

A collage of Queens Park Rangers players and a trophy. At the top, a group of players in white kits celebrate with a trophy. On the right, a player in a white and blue striped kit with 'AirAsia' on the front is in action. In the bottom left, a player in a white and blue striped kit with 'CLASSIC FM' on the front is running. On the right, a large, smiling portrait of a man with long dark hair is shown in a halftone dot pattern.

GREATEST GAMES QUEENS PARK RANGERS



MIKE DONOVAN
FOREWORD BY LES FERDINAND

GREATEST GAMES
QUEEN'S
PARK
RANGERS
MIKE DONOVAN



Foreword

I HAVE a real soft spot for Queens Park Rangers as Rangers is where it all started for me. I was born in Paddington and lived in the Ladbroke Grove area and I used to walk past Loftus Road every day on my way to secondary school.

When I first joined the club there wasn't one local lad playing for them. All our youth team players either came from Wales, Scotland or Ireland. No one from the local community was playing in the youth team and I never thought I was going to be a professional footballer.

I loved playing football, so I went to Viking Sports in Ealing while I was still at school. I stayed there a couple of years and moved on to Southall. I went from the youth team into the reserves and made my way up into the first team. Playing for Southall I had my first taste of Wembley in the FA Vase Final.

Unfortunately we lost! I always remember the manager standing in the middle of the room before we went out saying, 'Perhaps one of you may have the opportunity to play at Wembley again in your careers.' Everyone looked around the room and wondered who it could be. We had some good players but no one ever thought it might be me. Years later I managed to play there with England.

From Southall I went to Hayes. A guy called Bobby Ross, a QPR scout, saw me play there and told Frank Sibley, a loyal servant to the club as a player, manager and coach for 34 years, came to watch. Eventually manager Jim Smith came down and signed me on the same day.

I'd been working as a painter-decorator, doing driving jobs, all sorts, anything that would enable me to get away to train on Tuesday and Thursday evenings and play on a Saturday. Now I was a professional footballer. It was amazing.

I had a year in the reserves and a brief spell on loan at Brentford. I wasn't really breaking into the team and I remember Jim Smith saying he thought I had what it took but I wasn't going to get an opportunity in the team at that time. So he felt it was a great opportunity for me to go out and play in Turkey and play under an English manager at Besiktas with Gordon Milne, the former England and Liverpool player, who was in charge there. I didn't know anything about Turkey. All I knew was that I needed to go and play football.

I felt playing abroad would be helpful to get away from the distractions of London. Going out to Turkey gave me that education on what it was like to be a professional footballer.

I came back and, thankfully it started to happen for me and Queens Park Rangers gave me some unforgettable years.

My favourite QPR team-mate? Clive Wilson. There were so many players that made my time with the club enjoyable but Clive is godfather to my daughter and I am the same to him and he's a great friend.

Favourite Rangers manager? I worked with a few like Jim Smith, Trevor Francis and Don Howe but probably the one I got on with most and the one that got the best out of me was Gerry Francis. He came in, put his arm around me and said, 'Look, you are my centre forward.' He told me, 'I think you've got everything it takes to play for England.' I laughed at him at the time. But he was proved right.

One of the great things about Queens Park Rangers at the time – and I think most of the boys would tell you – was the atmosphere in the dressing room. We had a mix of

very good players and we had a great group of sociable lads. I still say that the chat we had at Queens Park Rangers was the best I have had at any football club I've been to and I have been fortunate enough to be at some good clubs as a player like Newcastle United, Tottenham Hotspur, West Ham United, Leicester City, Bolton Wanderers, Reading and Watford.

There were a lot of characters. Alan McDonald, sadly no longer with us, was a top man. Ray Wilkins was a character, Ollie (Ian Holloway) was definitely one. Gary Penrice was a big personality. Everyone got on with everyone, no cliques. I've been involved in a lot of dressing rooms and sometimes you can get little cliques. But there wasn't anything like that at Queens Park Rangers. Everyone seemed to get on with everyone. That's the way it should be.

There were some great on-the-field moments for me personally too, like when I scored a hat-trick against Everton to complete a second successive treble when QPR finished fifth in the first season of the Premier League. And when I was part of the first Rangers team to beat Liverpool at Anfield.

Mike Donovan has featured them in this enjoyable and fascinating book which covers 48 other great games from across the club's long history from their first bit of silverware in 1893 to Harry Redknapp's side going to beat west London rivals and reigning European Cup holders Chelsea at Stamford Bridge in an otherwise tough 2012/13 season for the club.

Rangers and their brilliant fans – who gave me my Sir Les nickname (although I still don't know how it came about) – will enjoy the read too, along with many other football supporters. Many have a genuine affection for the club.

A lot of people used to say to me they weren't Queens Park Rangers supporters – they might have followed Tottenham, Arsenal or whoever – but if their team was away from home they would go down to Loftus Road and watch Rangers because they were always guaranteed to see a good game of football. QPR have always had that reputation of being a good footballing team.

Also Loftus Road is a nice little stadium, it is close to the pitch. And when you get a few people in there it has a great atmosphere.

