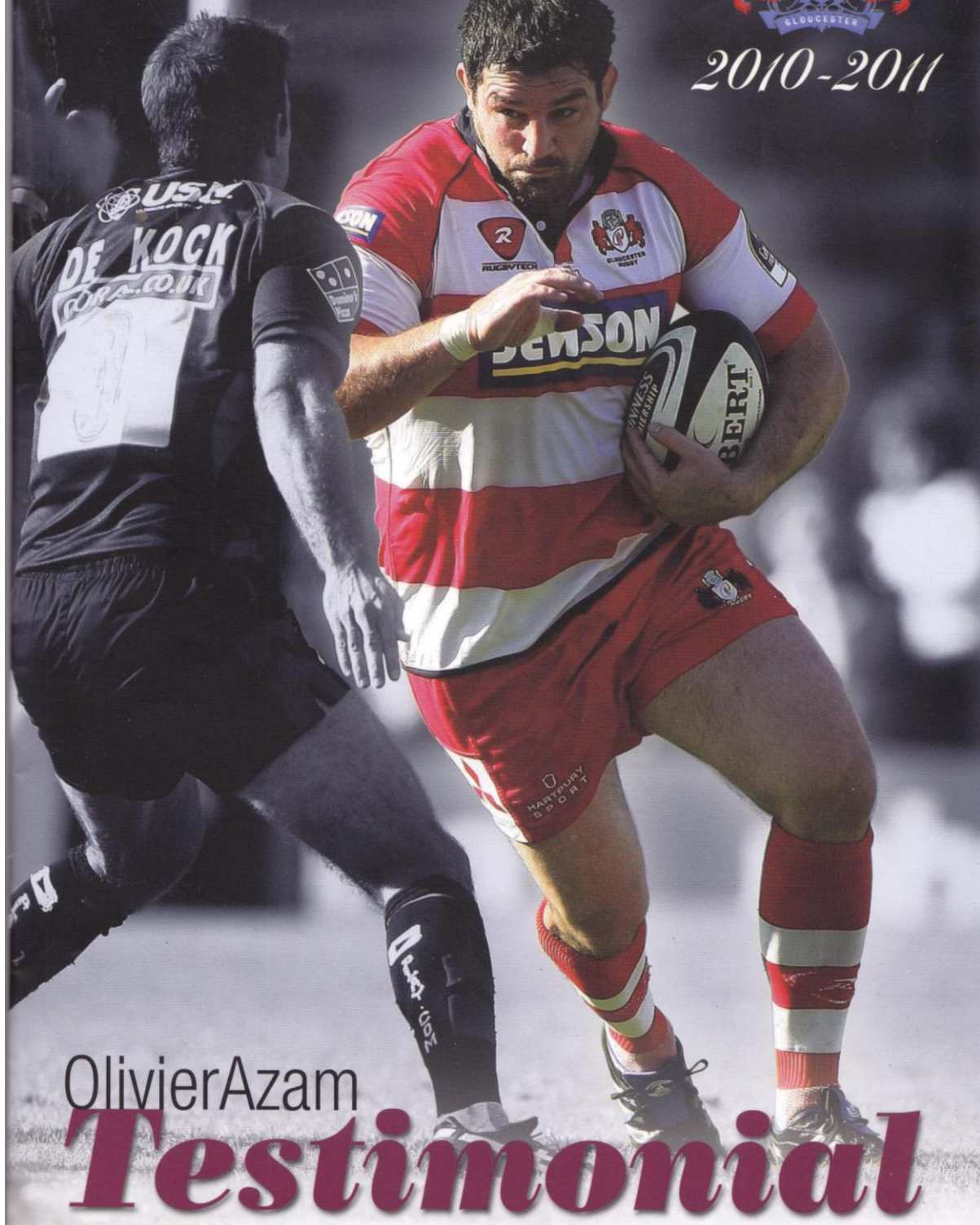




2010-2011



OlivierAzam

Testimonial



“A Gloucester welcome with a French twist”

Bonjour

You may have been expecting the traditional welcome to my benefit brochure – there was a stage when I did too – but the more I thought about my rugby, my association with the Cherry and White shirt and all the people who have forged my career, I realised I wanted these column inches to myself!

This is my opportunity to say 'merci' and to provide a little insight into what it means to me and my family to be awarded a testimonial year by the club I now regard as my home.

