

55

Jeff Holmes



Just Champion

The Stories Behind Rangers'
2020/21 Title Triumph



Foreword by
**CONNOR
GOLDSON**

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Introduction

SCOTTISH PREMIERSHIP champions!

Let's take a moment to soak it up and consider the significance of title number 55.

It would be so easy to take the fork in the road marked 'karma', but let's not become bogged down in retribution; let's focus on the positive, or at least the facts. Celtic didn't lose the title, Rangers won it. Ten in a row only ever existed in the ether region. Fifty-five always trumped the ten.

It's a bit like the movie that's building up to a thrilling climax: there are disappointments before the big bang, but the good guys win in the end.

Or maybe that's being too simplistic. How about making the correlation between the events of Friday, 6 March 2015 and this season's title, because without one, perhaps you don't have the other. Without Dave King, John Gilligan, Paul Murray and the other guys securing such an important victory at the EGM, maybe the club takes the fork in the road marked 'mediocrity'. In fact, there's no maybe about it. Profit before players.

Perhaps it's significant that the decisive win of the season, 3-0 over St Mirren which all but clinched the title, took place six years to the day from that astonishing boardroom success. So it's important to remember that while Steven Gerrard, his backroom team and the players have performed heroics this season, we will forever owe a debt of gratitude to those who worked so fervently behind the scenes to ensure our great club

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was rescued from the clutches of individuals who did not have the best interests of Rangers at heart. The consequences of failure that day are too frightening to contemplate.

So let's now enjoy this one. And speaking as someone who has watched Rangers win many championships, it truly was special. From day one, when we travelled up to an empty Pittodrie and secured the points with a fine goal from Ryan Kent, to mid-January when Celtic were making the headlines for all the wrong reasons in the UAE, to the first weekend in March when we beat St Mirren at Ibrox and our nearest rivals slipped up at Tannadice, it has certainly been quite a season.

The stakes were sky high for both halves of the Old Firm from day one. Apart from the perennial struggle for superiority, both clubs had a clear incentive, and this particular two-way battle had the potential to eclipse everything that had gone before it.

In the Blue corner, a side risen from the ashes of a near-fatal demotion to the fourth tier of Scottish football following catastrophic mismanagement but, like Arnold Schwarzenegger, we were back and challenging for top spot.

In the Green corner, the noisy neighbours; chasing an unprecedented tenth successive title, despite many claiming the ninth should be accompanied by an asterisk.

In the early 18th century US president Benjamin Franklin coined the phrase, 'No pain, no gain,' and it seemed appropriate as we patiently awaited the restocking of our trophy room. Another popular saying is, 'Good things come to those who wait.' And they certainly do. The euphoria which accompanied the winning of the 2020/21 Premiership was nothing short of cacophonous.

When Gerrard landed the big job, there was a sharp intake of breath. He had been in charge of Liverpool's under-18 side, so did he really have the experience to lead such a big club? A one-club player of great note prior to finishing his career in the USA, he had given sterling service to Liverpool and played 114 times for England. He was a born leader, and while it's often

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lazily assumed Rangers supporters demand instant success, the majority had no problem giving Gerrard time to bed in and accumulate the necessary experience. It wasn't too long until we started to think, 'Hey, he might just be the guy to sort this team out.'

There was a ridiculous gap between Celtic and Rangers. Not only in terms of points, but financially the clubs were as wide as the River Clyde. Celtic had taken full advantage of Rangers' years 'downstairs' to supplement their bank balance with a haul of Champions League cash. The shrewd appointment of Brendan Rodgers was another major factor.

Gerrard not only had to steer the Rangers ship in the right direction, but would have to do so while working under the constraints of financial disparity. Full credit to the Rangers board, though, as they backed him as far as they could financially.

The first two years of Gerrard at the helm produced many positive signs. Prior to his appointment, Celtic would have thought nothing of coming to Ibrox and scoring a few, but Gerrard put a stop to that. He began to challenge Celtic's domination of Old Firm games. Up until May 2021 he had presided over 12, and won seven to Celtic's four. The 2019 Scottish League Cup Final was as one-sided as these games get but a clear offside goal gave Celtic a victory they barely deserved. Fine margins, but Gerrard flipped this fixture on its head and made his players believe that second best was for losers. The Scottish Cup fourth round win at Ibrox in April offered another case in point.

Gerrard has also given us back our Continental swagger, while impressive runs in three successive Europa League campaigns helped swell the coffers and keep the treasurer happy.

Not bad for a man who was described by a sports journalist as looking quietly terrified at the size of the job which lay before him.

The careful recruitment of his backroom team has been excellent: hand-picked from his time at Liverpool, as well as

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other areas. They come across as close-knit, with all pulling in the same direction.

The players identified and brought in this season were positive additions to an already-talented squad. Each one makes the group stronger. Equally, Gerrard realised there were those who were surplus to requirements, and we said goodbye to stalwarts such as Andy Halliday, Wes Foderingham and Jason Holt, guys with around 300 appearances between them. But the desire to free up space at the club trumped individual need.

One got the impression that after two years at Ibrox, Gerrard was preparing for the big assault. He knew exactly the strength of his squad and recognised the need for cover in certain positions. There was also a requirement for more creativity so he tied down Ianis Hagi on a permanent deal at the end of May. Fine tuning for a title tilt had started in earnest.

Calvin Bassey joined from Leicester City at the beginning of June. He would provide cover on the left-hand side – and the centre of defence, if required – and, crucially, he was just 20 years old. Allied to 21-year-old Hagi, Gerrard was conspicuously building for the future as well as the present.

