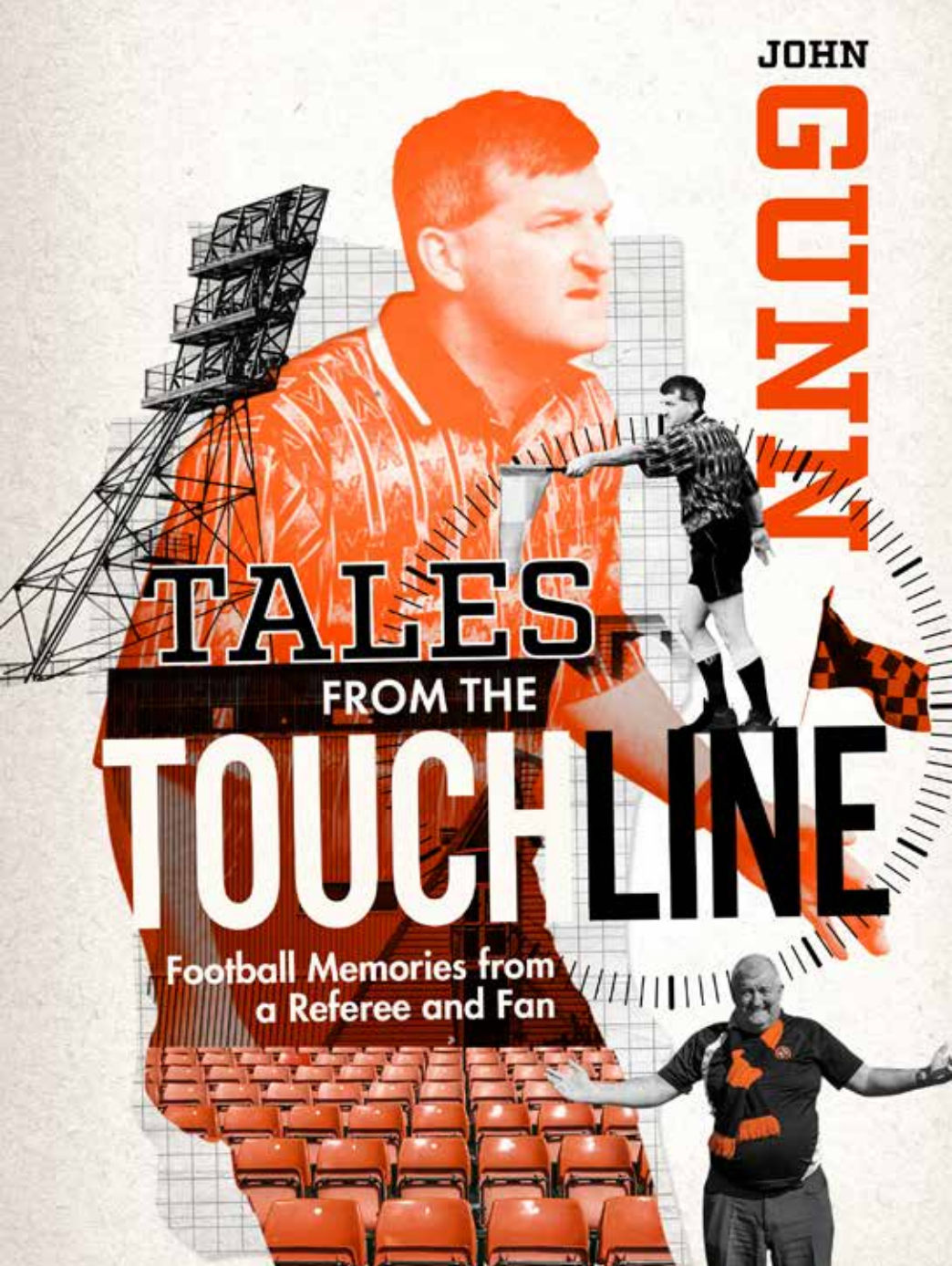


JOHN

GUNN



TALES
FROM THE
TOUCHLINE

Football Memories from
a Referee and Fan

*"A must read for any Scottish football fan,
particularly of a Dundee United persuasion."*

Hamish McAlpine

Ex-Dundee United goalkeeper and legend



JOHN GUNN

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FROM PLAYING TO REFEREEING



MY FOOTBALL playing career was somewhat non-existent, but I do have a couple of memories from my school days where I ended up captaining my team at under-16 level.