It is an honour to follow the likes of Andy Deacon, Mark Cornwell and Andy Hazell as a recipient of a testimonial and onto the list of players who have worn the club's crest on their heart with pride, who have lived together, worked together, laughed together, lost together and won together.

But to me it's more than that. I knew from the age of five or six that I wanted to play rugby, before the game was even professional and I am proud to have been a Gloucester forward, proud to have shared dressing rooms, tears, great joy and emotion with these great Gloucester players. I am proud to have played with rugby men like this who to me are my own heroes.

I am privileged to be a Frenchman made to feel at home in Gloucester. When I first came to Gloucester 10 years ago it was the people, players and staff that made me so welcome and I would like to thank you for your support. In some small way I have contributed to Gloucester's success during my career then I am a happy man.

All I have ever wanted to do was to play rugby and I am fortunate to know I have represented a club of such history and tradition. But I am also very humble and at this moment I would like to take the time to acknowledge a very close friend of mine, and former team-mate, Ed Pearce and his beautiful family who are as a family facing a daily battle with illness. Love to you both.

As you will see in the following pages, there are many people who have contributed to my career – players who have achieved everything in the game, supporters who make this club so unique in its identity and coaches I have played under.

If you are attending one of the benefit year events while reading this then I hope you enjoy the occasion and have a great time. I have had a great time in the 10 years I have spent at Kingsholm and I hope you have enjoyed what I have managed to bring to the club and the team.

Lastly, I would thank everyone for their generosity – from my benefit committee, supporters, players and coaches to my wife and family for making my time here so special. I am what I am but I am a Gloucester rugby player and that means the world to me.

Enjoy the season.

Zed



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“A big, scary Frenchman”

by James Simpson-Daniel

When people ask me what my first impressions of Olivier Azam were, the answer is easy: scary!

I was a shy lad from up north, fresh out of school and used to the sort of rugby that allowed me to run around a lot and use my skills.

All of a sudden I was plunged into the world of professional rugby and faced with all the personalities and performers that made up Gloucester about a decade ago. To me, Zed was a big, hairy, horribly scary Frenchman!

With guys like Zed, Phil Vickery and Junior Paramore in the dressing room we had some big players and some big personalities who knew how to look out for each other. There is no doubt Olivier was, and still is, a big presence in the dressing room and big influence on a young guy like me.

He was able to create an instant respect from the supporters and players alike through his attitude and the value he placed on team-spirit. It didn't matter we were both new to the club, if I was getting a hard time from someone Zed would be over to sort it out – and it tended to stay sorted – and that meant a lot to someone like me!

To me, that is what it means to us to play for Gloucester. We are not just representing a rugby team but the whole community, the crowd and our team-mates and Zed knows more than most how important that is because of the length of time he has been part of Gloucester Rugby.

Zed accepted he was joining part of a family and that is why he has been able to spend 10 years at one club – a club in a foreign country in one of the most unforgiving leagues in the world.

