

“Wonderful service, wonderful attitude”

by Stephen Jones, *Sunday Times Rugby Correspondent*

The Premiership in England has attracted a galaxy of overseas players since the advent of the professional era, and there have been success stories, partial success stories and also, frankly, wasted money.

There have been overseas players who have helped their clubs to trophies and greatness, there have been brilliant players who never quite produced their best form, perhaps because of homesickness, the intensity of the Premiership and also because of arrogance, believing all they had to do was turn up. They have definitely been a large number of players who arrived set only on feathering their own nests and who have been disastrous.

There is a tiny group who have been provided such wonderful service to their clubs that they will always be seen in the history of their adopted institutions as ranking alongside any local hero. Indeed, it is something of a surprise when investigating the birthplace of Olivier Azam that he does not hail from Longlevens or Coney Hill, does not speak with a broad West Country accent and does not serve elvers in his restaurant in Cheltenham.

When Azam first arrived at Gloucester there was a certain amount of unease because at the time, by no means all the overseas signings had worked out well. But there is no question that when he finally retires from playing he will be seen as one of the all-time great Gloucester players, one of the best-loved players the Shed has ever acclaimed. Imagine a Frenchman going down in history alongside Mike Burton. Heart and soul and body have been devoted to the cherry cause, since his arrival in 2000 and apart from one single-season spell with Montferrand he has been outstanding every year since.

The power of his ball-carrying and scrummaging have been his trademarks and so too an uncompromising playing style. So often,

it has been Azam who has taken Gloucester over the advantage line and set them in motion. Last season when Gloucester struggled as they changed emphasis, it was Azam who was always conspicuous, refusing to let the standards drop around him.

Perhaps he has not been a dead-eye every week with his line-out throwing but he has probably been the hooker of the decade in the Premiership, and his hard attitudes have extended the legends of Gloucester forward play and Fortress Kingsholm. Every team needs an enforcer, or a papa as the French call them.

There have been many highlights - many recall one run against Wasps when he covered what seems to be half the pitch with several Wasps tacklers hanging on to him and scored an incredible try. It is also preposterous that he has won so few French caps and perhaps has been out of sight, out of mind, too concerned with doing his mighty best for Gloucester while others might have conserved energy or even exaggerated injury in order to please their national coaches. A return of a mere 10 caps, the last won as long ago as 2002, makes no sense.

How fantastic if Gloucester could win one major trophy before he steps down, and if they do it will be the best possible tribute to him. Clearly, he realised that he was not joining any old club or signing any old contract. Gloucester is a demanding arena, but once those demands are met by players, they are taken to the heart of the grand old club.

It has all been a shared experience with that wonderful communion between the followers and the player with Gloucester does so well. In all its history, the jersey has never been worn by so dynamic and volcanic a player.

“A Powerhouse!”

by Nigel Melville

It gives me great pleasure to write a few words to support the testimonial of Olivier Azam, a wonderful player who thrived in the professional era because of his commitment to the amateur principles of the game of rugby - passionate, hardworking, dedicated and more than anything else - loyalty to his club and their fans.

When I arrived at Gloucester, Zed was one of the first players I met, he was walking around the field at Kingsholm with French front row 'partner in crime' Patrice Collazo, I wasn't sure what kind of welcome I would get, but they were warm, friendly and keen to get to work. When I say work, that is how they viewed professional rugby, it was a job, their office was the scrum and how they loved their office!

During our time together, I think I managed to persuade them that there was more to the game than the scrum (they humoured me on that one), in fact there was a time when Zed brought me a piece of paper with some thoughts on patterns of play and ways we could change the game. Few would expect this from a front row warrior like Zed, but he has a far greater understanding and interest in the game than many give him credit.

