



Mike Donovan

DAVE
MACKAY

The
Authorised
Biography

Football's
Braveheart

Forewords by Derek Mackay and Denis Law

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Contents

Foreword by Derek Mackay	9
Foreword by Denis Law	13
Prologue	17
1. 'Miracle Man'	21
PART ONE: BEGINNINGS	
2. Family and friendship	31
3. These boots are made for football.	42
4. 'A wee guy who was a bit special'	53
5. Rising Newtongrange star	63
6. 'Hard but fair'	72
PART TWO: HEART OF MIDLOTHIAN	
7. 'Superman' in maroon	83
8. Golden years	95
9. Living for the weekend.	106
10. Auld Reekie 'blew its dignified top'	117
11. A dream come true	127
12. World Cup	143
PART THREE: TOTTENHAM HOTSPUR	
13. 'How would you like to live in London?'	159
14. 'Transformed everything'	171
15. 'The main man'	180
16. Esprit de corps	190
17. The Double completed.	201
18. Glade all over	211
19. In his element	219
20. 'My dad was always for the club, never himself'	229
21. Broken legs, broken hearts	239
22. The second coming	250
23. Fairytales can come true	258
24. 'A born leader'	268
PART FOUR: DERBY COUNTY	
25. Brian Clough	283
26. 'Exceptional player, exceptional human being'	298

PART FIVE: MANAGEMENT

27. Becoming a boss	311
28. Sowing seeds for Forest growth.	319
29. 'No other manager could have done it'	325
30. The real deal.	334
31. Ken's Roller	346
32. The cradle of civilisation	357
33. Dubai to Doncaster	367
34. 'A strong character'	374
35. Pioneer's final frontiers	382

PART SIX: POST-CAREER

36. 'What more can a man ask?'	391
37. 'Having a right good laugh'	400
38. 'Ninian Cassidy, ex-Hearts and Tottenham'	408
39. Legend	416
40. The Banner Man	422
41. 'My best friend'	430
42. 'I was blessed'	438
43. Legacy	448

Postscript.	456
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APPENDICES

1. Eulogy	458
2. Historians.	461
3. Fans	471
4. Poets.	482
5. Quite interesting	486
6. Honours and career record	488

Acknowledgements	494
----------------------------	-----

Credits	497
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Bibliography	502
------------------------	-----

Index	507
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‘Miracle Man’

THE SOUND of a chilling crack filled the air. Les Allen heard it. So did the rest of Dave Mackay’s Tottenham Hotspur team-mates.

It reached the ears of the media and fans while eerily echoing around the sparsely populated White Hart Lane terraces and stands.

Aural confirmation that the left leg of Tottenham Hotspur’s main man on the field, the team’s heartbeat in the club’s greatest era, had been broken for a second time.

Ten months earlier, another explosive, sickening noise reverberated around Manchester United’s Old Trafford stadium housing close to 50,000 spectators to herald a similar outcome.

A ground either near-empty or near-packed, it made not a jot of difference.

Disaster had struck twice. It seemed to reflect for Mackay a line from the William Bell and Booker T. Jones blues track ‘Born Under A Bad Sign’, ‘If it wasn’t for bad luck I wouldn’t have no luck at all.’

Eyewitness Ken Jones, who passed in 2019, was a cousin to Spurs’ star winger Cliff, a team-mate of Mackay as manager Bill Nicholson’s Lilywhites became the first winners of the Football League and FA Cup Double in the 20th century three years before.

Ken wrote in the *Daily Mirror*, ‘It was like watching a re-run of a horror movie.’

The only person present who was convinced of the diagnosis initially was Mackay himself, who stamped his left foot into the turf to determine the verdict before accepting it.

It had been feared that Mackay's career might have been over following the first leg break. Would the second be a step too far even for the player perceived as the indestructible Iron Man?

It was Mackay's competitive comeback following a battle against the odds after the tibia and fibula bones in his left leg had been smashed in an horrific, violent collision with Manchester United's Noel Cantwell at the Theatre of Dreams the previous December as Spurs fell at the first in their defence of the European Cup Winners' Cup.

And the left-half stepped on to White Hart Lane's green sward champing at the bit to secure a return to the first team.

It followed a series of friendlies playing at inside-forward – 'to feel my way around' – which began against a Glasgow Select at Hampden Park 38 days earlier.