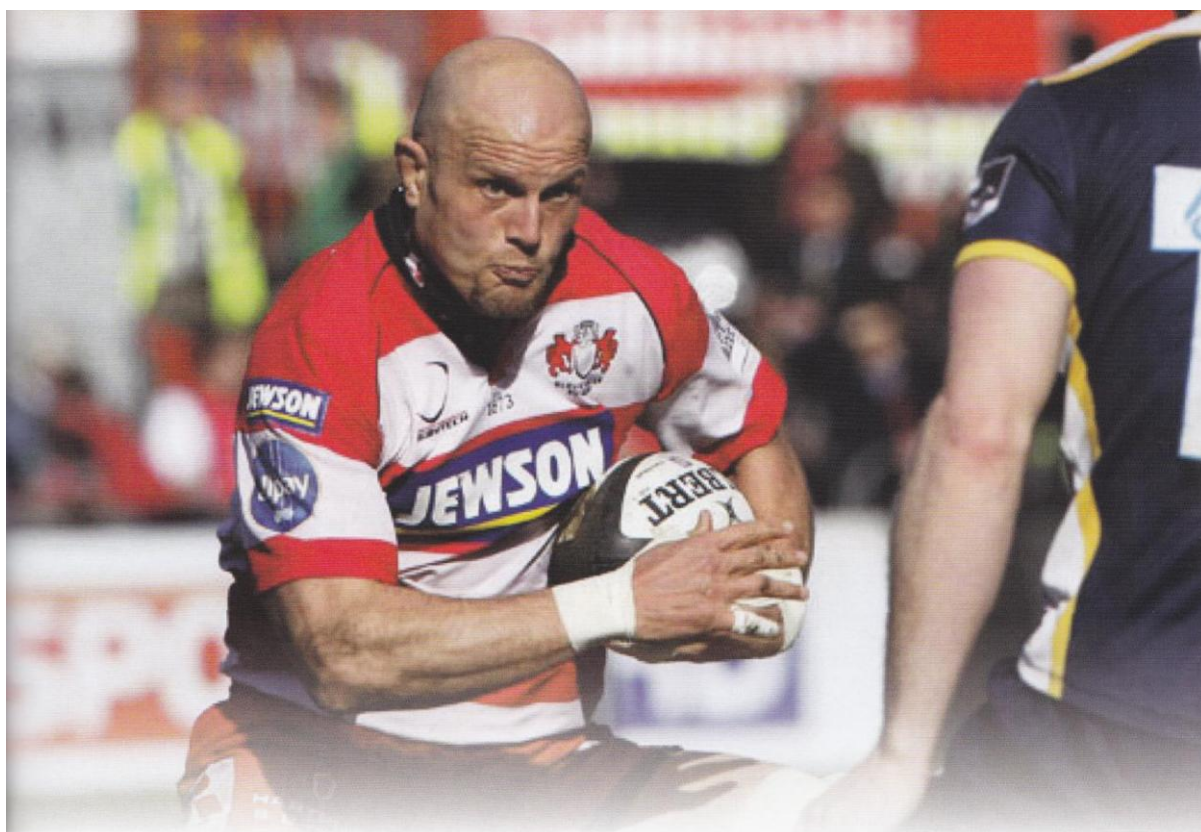
His reputation as a fearsome competitor is well known and he is still able to mix it with the best of them.

But best of all, he is still that big, scary, hairy Frenchman I first met all those years ago – every team needs one and I am happy to say Zed is ours!

Good luck in your testimonial year, you deserve it.

Sinbad





“A powerful man that likes red wine”

by Will James

What can I say about Olivier Azam, aka Zed, aka le Bouqueton (The Goatee)?

As a rugby player he is confident, uncompromising and aggressive and as his career over the past ten years has shown a truly committed and dedicated servant of Gloucester Rugby.

I am fortunate to have such a powerful man in front of me in the scrum. Zed loves to scrummage, which is pretty handy for a second row forward and it gives the team a great platform.

Zed was well into his Gloucester career by the time I arrived at the club but his hunger for success and competitive instinct are as strong as ever. He is the sort of bloke who stands up for his team-mates, relishes the confrontation that is so unique to rugby and will be remembered as one of the most important Gloucester players of recent years.

Off the field he is a good friend. He is straight talking, honest and to the point and although I believe him to be the oldest man in the team by a big margin he is always willing to give advice to the younger guys - which usually goes along the line of which wine goes best with a good selection of cheese!

Zed, may I wish you all the best for your testimonial year, you thoroughly deserve it and here's to the next 10 years - I am looking forward to a nice glass of red wine to celebrate!

Will James

“Raging Bull? There must be two of them!”

by Dean Ryan

Pacing up and down the touchline at Bristol like a frustrated Bull waiting to be unleashed on an unsuspecting public was Olivier Azam – it was my first experience of the man they call Zed!

Philippe Saint-Andre's volatile collection of relatively unknown Frenchmen, the odd Samoan, an Australian and a sprinkling of Englishmen were in town playing against my then club of Bristol.

With the score tight after 60 minutes, Saint-Andre played his trump card by introducing a hooker who looked more like a hitman from the Sopranos than a rugby player.

On rolled Zed to create mayhem in the last 20 minutes against a gutsy but tiring home pack. His bullocking runs up the middle took half a dozen men to stop, his ability to trample over anything that moved (our scrum-half mainly) was incredible and he was a combustible mix of raw aggression at anything or anyone who cared to get in the way.

For the first time I was relieved at my transition from player to coach. I was quite close enough watching from the Bristol dug-out!

Now that picture probably doesn't differ from what most people have seen down the years. There have been brilliant and volatile performances, the occasional brush with the authorities and a longevity that has established him as a pillar of Gloucester's recent history.