Of course, there were moments when his Gallic temperament got the better of him, there was a disagreement Zed and Patrice had with Northampton's Robbie Morris. The subsequent disagreement (about 1 minute after the kick-off) resulted in Patrice being yellow carded and sent to the sin-bin. Furious, I asked what the hell was going on - 'we don't like Robbie Morris he replied' why the hell not I demanded 'he wears gloves' came the reply!

There were also some memorable times, winning the Powergen Cup and ending Gloucester's silverware drought at Twickenham, I have a picture at home in Colorado of the Gloucester team standing on the podium with the Powergen Cup, centre stage Zed, a huge smile leading the celebrations.

A wonderful player, dedicated servant of Gloucester Rugby, a powerhouse on the field and a gentlemen off it - what more could I say....

Have an awesome testimonial,

Nigel









“What a man, what a player”

by Raphael Ibanez

I think I should start with exploding a myth about front row forwards and hookers in particular!

Hookers are really clever – honestly. I have known Zed for a long time, first when we were playing in the French students team in the students World Cup in 1996 – yes, we were students! From memory, I was studying colouring in and Olivier was doing jigsaw!

Zed hasn't changed. He was exactly the same at 18 as he is now – I knew he was going to play for the French national team.

He was so strong, so committed, so physical. He was so good in that tournament that he played at loose-head prop because he was so versatile and such an asset to the team.

We are both from the same part of France, near the Pyrenees, where it is strong man country and wild and I am reminded of it every time Zed laughs.


I have this image of a great bear of a man laughing in Gloucester. The brown bear is about to be reintroduced into the wild in the Pyrenees and I think the first one will be Olly!

His career has been immense, his impact on Gloucester huge. I remember after his first game for France he was described as the 'hooker of the next century'. I think that is a fitting description of Zed – figuratively and physically he is the biggest hooker ever to play for France.

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

Raf





“Quite simply, it was easy playing with Zed”

by Phil Vickery

A huge part of my career (quite literally) was being part of the Gloucester front row of: Woodman, Azam, Vickery.

I am very fortunate to play for a club where the values and traditions of the forward pack were not only legendary but remained living and breathing parts of the club's identity, it was an honour to play with some great players.

You had Trev's skills and brilliant footwork, I tried to work as hard as possible and between us was the sheer brute force and physicality of Olivier Azam. When you chuck guys like Andy Deacon and Chris Fortey into the mix it was clear Gloucester had a front row to die for and it was great to be a part of it.

Quite simply, it was easy playing with Zed. I am sure others have said the same but he is such a big, physically imposing man that he made the life of a prop a comparatively easy one.

Zed came to Gloucester at a transitional time for the club and looking back now, 10 years on, it is hard to explain just how different the club became almost overnight. Without warning, there were 10 or 12 French guys running around which was a bit of a shock for a few of us but Olivier was always different.

He didn't speak a word of English but he was always prepared to make an effort when many others didn't – whether that be to learn the language or get to know people and the club. He stood out for that and immediately earned the respect of players who had been at Gloucester a long time.

Of course, get him on the field and that's when he really came alive. It's hard to explain but what marked Zed out as different was that he understood the workings of the club, what it meant to the people who worked all week and then paid their money on a Saturday to come to Kingsholm and what it meant to players who had been together and bonded for a long time.

I have no hesitation in saying that when you combined his physicality and hardness it was difficult to find anyone better than him and it wasn't until he went back to France that the club probably realised just how good he was.

I have been fortunate enough to experience plenty of great days in my career but the ones alongside Zed will rank alongside any. He wasn't dirty at all but has this willingness to win that means he is ultra-competitive in everything he does. That is what shines through and what I have huge respect for.

Even though I am not at Gloucester these days or whenever I meet up with French players after an England game, everyone talks very highly of Zed. He is one of those guys who gets some special attention in the build up to games because he commands that sort of respect and I think that is one of the greatest compliments you can pay to him.

It was a pleasure to be part of that Gloucester front row with you Zed and I hope you have a great testimonial season – you fully deserve it.

