have another game this week and we all want to put it right",

"We have a good squad morale, everyone is close knit and that shows on the pitch".

This weekend the stakes are raised again as Gloucester entertain Saracens in a do or die Powergen Cup Quarter-Final. After so long on the side lines however, Chris Fortey needs no more motivation and as one of the more vocal of the Gloucester players, when he is around, his team mates and opposition are likely to know about it.

"It doesn't matter who you play against, the motivation is always there; even when you are injured you still want to play. Obviously the impetus is on us after the Munster defeat everyone expects that little bit more. But this competition is just as special, there is still a lot to play for", says Fortey.

Indeed he has. Having spent so long out of action he is unlikely to be involved when the England A squad is announced next week, but Fortey has designs set on a summer tour place at least. With this sort of incentive, to add to the desire he has to wear the Gloucester number two shirt there could be fireworks ahead. ■