But it wasn't until I moved to coach Gloucester in 2003 that I got to know the real Zed.

The reality to what you see in the heart of a scrum, ruck or maul is much different. He is a deep thinker on all things rugby and a huge influence on early Gloucester tactics and systems, bringing fresh ideas and influences from his experiences with French team and merging them back into his translation of the English game.

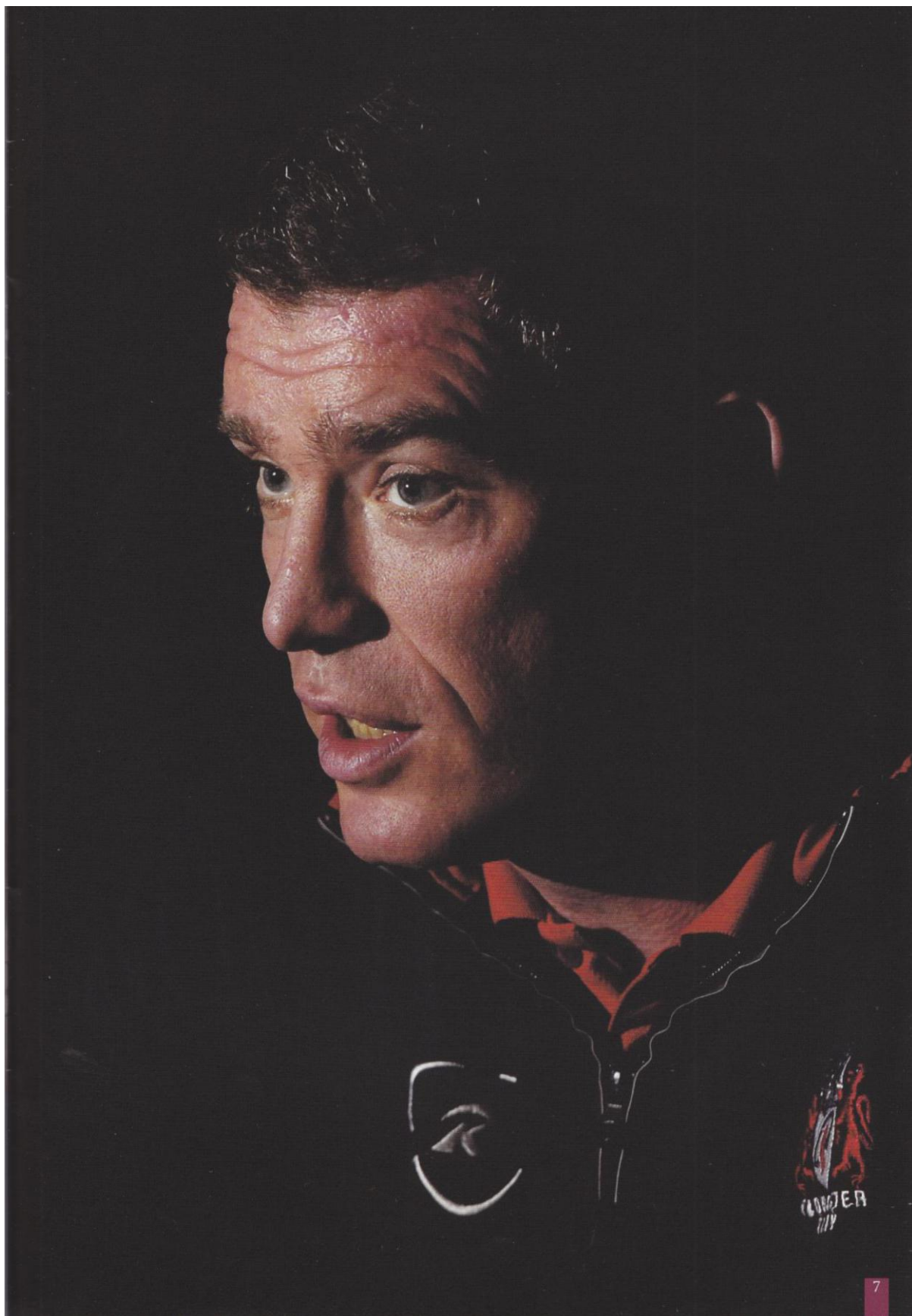
The challenge for Zed was how to play with the passion and freedom of a Frenchman within the systems and structures of England but he has managed it brilliantly.