It was a dry, warm and sunny afternoon at the Lane on Saturday, 12 September 1964, and about 2.45pm. Mackay, in the dressing room, was pulling on the number six shirt for the first time in a competitive encounter since that fateful night in Manchester as Tottenham's reserves prepared to take on Shrewsbury Town in the Football Combination.

Spectators were flicking through the match programme, reading that the first of two dances would be staged by Mecca at the Lyceum ballroom in the Strand in London's West End to raise money for the John White Fund, which had been set up to benefit the family of the recently deceased member the 1960/61 glory team.

Mackay was named in the thin publication alongside goalkeeper Bill Brown, who was, with Allen, another Double-winning colleague, in the Spurs team line-up laid out in a 2-3-5 formation. As were debutants Roger Hoy (right-back), Steve Pitt (right-wing) and Neil Johnson (inside-right), plus Alan Dennis (left-back), Roy Low (right-half), Laurie Brown (centre-half), Derek Possee (left-wing) and John Sainty (centre-forward).

Sainty, a prolific goalscorer and reserve regular, said, 'There were a lot of good players around me. It made my job easy. It was a pleasure to play with these people. They made me look a better player than I was. It was a pretty useful reserve team. Those who had been in the first team, like Bill [who shared first-team duties with Pat Jennings that season], Laurie, a stopper who did the job, and Les Allen who was a great striker and used to give me a lift in from Essex.

‘Alan I think was captain of the London Boys and Roy had a few tricks. Roger turned into a centre-half, Neil could run and Steve was a ginger-haired lad who could play when he got the ball and Derek on the other wing was as light and as quick as lightning.

‘But the fact I was lining up with Dave Mackay was a major, major highlight for me. He was my hero. He could do anything as a footballer. I idolised him, so much so that I travelled up to Scotland on my own to attend his funeral.’

Tottenham had once been covered in woods in which Henry VIII was understood to have hunted while visiting a friend based on the High Road, when it was known as ‘the highway’. But Spurs’ home ground was in the middle of a setting now far from bucolic, more a man-made concrete and brick jungle. The nearest to what passed for rural England was a mile or two up the road in Epping Forest, believed to be the base camp of an uprising against the conquering Romans led by Boudica (aka Boadicea), the queen of a Celt tribe, another fearless British folk hero knocking about around 2,000 years before Mackay (pertinently, the royal’s battle was in either 60 or 61 AD).

Sainty estimated the crowd was 3,000 to 3,500 in a stadium with a capacity about 20 times greater, attracted by thoughts of a relaxed afternoon of football-watching bathed in sunshine rather than experiencing the blood-and-thunder of the first team’s derby against West Ham United six miles away at the Boleyn Ground. And, of course, the return of Mackay.

But any thoughts of having gentle fun in the sun were dispelled the instant those present had to listen to that sudden sharp sound of broken bone.

The moment came after 20 minutes, during which Mackay had displayed proof that he could be just *this* game away from a first-team return.

Ken Jones wrote, ‘He looked fitter and faster. He was looking for work and finding it. He didn’t shirk a tackle and his passes were beginning to have the old look of authority and precision.’

The fateful incident beneath the blue skies is clouded in contradiction.

It was reported that Mackay had moved into an attacking position on the edge of the Shrews’ penalty area, anticipating a ball from the right, as visiting defender Peter Dolby came in to challenge. He shaped his body

ready to pass the ball back before it whirled out of control as he clung on to his left leg.

Mackay said, 'I was holding up well when, when I stood like a stork on my left leg and played the ball with my right, the man came down on the back of my left leg and broke it again.'

Team-mate Allen, also on the way back from injury, saw it from close quarters.

The striker had finished second top scorer behind Bobby Smith in the historic Double campaign. Like son Clive, who donned a Lilywhite shirt two decades down the line, he had what the club's official website described as a 'natural eye for goal'.

Allen, living quietly in retirement with wife Pat in Essex, revealed he had 'one or two things I'm trying to get over' physically, but his mental marbles remained intact as he recalled the incident close to six decades after it happened.

Allen, who netted all four of Spurs' goals in a 4-1 win, said, 'I was about ten to 15 yards away from Dave when his leg went. I knew straight away that he'd done it again.'

'It was frightening to hear it. You hear of people breaking their legs and you do hear of people hearing the cracking noise. When it happened we were more than aware that Dave had done it again.'

Shrews centre-half Dolby, en route to sealing a place in the hall of fame of his only league club, felt he might not have 'even tackled' Mackay and claimed the stricken Spurs player told him, 'It is not your fault.'