All the best,

Vickers



“It’s all been a wind up- I think”

by Peter Buxton

It will be pretty obvious this brochure will be littered with words like ‘confrontational’ and ‘physical’ and I can tell you from experience these are more than accurate ways to describe Olivier Azam.

I have had the pleasure of playing with Zed for a number of years now and have got to know him well. There is no doubt he is everything as described above – and a little bit more.

To remain competitive in the front row for as long as he has certainly takes a remarkable amount of conviction, courage and determination. There is an edge to Zed that marks him down as a very special competitor indeed.

While he must be a nightmare to play against, Zed also presents the odd challenge to a captain – and I can tell you that from experience!

There have been a few times when I have thought ‘hold on, the fuse has been lit here, stand well back’ but Zed has always had this ability to deliver performances that not only drags the best from himself but also seriously winds up the opposition!

If I had a pound for every time I had been at the bottom of a ruck or stuck in a maul and seen that Gallic red mist come down, I would be a very rich man indeed!

I remember once when things were more than just a little bit lively and Zed was at the forefront of the action. I thought it was all about to get a bit messy but in the next break in play, Zed came over and said: ‘Don’t worry, it’s all part of my big plan – I am just winding them up.’

He knew that if he could get under the skin of the opposition, they were likely to make a mistake and we would capitalise as a side and take full advantage. Zed was prepared to make those sacrifices for the good of the team and it takes a pretty special person to be able to do that.

He knows what it means to represent the club, he knows what it means to the players, coaches and supporters. To achieve and understand this as a Frenchman for more than 10 years is a massive achievement. He has instilled in himself all the best traditions of the club and I know it means everything to him to pull on that number two shirt.

It has been a pleasure to have played with you Zed – keep winding them up!

Bucko

“Where’s that wine & cheese?”

by Mike Tindall

If the secret to longevity in professional rugby these days is good wine and cheese, I am obviously doing something wrong!

In an age when every minute detail of your preparation, physical well-being and recovery methods are so strictly monitored, Olivier Azam’s technique of a cheeky glass of vin rouge and a great hunk of creamy cheese is a bit of a throwback – but quite a pleasant one.

When I first joined Gloucester I used to room with Sinbad – probably because he hails from north of Cheltenham and I could understand what he was saying – but it never used to amaze me what he could throw down his neck without putting on an ounce of weight or increasing his body fat.

Chicken sarnies with mayo were his particular favourite and I would watch with envy as he demolished the lot, safe in the knowledge he wouldn’t be joining the notorious ‘fat club’ the following week.

I guess it shows rugby is still each to their own when it comes to finding the recipe for personal success. We are very fortunate to have some fantastic players at the club and none of them have made a bigger impact than Zed.

To not only survive but thrive in Premiership for 10 years takes a very special individual. To do that at Kingsholm as a front row forward is an even more remarkable achievement when you consider the punishment – mental and physical – that Zed has taken down the years.

I can tell you from painful experience that getting bumped around is par for the course but to keep coming back, year after year and still be as competitive, still desperate for success and still looking to improve takes a very special person.