Experienced Scotland international goalkeeper Jon McLaughlin arrived to push the evergreen Allan McGregor for the coveted number one jersey. McGregor enjoyed one of the best seasons of his career. A masterstroke by the gaffer.

Matt Polster returned to the USA in the first week of July, and a couple of weeks later, experienced German-born central defender Leon Balogun arrived from Wigan Athletic to bolster an already-strong defensive department. The 32-year-old Nigerian international brought experience of playing in Germany and England.

It was soon time for the pre-season exertions, and for starters, Rangers were invited to take part in a prestigious invitational tournament in Lyon where victory over the host side, as well as Nice in the second game, proved a fine start. This was followed by victories over Motherwell and Coventry

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City at Ibrox. Opponents picked for tactical reasons. Ten goals scored and zero conceded.

With the opening league match at Aberdeen successfully negotiated, the need for extra firepower had supporters speculating as to who might arrive at the club. Alfredo Morelos and Jermain Defoe were our only recognised senior strikers and it was clear that reinforcements were required.

Three days after the single-goal victory at Pittodrie, supporters had their answer. First through the door was Kemar Roofe, a Midlands-born striker with just a single season behind him at Anderlecht after joining the Belgian side for a reported £7m. The 27-year-old had first caught the eye by scoring some sensational goals during a three-year stint at Leeds United. Roofe, who had come through the ranks at WBA, signed a four-year deal, tying him down until his 32nd birthday; a great piece of business.

He was followed later that day by Cedric Itten, a 23-year-old product of the excellent youth setup at perennial Champions League entrants Basel. The talented Swiss international was undoubtedly one for the future, but his incredible will to win would soon endear him to supporters.

The transfer merry-go-round continued with Ross McCrorie (Aberdeen) and Greg Docherty (Hull City) leaving the club, but despite all these comings and goings Rangers continued to perform admirably. From the first seven league games came six wins and a draw with zero in the goals against column. It was a huge statement. McGregor, Goldson, Balogun, Helander and Barišić were playing as though they'd known each other for years.

There was one other player, though, who had started his Ibrox tenure in the latter stages of the lower-league journey; a man who had been installed as captain by Gerrard shortly after his arrival. It was a role he slowly grew into, and while never the loudest on the park this dignified Yorkshireman seemed the perfect fit.

Fittingly, James Tavernier had scored the goal that clinched promotion back to the Premiership in 2016. He has become

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part of the furniture at Ibrox and it's difficult to see him finishing his career at a club other than Rangers. Watching Tav return from injury to lift the Scottish Premiership trophy was one of those moments which tugs at the heartstrings, and who would bet against him doing it again next season?

Gerrard is another we hope might remain at Ibrox for another few years. He has clearly come to love Rangers and the guy who arrived in 2018 to take up his first managerial position has steadily grown into the job. Just as he was a fearless leader on the park, so he has become a similar type of character from the dugout. Not one to shout and scream from the sidelines, he isn't afraid to show his emotions when the time is right.

The manner in which he defended Alfredo Morelos at Livingston, and Glen Kamara on the night he suffered racist abuse against Slavia Prague, was outstanding. A manager who cares for his players. And it has been mirrored in the way his players fought for him throughout the season.

He was criticised for 'over-celebrating' the December 2019 win at Celtic Park, and throughout the season just finished he was on his best behaviour at the side of the pitch. But he's a winner, and winners like to win. His outpouring of emotion when the title was secured was empathetic towards those locked out of stadiums due to COVID. To see the manager celebrate with his players in the manner he did was wonderful. For one day only, he was one of the lads.

The Premier League title is once again the domain of the world's most successful football club, and boy how we enjoyed it. The 4-1 win over Celtic at Ibrox at the beginning of May wasn't just the icing on the cake, it was the strawberries and cream, and it was delicious. Now read on for a unique look at the 2020/21 campaign, seen through the eyes of Rangers supporters from all walks of life.

One final question, though. How did you celebrate?

Jeff Holmes
June, 2021

From the Boardroom

Dave King

*Former Rangers chairman
South Africa*

‘ON THE eve of the EGM, I was still very apprehensive about the outcome. Along with Chris Graham, I had done my homework on the votes and as long as certain key shareholders voted with us, or abstained, we should have succeeded but I was concerned that one of them might change their mind and tip the balance in favour of the incumbent board.

‘The fact that James Easdale and the chairman had already stepped down gave me some confidence that they were anticipating defeat. We had come a long way and I was desperate that we didn’t fail at the final hurdle – too much rested on our success.

‘At that time I was solely focused on regime change.

‘The moment I knew we’d been successful, there was an immediate release of the pent-up anxiety and emotional energy that had been building up in the weeks and days leading up to the EGM. Without success at this EGM we were doomed to be a second-rate club.

‘The supporters were key. Without the boycott of the season tickets and of Sports Direct, the incumbent board would have been in a position to survive for a prolonged period to the point that the damage might have been irreversible. When this season’s title was officially won, I was completely overwhelmed with emotion. It is the benchmark for everything we have done since regime change and marks the official end of the dark days

that we had all endured. We wanted to become the number one club in Scotland again – and we are a clear number one at the moment.

‘I’ve witnessed many successes as a Rangers supporter, but I put this one at number one, because of the starting point. The club was never at a weaker point, across all activities, than we were at regime change. We have come such a long way in a relatively short period.’