Dolby said to the national press on the day, 'He [Mackay] called for the ball, then rushed past me lunging out his leg. The next thing I know he is on the ground. I don't think I even tackled him. Dave shook his head and murmured, "I think it has gone again." He rolled down his socks and I could see he had broken his leg. I patted his shoulder and said, "Sorry, Dave." He looked up with tears in his eyes and said, "It can't be helped. It is not your fault. I can move my toes but not the rest of my leg."'

Mackay's mantra in the aftermath might have appeared conciliatory. But he reflected in his autobiography that Dolby had inflicted a 'diabolical' challenge on him, adding, 'I could not believe it. My first game back and crack! Utter bloody despair ... this man did not get booked, let alone sent off.'

Referee Peter Songhurst crouched beside Mackay and called for the trainer – understood to be Jack Coxford – and a stretcher. The trainer scampered on to inform that the leg was broken. That is when Mackay, despite the pain, tested the diagnosis by standing to stomp his left foot into the turf. Allen said, ‘That’s Dave all over. That was one of the things he would do. He was pretty fearless of pain.’

Mackay only recognised the reality as his cracked bone poked through his ‘bloodied’ sock. Even then he rejected the invitation of the four members of St John’s Ambulance to hop aboard the stretcher they had carried out, determined to walk off, ideally without limping so as not to show weakness in front of the opposition, before finally accepting that would not be possible. Allen said, ‘I wouldn’t have been surprised had he walked off.’

A funereal atmosphere descended on the crowd.

Four male figures, each of a different generation, stood squeezed together on the thinly inhabited terrace, pressed against the players’ tunnel wall where it met the metal ring-topped barrier, which stretched the length of the West Stand and separated the supporters from the pitch and surrounding area. A grey-haired senior citizen, a bespectacled middle-aged guy in a white shirt, a young, dark-haired adult in short sleeves with his left hand over his mouth and a diminutive child peeking over his left shoulder; each generation wore the same haunted expression, a mixture of shock, disbelief and concern. Less than a yard in front of them Dave Mackay lay flat on the stretcher carried by members of St John’s Ambulance on each of its four corners, his face contorted in a grimace.

Thoughts might have been unspoken but it was clear the fans believed it was the last they would see of the marauding Mackay as a professional footballer. They felt they had borne witness to the end of a career of arguably the greatest Spurs player of them all at the age of 29.

Mackay, it seemed, was more concerned about the negative effect on morale the situation would have on his first XI team-mates taking on the Hammers (and losing 3-2), and manager Bill Nicholson in particular. After all, Spurs had had the triple-axis of their Double-winning team shattered over a nightmare seven months. First had come Mackay’s first leg break in Manchester. Captain and on-field manager Danny Blanchflower retired in June 1964 and genius inside-forward John White was struck by lightning and killed during a round of golf in July.

Mackay told assistant manager Eddie Baily, who had sped down to pitchside from the stands, as he wrote in the *Daily Mirror*, 'Don't tell Billy Nick. I'll play again, don't worry about that.'

The Spurs players revealed to Ken Jones in the *Daily Mirror*, 'He just sat there saying, "It's gone again, it's gone again."'

Isobel Mackay, Dave's wife for six decades, said, 'I wasn't there because our youngest daughter Julie was only a couple of months old but I was floored when I heard the news. After all that he'd been through for it to happen again! I think it was Eddie Baily who phoned me.'

In the immediate fall out, Mackay said to the *Mirror*, 'It's rubbish to say I came back too soon. I'm sure that I would have been challenging for a league place inside a month.'

Nicholson added, 'It's a three-quarter fracture and we don't know yet how bad it really is. When I saw him he was happy and cheerful.'

In the meantime, Chelsea winger Frank Blunstone and Doncaster Rovers striker Alick Jeffrey offered words of advice and encouragement to the stricken wing-half, with both having come back from having their legs broken twice.

Blunstone said, 'I'm writing to Dave tonight. It's not easy to console him, but I hope my experience will help. It's really a mental barrier that stops most people coming back. An ordinary chap can go back to work with a plaster on. But a footballer, who is normally so active, finds it tough sitting around. But you MUST make up your mind to carry on playing come what may. Dave's a fighter – I'm sure he'll be back.'

Donny legend Jeffrey, who made his senior debut for the club aged 15, highlighted the role Mackay's family could play.