Ten years on and something must have gone well because the Shed's love affair with their talismanic hooker continues. In modern times 10 years at one club is a fantastic achievement but 10 years at the centre of a club in foreign territory is really something!

Well done Zed it really has been a pleasure to have worked with you over so many years and I wish you the best of luck with your testimonial year.

It is a true reward for your services for Gloucester, I just still thank the stars that I got to finish my playing career before you got here!!

Dean Ryan



“Stepping up to live with the greats”

by Paul Furley, BBC Radio Gloucestershire

So, it's 10 years since the Shed got its first sight of Olivier Azam in cherry and white. Scarily that means it's also 10 years since I first interviewed him, along with the rest of that summer's intake.

A decade on and with the benefit of hindsight, two names stand out as having given exceptional service to Gloucester: Jake Boer and Olivier Azam, while Franck Schisano and Herve Gregoire-Mazzocco left after making less than ten appearances between them. Schisano is worthy of a mention because he and Azam were the most interesting interviewees of the day.

The wing genuinely tried - but ultimately failed - to communicate; the only help I could give him from my GCSE French was to point across the field from the dug outs and say "voici le Shed" when trying to ask how excited he was about playing in front of such passionate fans. Fortunately he got the meaning when he scored a hat-trick at Rotherham and the travelling Shed raised the roof.

Talking to Ollie for the first time was a completely different kettle of poisson, he looked through me in the same way I imagine he looks through the entire Bath pack and said he would get Stephane Sanchez to translate my questions in to French before he would reply in English, which worked remarkably well.

Azam's desire ahead of his first season in England was to be in a team that had "a good objective, a good target," before adding "I think Gloucester has this capacity."

The team under Philippe Saint-Andre was taking on an increasingly French feel at the time and Azam admitted that the language barrier needed to be overcome:

"We don't know anybody, speak not very good English, but I think the other players in the team are very sympathetic and I think the integration feels good."

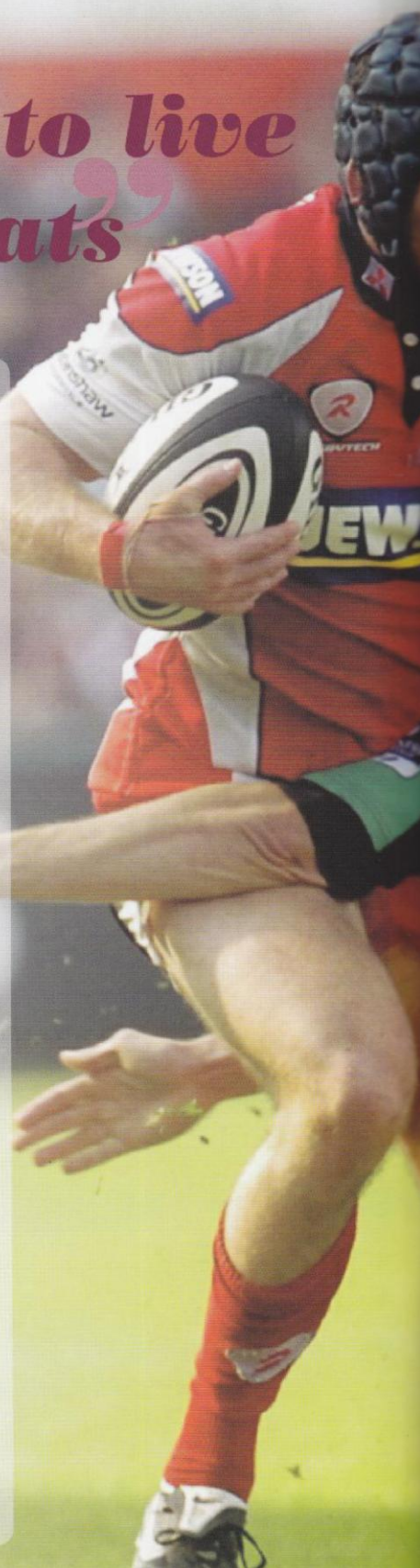
"Philippe Saint-Andre is very well known in France and Gloucester is now very well known too, a lot of English came to France - this year some French came to England and I think it's a good evolution for rugby."