As already mentioned, I was a decent full-back and having a bit of pace tried to get forward as much as I could, as overlapping full-backs were the fashion of that period in the early 1970s. But during one match against Stanley Secondary School my gym teacher Dougie McRae decided to play me on the wing because of my speed. That day I scored the only hat-trick I ever achieved, whether it be in a competitive match or a kick-about with my mates in the playground.

Also, it was the perfect threesome would you believe – right foot, left foot and a header. I remember it as if it were yesterday! My partner up front was my best mate Andy Smith, who was not as fast as me and a good bit shorter, but a damn good player. We played really well together, me assisting in his two goals and Andy laying on the passes for the two of mine with my feet. However, it was my header which had an air of comedy about it.

Our goalkeeper Norrie McLellan punted a long ball upfield with Andy on the chase and me alongside him. The wee man managed to get the ball under control as their goalkeeper had come out to narrow the angle and I was totally unmarked, screaming for a pass inside. Andy, also looking for his hat-trick, had other ideas. He continued bearing down on goal but only succeeded in colliding with the keeper. With the ball spinning up in the air towards me, I had the simplest of tasks to nod it between the unguarded posts (no nets in these days!). One happy Gunner and one sheepish-looking Smithy.

The other incident I recall was totally bizarre. We were playing a cup semi-final against St Columba's High School from Perth when Norrie McLellan inexplicably did not turn up. As the final was due to

be played at Muirton Park, Perth, the then home of St Johnstone FC who played in the top division in Scotland, this was a very big game for all the lads and Norrie not turning up was unforgivable.

I was selected to play in goal by Dougie McRae. I had, on occasion, played there before so I was not particularly fazed about doing so again in such an important game.

St Columba's were a very good side, marshalled by an excellent captain in Drew Melley, and they raced into an early three-goal lead. We fought back to go in at the interval 3-2 down. The second half was an end-to-end affair and, with a couple of minutes to go, the score was tied at 6-6 when St Columba's were awarded a penalty.

This was a very nerve-wracking moment for me as the guy taking the penalty was their tricky left-winger named Nicky Mulligan, who only had one arm. Despite his disability the lad had tremendous balance and a deadly left foot. The referee blew his whistle and up Mulligan stepped to side-foot the ball well to my right-hand side. I went down on one knee as a token gesture as I was never going to reach it, but the ball hit the inside of the post, spun across goal, skimmed my head on the way past, hit the inside of

the other post, came back across, hit my left leg and trickled over the line. That was the final goal in the game and the chance to play at Muirton Park was gone. Absolutely gutted!

When I started out with the *Dundee Evening Telegraph* I was required to work on Saturdays, so that put paid to any designs I may have had about playing at any decent level, although I did play a few games in a Sunday juvenile league.

One game stands out in particular as I was getting an absolute roasting from a left-winger called Jimmy Robertson, who played for Newburgh Juniors. The referee that day was a great guy called Willie Doig, who had the knack of talking to the players and getting the best out of them. Jimmy was far too quick and skilful for me and I took him down a few times before being called over by Willie, who said, 'Aye laddie, enjoying your game today?' I replied, 'No I bloody well wasn't,' due to wee Jimmy turning me inside out. 'Well, just a wee word of warning, any more fouls and you will find your name going into my book.' Fair enough, I thought.

In the second half and, after another couple of fouls, Willie, quite rightly, shouted me across to give me a caution. 'Right, laddie,' he said, 'you really are

going to have to watch yourself now. Maybe you should have a word with your bench to see if it is worth your while continuing.' One foul on Jimmy later and I was quickly substituted for my own good.

I glanced across to Willie, who was smiling and winked at me with a thumbs-up sign as he trotted back up the field. The lesson I took from that game was that Willie Doig knew Jimmy Robertson had me on toast that day, but he also knew that I wasn't a dirty player, just not good enough to stop him by fair means on the day. He didn't want to send me off and was quite happy to see me substituted before he really had to dismiss me.

By this time, I realised that perhaps my playing days should come to an end fairly quickly.

* * *

I moved to Elgin from Dundee in 1979 and, as it was a local weekly newspaper group I was employed by, I did not work on Saturdays. This was a bit of a culture shock to me as I was now able to go and watch football again. If Elgin City, the local Highland League team at that time, were at home I would invariably go to watch them as they had quite a good side. If they were away I would go and have a look at one of the three

local junior sides – Bishopmill United, New Elgin or Caberfeidh, who played on the pitch next to my house.