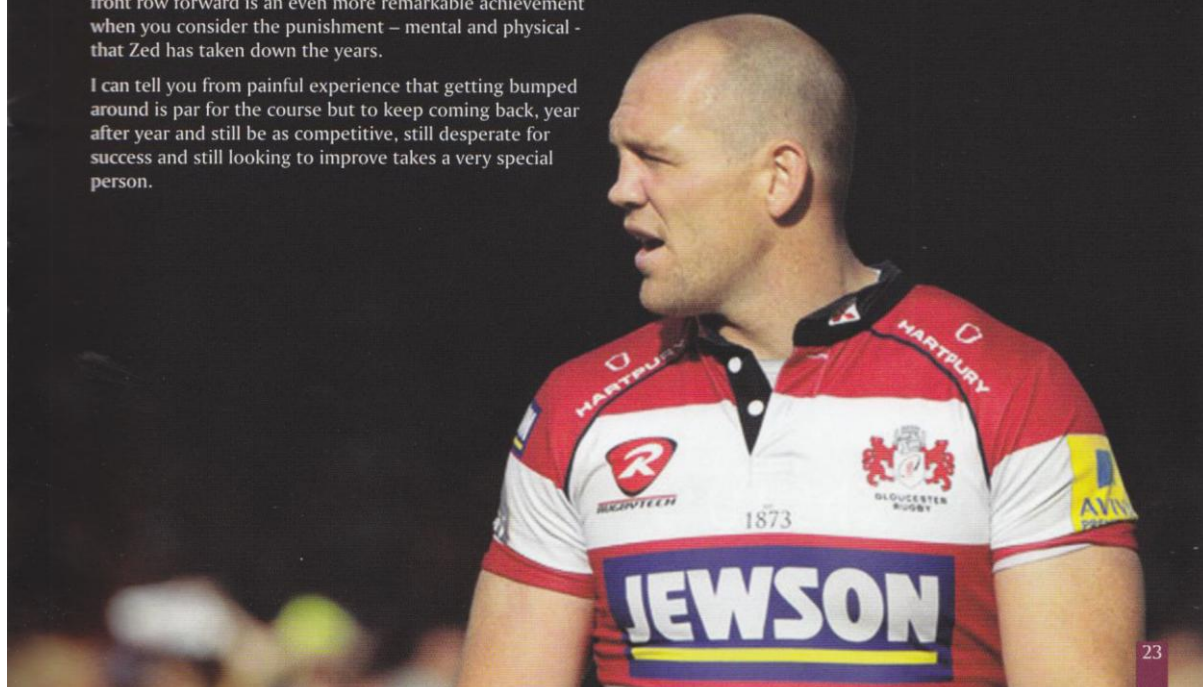
Zed has always been a challenge for all opposition both Internationally and domestically and pound for pound (and there are a few these days!) Zed is still a very serious operator in the Premiership and a bit of a figurehead at Kingsholm. If you ever doubt his credentials all you have to do is buy a ticket in the Shed on a home game, when the familiar cries of Ollie, Ollie, Ollie echo around the stadium and you soon understand how much he is cherished!!

We have a big season coming up and we are all desperate for success. Even though Zed has been here 10 years his passion and desire to win silverware for Gloucester has never diminished and no doubt he will play a very significant part in what we manage to achieve this season.

There are plenty of great events lined up in the coming season so get involved and have a great time. Zed, it’s been a pleasure and I hope your testimonial year is a huge success – now, where’s that wine and cheese?

Cheers,

Tins



“Olivier has been a God-send to Gloucester and its rugby”

by Chris Hewett, Independent

A wonderful thing, Wikipedia. It tells you that the mid-sized French commune of Tarbes, situated deep in the south-west of the country towards the Spanish border, was the birthplace of the writer Theophile Gautier and the concert pianist Cecile Ousset, and that it is twinned with the Rhineland town of Altenkirchen. Yet Wikipedia doesn't know everything, contrary to popular belief. There is no mention of the fact that Philippe Dintrans, widely lauded as the finest hooker in the history of French rugby, is a man of Tarbes, or that Olivier Azam, who might, under different circumstances, have won almost as many caps, hails from the same neck of the woods. Dintrans and Azam, joined at the hip in the capital of hookerdom? Scary. Maybe Tarbes should ditch the German link and twin itself with the Bates Motel instead.

Years ago, when your correspondent first sat down with Olivier for a feature piece, the name of Dintrans cropped up time and again. “With my experience of English rugby, I think I can play a big role for my country,” he said when asked how long he intended to ply his trade at Kingsholm. “But to give myself the best chance, I think I must play in France. And being there would make it easier for me to go home to Tarbes and see my friend Dintrans. Oh yes, we know each other quite well; he sells cars for Renault now. Tarbes is not a big place, and the rugby community is very close. Just like Gloucester.”