The frontman, who had agreed on a switch to Manchester United when suffering the first fracture, said, 'Watch as much football as you can. I know how depressed I felt the second time it happened, but I made myself watch as many games as I could. It's the only way to get the urge again.'

'I also learnt how valuable a family can be at a time like this. Dave has a wife and children and it is easier to get over the shock if they are around to help take your mind off things and share the burden.'

Mackay was hospitalised at the Prince of Wales, just off the High Road in Tottenham, to discover the extent of the treatment required and whether he did indeed have a future in the game.

His spirits were lifted by sackfuls of letters from fans.

And they were boosted further by visits after he returned home from team-mates Terry Dyson and Bobby Smith, with whom, when mobile, he enjoyed nights out at London greyhound tracks.

Dyson said, ‘We used to go round his house and played cards and whatnot.’ But Mackay admitted to team-mate Jimmy Greaves that ‘for a while it looked as if it was curtains’ after the second break.

Yet Dave being Dave – football’s Braveheart – you just knew a second coming from a broken leg would be a forgone conclusion if it was based on willpower, resolve and courage alone. The Scot might have been mortal and suffering physical afflictions, but he NEVER gave in. There would be no exceptions this time.

Isobel Mackay said, ‘David wouldn’t give up. That was the man he was.’

After he eventually came back, it could have proved third time unlucky when fellow Scottish international and Leeds fireball midfielder Billy Bremner – dubbed ‘ten stone of barbed wire’ – kicked him fiercely on his twice-broken leg in the opening game of the following season, which provoked an angry response from Mackay caught famously by photographer Monte Fresco’s lens.

But ‘Miracle Man’ Mackay survived it all to provide a fairytale ending to a personal nightmare by lifting the FA Cup at Wembley in 1967 and gain further success later in his career. Isobel said, ‘Fantastic how he came back twice from broken legs to win the cup? Yes, absolutely.’

Mackay even enjoyed sequels of glory beyond as he became a member of an exclusive club of individuals to secure the English title as a player and manager.

As Mackay said to Jimmy Greaves and Norman Giller in *The Sun* in the 1970s, ‘Well it was something of a miracle really when you think of the mess my leg was in when Noel Cantwell did me at Old Trafford.’

Allen never had any doubt he would return. He said, ‘Very few come back from one broken leg let alone two but I didn’t think “that was it” for him, personally. Nothing seemed to hurt him. I never saw him shy away from anything. He was top dog.’

‘If people thought that maybe he was finished as a footballer, it made him even more determined to come back. It must have been gutting to have to come back from a broken leg twice. But he never complained about it. The treatment he had to have to get back, he just got on with

it. He was the hardest man I ever played with or against as well as an exceptional player in my eyes.'

John Sainty was also convinced Mackay would bounce back. He said, 'Knowing Dave, he would have had the best chance in the world. It would have been really serious for him not to return. Anybody else it might be the case that having a cartilage out would finish their career. It was still guaranteed he'd get back even if he had had all his cartilage out and a broken leg.'

Cliff Jones hinted he felt the same. The superstar flanker returned from breaking his leg in an accident with team-mate Peter Baker in pre-season training for the 1958/59 campaign. He said, 'Dave had just got his eye in when he broke his leg again. Like the first it was a bad one. But he had enough desire and commitment to the game to get back. He'd already shown that when he fractured his skull in the European Cup in 1961.'

Terry Dyson said, 'Incredible that Dave's leg got broken again but he was hard, strong. It wasn't long before he was on his crutches and walking again. The fact he always used to come back is one of so many reasons why he was one of our key players.'

Jimmy Robertson, who was to be an FA Cup goalscoring hero for Spurs three years later, said, 'If it was possible to be done Dave would do it. I actually experienced the same thing because I twice had broken legs after leaving Spurs. And I always thought if Dave can do it then I can do it. And I did.'

Pat Jennings said, 'I was fearing the worst when I first heard he'd broken his leg again. That he wasn't going to come back. But he wouldn't give in on it.'

Phil Beal, who was to suffer a broken arm which put him out of the 1967 FA Cup-winning run, said, 'I was coming back on the coach from the first-team game at West Ham when I heard the news. Coming back twice after a leg break shows you what sort of person he was. Talk about tough.'

Joe Kinnear, who went on to work in management with Mackay, broke his leg against Manchester United in 1969 after shining alongside Mackay in the FA Cup Final two years earlier. He said, 'Is breaking a leg the worst injury you can get in football? Yes. It's bad. It's really difficult to come back from. And he came back twice!'