Objective, capacity, sympathetic, integration and evolution - not bad for a first interview when he was struggling with the lingo, but then interviewing Ollie has never been mundane and let's not forget he gave the Shed another reason to boo Rob Andrew!

I concluded that first piece by saying "the names may be different and some not so easy to remember - let alone pronounce - but if Gloucester can carry on improving the way they have under Philippe Saint-Andre, then the Shed may whisper them in the breath as the likes of Burton and Teague."

I reckon Ollie and Jake stepped up to that mark.

Paul Furley





“Cheese Power”

by Andy Hazell

I call it cheese power – French naturally.

It always makes me chuckle, every summer, when the new Academy boys pitch up for their senior squad training programme and see Zed chugging round Hartpury with several pieces of farming equipment under each arm!

He might not be the quickest these days (was he ever?) but there is still no-one stronger in the Gloucester squad when it comes to shifting tractor tyres or pulling weights.

Zed has a phenomenal natural strength and while the rest of us are quite happy simply to get through the latest insane training idea, Zed will be lapping people with two pieces of rubber on his back you usually see on a Massey Ferguson.

The Academy boys take one look and say: ‘how does he do that?’ It’s easy I tell them, ‘it’s the cheese’!

But I will never forget seeing this awesome display of natural strength when I was still fairly new to the Gloucester side. You will know the story only too well – Gloucester versus Wasps under lights at Kingsholm on a Friday night – and a try that has gone down in Kingsholm folklore.

The vivid memory I have of that try is him carrying Phil Greening over the line hanging off his back closely followed by half of the Wasps pack. We realised then we had a pretty special player on our hands – not only could he carry ball he was a remarkable scrummager, loved the confrontation and fitted right into the mould of a traditional Gloucester forward.

In those early days he was also a pretty prolific swearer and taught an innocent boy like me a few choice French phrases that came in handy on a few occasions down the years. There was a time when I thought Zed and Patrice Collazo only knew a handful of English words – and most ended in off!

But he also has a cultural side and knows a thing or two about fine food and wine – which is just as well considering he owns his own restaurant. Before the start of the season he took us all out for lunch where, thanks to Zed’s enthusiasm, Les tucked into the mushrooms and got through an entire plateful.

Les can be a bit fussy about his food but couldn’t do a great deal when Zed informed him his mushrooms were in fact snails! Zed is a great man to have about and Gloucester have been very fortunate to him down the years.

May I wish him all the best for his testimonial year – it’s only going to get busier!

Hazy

“Try not to be late Zed – it isn’t pretty”

by Mefin Davies

He might not have realised it at the time but Olivier Azam has played an important part in my career.

If Zed had not suffered a shoulder injury that required surgery, it is doubtful I would have ever joined Gloucester. They were short of hookers and I was looking for a club, it was an opportunity that helped re-spark my career at one of the biggest clubs in Europe and for that I am very thankful.

In some ways it gave Gloucester the best of both worlds. Zed is a very big man and blessed with all the attributes you would expect – he is powerful, able to dominate the set-piece and offer qualities in areas of the game I couldn't and vice-versa.

We both understood why the other was picked for certain games and we respected our individual abilities and learnt a lot from one another. I doubt there has ever been two players in the same position at the same club who have been so different physically! But it worked for us and it was fantastic to be part of the same squad as Zed.

He might have been a fantastic hooker but there were other aspects to Zed's personality which were not always up to scratch – when he was late, he was usually very late!

We were due to travel to Portugal for a pre-season training camp. It meant a very early start at Kingsholm to get the bus, except Zed was nowhere to be seen. We waited – and we waited but nothing.

There was nothing else to do except drive to his house to try and find him. When we got there we found he had overslept and were confronted by a very big Frenchman running around in his boxer shorts looking for a pair of shorts in the back of his jeep. It was an odd sight to see such a big man so early in the morning, ferreting about like Big Foot, let me tell you!

But if you thought he had learnt his lesson then you would be wrong. The forwards had an early session on the first day of the camp – we were all ready and waiting and yes, you have guessed it, Zed was late again – and still looking for a pair of shorts!

It was always an experience let me tell you but it was always a pleasure.

Good luck in your testimonial year Zed – just don't be late for your events!