Olivier duly returned to his homeland, but was back in the West Country a season later with his international future some way behind him. If he gave the impression of being an unstoppable force during his first stint at Gloucester, the senior hooker in Les Bleus, the long-serving captain Raphael Ibanez, was very definitely an immovable object. There was no way past him, or through him. (For the record, Ibanez was born a few dozen miles to the west of Tarbes in Sagnac-et-Cambran. What is it about that patch of land down there in the Gascony of old?)

Ten caps seems a poor return for a front-row forward of Olivier's talents, for those talents were generously bestowed by the sporting gods. When he first arrived at Kingsholm from Montferrand, lured across the water by Philippe Saint-Andre having played club rugby alongside the great man (scorer of the “try from nowhere” at Twickenham in 1991; architect of the “try from the ends of the earth” in Auckland three years later), he was an outstanding scrummager, a brilliant mauler, a deft ball-handler, the possessor of a majestically explosive temper and pretty damned quick. He is still all those things today, with the possible exception of the last. If five French hookers fell under the same bus tomorrow, Marc Lievremon would be well advised to summon him for the autumn Tests.

Has there been a better overseas signing anywhere in the Premiership, ever? People still talk, rightly, of the Michael Lynagh-Philippe Sella contribution at Saracens in the early days of professionalism, and few would argue with Pat Lam's claim to fame at Northampton or Pat Howard's canonisation at Leicester. But Olivier stands alongside the very best of them, in terms of both loyalty and delivery. It is not simply a question of talent: bags of foreign imports have had skills coming out of their ears, yet have failed to make an impression on the world's most competitive club league. Saracens alone have made many a dud move in the transfer market; come to that, Gloucester themselves have not always struck lucky on the chequebook front. A player needs more than talent to make his way in an alien environment. He needs a combination of soul, spirit and conscience that is far from commonplace.

Olivier brought all this and more to Kingsholm, where the crowd is better equipped than most to recognise it. Andy Hazell, the local boy made good, once discussed this very subject in *The Independent*. “The old values are there every time you run out at Kingsholm,” he said. “The crowd expect a player to give 100 per cent every game, and if they feel they get it, they will always support him, win or lose.” Azam never gave anything less, which is why he is so loved in the Shed, where everything is forgiven except half-heartedness.

For those of us who earn a living watching and writing about this grand old game, Olivier has been a God-send. Not because of the pantomime villain aspect of his rugby persona, although we've had our fair share of chuckles as a result of it, but because the temperature of a contest always increases when he sets foot on the field. Another excerpt from *The Independent* – this time from an interview with the man himself – gives you something of his essence, and explains the esteem in which is held.

“Gloucester are a big scrummaging side, and I love to scrummage. If you don't love the scrum, it is impossible to play rugby as a forward in France. At home, the scrum is more important than the line-out. You scrummage here (he tapped his forehead with the tree-trunk that passes for his index finger) and you scrummage here (he placed a Cotswold-sized huge hand on his heart). They understand this in France, and at Kingsholm too.”

My favourite things

Favourite Food: Tournedos Rossini – a fillet steak with foie gras on the top in a lovely Madeira sauce – one of the nicest things possible to eat.

Favourite Restaurant: Le Manoir – Raymond Blanc's brilliant restaurant near Oxford. The food is obviously fantastic, the atmosphere very relaxed and what made it for me was that I was able to look around the kitchens – very special.

Favourite Drink: I am living in Gloucestershire so it has to be cider! I also love red wine – Cote Rotie is a particular favourite.

Closest friend in rugby: Without question Ed Pearce. He was playing for Gloucester when I arrived and from the moment I went to the first training session only able to say "Hello" and "Yes" in English, he made me feel like one of the lads! Mainly by trying to translate jokes with hand gestures and mime! We formed a close bond, so much so that he followed me back to Clermont Ferrand for one season, and had the most awesome season ever - he was immense! We are still great mates now and he was my best man when I got married a few years ago. I think its because we are both grumpy old men that we get on so well.