One July day that year I happened to pick up a bit of copy for the newspaper I worked with, *The Northern Scot*, which needed to be typeset, now my occupation. It was a piece from the local SFA Referees' Association looking for new recruits to come on a 13-week course with a view to becoming a qualified referee at the end of it.

As it happened my uncle, Ali Gunn, had been a referee in the Tayside Amateur FA for many years and I also knew Grade 1 official Bob Valentine very well, having worked alongside him in Dundee. I thought to myself, 'I would love to have a crack at this. There is nowhere for you to play up here and you're not very good anyway!' So, I applied for a place on the course with the then secretary, David Simpson, and the rest, as they say, is history.

I was invited by David to attend training sessions in August before the course started in September and was introduced to my new colleagues including Sandy Roy, Robbie Harrold, George Newlands, Bob Stuart, Gordon Logan, Robbie Russell, Ali MacDonald, Sandy Smith, Robbie Ness and Stuart Logan among quite a few others. The group at that time was the SFA

North of Scotland Referees' Association which covered an area from Wick in the north, Fort William in the west to Banff in the east. Far too big a geographical area to function properly, I thought, and this was to change within the next couple of years.

The course was run by Robbie Harrold and I found it very interesting indeed as there were quite a few little technical points within the 17 Laws of the Game which I thought I knew all about but quite obviously did not. The two-hour exam, which required an 80 per cent pass mark, took place a couple of weeks before Christmas and I found out in January that I had passed with flying colours.

I continued to referee schools' football, which I had started doing the previous September, and officiated as a linesman at various youth levels in cup semi-finals and finals. In early March I was informed that I would be getting a few games as a linesman at some end of the season Highland League fixtures. My first match was Nairn County versus Forres Mechanics where the home side ran out 2-1 winners. This was the beginning of a nice wee journey.

During that summer I was cutting my teeth in the local amateur and welfare leagues – Elgin & District, Buckie & District and Speyside – and in August at the

beginning of the 1980/81 Highland League season I was to become a regular linesman at its matches.

One highlight from the Elgin & District Amateur League involved making a decision which would have been frowned upon by any referee supervisor had they been present. There were two pitches used by the league in Elgin, lying between the housing estates of Bishopmill and South Lesmurdie, which were situated in a very large area of grassland. There was a little guy who played for Elgin Cosmos whose first name I can only remember as being 'Alfie'. He was a cocky little character and not too bad a player. I had previously given him a yellow card in a game where he was about to take the kick-off after the half-time break while smoking the last draw of his cigarette!

On this occasion I had awarded a free kick against him for tripping an opponent, then he deliberately booted the ball as far as he could away from the pitch. Normally I would have cautioned him immediately, but I had another form of punishment to administer. I called him over and let him have a look at the yellow card in my hand and said, 'Take your pick son, either you go and get the ball or I give you a card.' Alfie immediately retorted, 'You wouldn't dare!' as he looked across to his manager, who was having a good laugh

about the situation on the touchline, for some sort of guidance. Our eyes then met again and as I stared him out, very slowly lifting my card to mete out his 'proper' punishment, he started to sprint to retrieve the ball. Card back in pocket, job done and no more bother from Alfie that Sunday afternoon!

I had been informed by some of my more experienced colleagues that I had been progressing quite well as a referee and that if I continued to improve then I could go far in the game. I hadn't really thought about promotion through the ranks as I had only taken up refereeing to be involved in football on a regular basis. But then I started to listen more intently to the conversations at training among the guys on the SFA Senior List and heard their tales of trips to Pittodrie, Tannadice, East End Park, Tynecastle and the like and decided that I would like a piece of that action as well.

I was thoroughly enjoying the start to my refereeing career and in the main was quite pleased with the majority of my performances when one Tuesday night around October time I was approached after training by Robbie Harrold and Sandy Roy. My immediate thought was, 'What have I done?' but big Sandy soon put my mind at rest. He informed me that there was a shortage of referees at junior level and it was thought

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by Robbie and himself, among others, that I was good enough to take that step up, but they wanted to know how I felt about it. Under normal circumstances I would not even have been considered for promotion until the start of the next season at the very earliest but, as these two experienced campaigners had faith in my ability and I now had the burning desire to move up through the ranks, I decided to give it a go. It was a decision I never regretted.