Mefin Davies

“The Gym...Unlikely”

by Richard Cockerill, Head Coach Leicester Tigers

When I first got to know Zed as a player, when he joined me at Montferrand in 2004, he gave the impression that he saw the gym sessions as more of a social event than a fundamental part of his training. He traded more on his natural ability, but his approach certainly doesn't take away from the fact that he's a very good player and he's a really good bloke too.

Zed came to Montferrand at the end of my first year there – I'm not sure what that says about how I was playing for them at the time – and we had to compete for the hooker's shirt. But we got on well and he did help me a lot there before we both came back over to England.

He's a good professional in lots of ways, he's a very tough player to play against and he's been capped in some good French front rows, though Zed probably admits he could have won even more caps.

With his bars in Clermont and his restaurant in Cheltenham, Zed is obviously a very handy guy to know and I'm looking forward to him celebrating his testimonial with an event there for all his former team-mates!

All the best Zed on your testimonial year, enjoy it.

Richard Cockerill

“Good on ya Babs!”

by Mark Regan

Mark Regan on Olivier Azam, by Steve Cotton, Western Daily Press

There may be a world of a difference between Tarbes and Bristol – culturally speaking, at least – but there is little doubt Olivier Azam and Mark Regan were cut from the same hooking cloth.

After arriving at Gloucester in 2000, Azam regularly locked horns with Regan, who was a Bath player at the time, before moving to Leeds and then back to his hometown club.

Their battles were always fierce, with Regan revelling in the role of Kingsholm’s pantomime villain as Azam lapped up the adulation of the adoring Gloucester hordes.

Regan retired from professional rugby at the end of the 2008-09 season, aged 37, while his former sparring partner continues to go strong at 35.

And, perhaps as a result of their engaging duels being behind them, Regan is more than happy to shower the plaudits on one of the toughest opponents he ever faced.

“It was always a challenge to play against Azam – and the Kingsholm factor had a lot to do with it,” said Regan, who now coaches the forwards at Bristol-based National Two South club Clifton.

“It was like a red rag to a bull to me to play at Kingsholm. I loved to rise to the challenge of warming up and playing in front of the Shed – and then having the challenge on the pitch of taking on Azam.

“That made it really special – and it was one of those games I really relished. He never took a backward step and nor did I – and we used to knock 10 bells out of each other. It was always a right Battle Royal but I don’t think either of us came off worse.”

As Regan settles into a watching brief as far as the professional game is concerned, he is saddened that players of Azam’s ilk and character now appear few and far between.

“He is one of a dying breed – an endangered species,” said Regan. “Every club needs a player like him, though: a grafter who can be nasty but does the basics well.

“I wish him all the best and he deserves his testimonial. He also deserves a lot of credit for earning the respect of both his team-mates and his opponents – which is not easy for a player to do when coming over from another country.

“He has really got involved with Gloucester, embraced the club’s culture and ethos and shown passion and enthusiasm. Personally, I loved playing against the bloke – we would have our battles on the pitch and then have a drink off it.

“I really enjoyed taking on tough and uncompromising players – and I always got the impression that he thrives on that, too.

“He thoroughly deserves the credit he has got, because of the efforts he has put in. He is an old warrior and they don’t make them like that any more – which is a pity.”

Regan being Regan, though, he was eager to keep his praise of Azam in check, signing off with: “Don’t big him up too much, mind!”

Mark Regan



“A pleasure to have him in our shire”

by Chris White

It's a little bit odd considering we are both Cheltonians but I probably got to know Olivier best in Melbourne many years ago – I was nice to see a friendly face!

France were playing Australia and Olivier was part of the French side that day but his real impact has been with Gloucester in the Premiership.

He has been one of the most competitive forces in the game for 10 years now which is a remarkable achievement for a man whose playing position means he is always always at the sharp end of the action.

It is well known I don't referee Gloucester much these days (if at all!) so the closest I get to Kingsholm is as fourth official. But it has probably allowed me to get to know Olivier even better over the years when he comes to sit next to me in the sinbin!

He is always very polite – particularly when he is asking how long he has got until he goes back on!

What he has achieved in the game has been fantastic. He is a role model on and off the field, has settled in our county and made his home and his family here – for that we should be thankful because he brings so much to everything he is involved in.

Olivier stands out, not just as a rugby player but for also what he has achieved off the pitch. It has been a pleasure to have him in our shire.

Salut Zed, have a great testimonial year.