If not a rugby player, what would you be: Probably a baker. I have huge respect for this profession and wanted to be one when I was younger.

Favourite School subject: This might come as a shock but Mathematics – I really enjoyed it.

Most memorable game: For me, there are plenty that stand out but the Powergen Cup final against Northampton was pretty special. There are not many times in a career you play in a final and 10 minutes from the end you know you are going to win. What a feeling.

Most difficult opponent: Probably Mark Regan – only because I didn't understand his rather odd banter!

Favourite Holiday destination: Obviously the south of France. It is a beautiful part of the world and combines the mountains and the sea – absolutely perfect.

Motto in life: Everybody wants to go to paradise but nobody wants to die.

My Gloucester Dream Team

I have been fortunate enough to play with some fantastic players, internationals and World Cup winners in my time at Gloucester. Not all can make it into my team unfortunately but as 'coach' I want a combination of commitment and excitement all wrapped with a Gloucester mentality. Here's my selection.



1: Christian Califano. I simply had to have him in my team. Maybe not as his best when at Gloucester but simply a world class prop – he could do everything and won a Test series away in New Zealand. That says it all. Trevor Woodman runs him close but Cali nicks it.

2: Mefin Davies. The best hooker I have seen at Gloucester. I really enjoyed playing with him – a total gentleman on and off the pitch.

3: Phil Vickery. A great player and a great man and easily my captain. He led by example, didn't take a backward step and commanded respect wherever he played.

4: Ian Jones. You always need someone to win the line-out! When I first saw him in the dressing room at Kingsholm I couldn't believe he was an All Black but his work-rate was phenomenal, he read the game like no other and was tough. My sort of second row.

5: Peter Buxton. Maybe a surprise choice given the talent available – but you always need a horse and he would add the power in the scrum to compliment Kamo. Big, powerful and puts the team first.

6: Jake Boer. For a time the best flanker in the Premiership. Fearless, a big heart and a great leader on the pitch. Jake was a great man to have in any team.

7: Has to be Andy Hazell. Gloucester born and bred, cut him open and he will bleed Cherry and White. One of the best flankers in the Premiership over the last 10 years.

8: One of the hardest selections. It could have been the brilliant James Forrester but I have gone for **Junior Parmore**. It is always good to take the field with someone as well respected as JP. May

not have had the ball skills of Jango but a big, honest man who loved the confrontation.

9: Dimitri Yachvili. He was so young when he was at Gloucester that he cycled to training! He was just a pure talent and everything was so natural. He could kick his goals too and that is important.

10: Nicky Robinson. There have been a lot of very good number 10s but Nicky is the most complete. He has a bit more maturity than Ryan Lamb – who is England's answer to Freddie Michalak – and probably a number 9 – so Nicky gets the nod for his all-round game.

11: James Simpson-Daniel. Simple. The best winger I have seen. Sheer quality.

12: Terry Fanolua. As a forward I like my backs to have a bit of go forward. For a long time Tezza was a talisman for the team and a massive crowd favourite. You could always rely on him making ground – and we also need someone to lose at cards!

13: Mike Tindall. An expert in his position. A great defender and reader of the game – tough and strong. With Terry we have a centre combination like fire and water!

14: Philippe Saint Andre. An absolute legend as a coach now, but a world class player too, which is a perfect combination. He 'got' Gloucester the moment he arrived, and played with his heart. He was a grafter and a danger to the opposition close to the line, and his skills and rugby mind was, and still is, immense! Also known as 'Le Goret' – the wild pig, because of his style of play!

15: Thinus Delport. Another very tough decision but Thinus had it all. He was strong, good in the air, could counter-attack and was the complete full-back – the eyes of the team.