Chris

“A heart of gold and a very sharp brain”

by Patrick Wolff

I am proud to say I have known Olivier Azam for a long time and he remains one of my best friends. That I can be counted as one of his best mates is a great pleasure and an honour to me. Some people may be surprised to learn that under those steel-capped eyes and grumpy look is a man with a heart of gold and a very sharp brain, not just for rugby but also for life – and how can I forget that very big appetite!

Ever since Olivier was born he was destined to be a rugby man. Everyone at Montferrand, from the coaches, players, support staff and the fans all knew he had an exceptional gift to play rugby at the level he does. He is a very special player.

It says everything you need to know about Zed that he has the knowledge and ability to make his career in England. English rugby understands him and Olivier understand the dynamics of the game there and that is what has made him such a special player – England have realised the benefits of him which is why he has had 10 years at Gloucester.

For me, he is like other French sportsmen who have character, a strong mind and a personality – people like Eric Cantona and Sebastian Chabal – who have given their hearts and soul to playing sport in England and who have excelled on the other side of the Channel.

It is strange that Olivier has been accepted, honoured and loved by the Roast Beefs rather than at home but that does not surprise me because he has such a depth of feeling for his rugby that means he is able to make his home anywhere.

But he still has a lot of friends in France who are delighted he has this honour at Gloucester because it sums him up so well.

Good luck for your year Olivier – you deserve it.

Patrick



“French attitude, Gloucester mentality”

by Andy Deacon

What do you get if you combine the attitude of a French rugby player with the mentality of a Gloucester front row forward?

Let me tell you. Olivier Azam or 'Zed' as he is known is the resulting volatile cocktail of aggression, determination, sheer willingness to win with a complete and total love of the scrummage.

Zed was one of the first arrivals during Philippe Saint-Andre's 'French Revolution' and for a long-time Gloucester player and a member of the front row union like myself, plenty of these signings were viewed with a fair amount of scepticism. To put it mildly, we didn't think they were all as good as some people made out.

But Olivier changed that perspective. He understood the club, what it means deep down to the people of the city and appreciated it from a Gloucester perspective. He loved the shirt and as a result he was loved for it on the field. There is no doubt that when you mention guys like Phil Vickery, Zed's name is up there alongside them in Gloucester's recent history for his level of impact and cult status.

He earned our respect through his attitude and effort. He might not have spent hours in the gym, but he already had this huge man strength, big hands and shoulders which made scrummaging with him one of life's perverse pleasures.

Zed is a bear of a man who would go to almost any length on the field to dominate an opponent. He didn't like the people he played against – which also goes down well in this neck of the woods on the pitch – but away from the game he is a perfect gentleman.

It was a pleasure to share so many scrums with you Zed – I have been telling people it was me who made you look good all those years!

Have a great Testimonial year Zed. See you for a beer soon.

Deacs

“It might not be music but Zed is a great piano player”

by Philippe Saint-Andre

Professional rugby may have changed beyond all recognition over the last decade but as a self-confessed admirer of the game's 'piano pushers' it gives me great pleasure to congratulate Olivier Azam on his testimonial year at Gloucester.

Zed is one of a dying breed – a player still going strong who I played with! This says a lot (about my age mainly) but also about a fantastic man and a great rugby player – one of the very best piano pushers I have ever worked with.

I first brought him to Gloucester about 10 years ago and his very aggressive approach, sheer love of the scrum and strong ball carrying guaranteed him immediate hero status in the Shed. They like their tough men in Gloucester and he fitted in perfectly.

Zed combined that typical French attitude and aggression with a deep understanding of what it means to play for the club and that is why he has been so successful. I have no doubt he will make a great coach one day because he is a deep thinker about the game.

But at the moment he is happy to be a true man of Gloucester. He loves the club and the city, has built his family there and is happy. I have always said that when you go into the jungle you need guys like Zed behind you for the experience, for the attitude and for the willingness to compete.

The one regret is that he did not get more recognition with the French team. Arguably, his best years were in Gloucester and the French coach only selected men based in France – a great shame for such a good player.

My admiration and respect for Zed as a rugby player and a man runs deep, so deep in fact I tried to sign him when at Sale and then again at Toulon. But this piano player has his heart in Gloucester and for that people should be very happy.

Good luck in your testimonial year Zed, you deserve it.

Philippe Saint-Andre