It has a lot of history with some great players down the years like Stan Bowles and Rodney Marsh.

I'm flattered if I am well thought of at Queens Park Rangers. One of the things I remember when I went to Newcastle was that on my return to Loftus Road I got the biggest standing ovation you could hope to get as a player going back to his old club.

It made me feel that I did it the right way when I left QPR. There was no turmoil. It was just the fact I felt I needed to try and improve and develop as a player. I'd gone as far as I could go. I think the supporters appreciated that and showed that by the ovation they gave me at the end of the game.

I honestly feel I've been so lucky to be able to do something I love doing and still love doing with my coaching at Spurs. I've had a good life through football and I can't complain.

And it all kicked off for me because of the faith Queens Park Rangers and their supporters showed in me. I will be forever grateful. Now read on and enjoy the book.

Les Ferdinand MBE
London July 2013



Introduction

THE 'GREATEST' is an adjective used to underline either something or someone who has a superior quality so I set about which Queens Park Rangers games were deserving of such a prefix over the club's long history which had expanded to 131 years on publication of this book.

I began the process of whittling down the thousands of matches to 50 by asking all Rangers fans what they would include, via the club's match programme during the 2012/13 Premier League season.

I also wanted to touch on my own emotions and memories of a club that has been a big part of my professional and personal life. A visit to Loftus Road to plug in the phones for reporters and then read over their copy to copy-takers was my first assignment as a budding sports journalist. And then I covered the club as sports editor of the *Ealing Gazette* during the 1970s and 1980s. I also had a wife and another best friend who supported them. And they were the nearest league club to where I grew up in London.

But the head had to have a say in the final choices and it insisted on ground rules.

The choices had to include matches which represented a 'first' for the club. It is like life, we all remember the first time.

So it was crucial to include the first trophy, promotion, title, big FA Cup win, Charity Shield appearance, League Cup Final, FA Cup Final, top-flight showing and European tie.

It was necessary to go back to the club's beginnings to ensure perspective, from when a group of Paddington schoolboys from Droop Street got things started. To the nomadic nature of the early years with ground-changing a regular occurrence before Loftus Road was settled upon. It was important to include the ups and downs of promotion and relegation fights (supporters have suffered a rollercoaster of emotions down the years), and to look at the return to the Premier League under Neil Warnock then the subsequent Harry Redknapp era. It was essential other high points such as victories over big names such as Manchester United (at Old Trafford), Liverpool and Arsenal were included. There was the west London derby factor, of course. Victories over Brentford, Fulham and Chelsea (one when the Blues were European Cup holders) had to be in there. The big comeback games had to be featured such as epics against Newcastle United and Port Vale.

Matches which represented great individual achievement such as Alan Wilks's five goals against Oxford United, Dennis Bailey's hat-trick at Old Trafford and Clive Allen's debut treble as a teenager all feature, as do games which highlighted the impact of icons who heightened the club's profile as one capable of producing entertaining football.

Managers from James Cowan to Dave Mangnall to Alec Stock to Gordon Jago to Dave Sexton to Terry Venables to Gerry Francis to Ian Holloway to Neil Warnock to Harry Redknapp are all in.

Mavericks who wore the fabled number 10 shirt from Rodney Marsh to Stan Bowles to Simon Stainrod to Tony Currie to John Byrne to Adel Taarabt all feature, along with other legendary players such as Mark Lazarus, Evelyn Lintott, Tommy Cheetham, Cyril Hatton, Reg Allen, Brian Bedford, Gerry Francis, Dave Thomas, Don Givens, Phil Parkes and Ian Gillard, plus loyal players such as the indomitable Alan McDonald, who tragically died in 2012, and Tony Ingham. A host of characters who supplied a wealth of memories are all covered in this book. Sit back, put your feet up and read all about them.

Mike Donovan



v West Bromwich A 3-2

Football League Cup Final. Wembley Stadium
4 March 1967. Attendance: 97,952

QUEENS PARK RANGERS:

Springett
Hazell
Langley
Keen
Hunt
Sibley
Lazarus
Sanderson
Allen
Marsh
R. Morgan

Referee: Walter Crossley (Lancaster)

WEST BROMWICH ALBION:

Sheppard
Cram
Williams
Collard
Clarke
Fraser
Brown
Astle
Kaye
Hope
Clark

IT TOOK a few seconds of thought for match-winner Mark Lazarus to remember a few of the words and a bit of the tune. He gathered himself and, for the benefit of your author, launched into the song he had recorded to celebrate Queens Park Rangers lifting the 1967 Football League Cup beating West Bromwich Albion 3-2 at Wembley Stadium on 4 March 1967.

'Who'd have thought that we'd have done it.
'Who'd have thought that we'd be here.
'Who'd have thought we'd be knocking back champagne
'Who'd have thought we'd have won it.
'Who'd have thought we'd get a cheer.
'When the final whistle blew we'd won the game
'QPR – they're the greatest.'

The vinyl single 'QPR – The Greatest' was put out on the Eyemark label after the triumph and sold in thousands to euphoric Rangers fans eager for a memento of the day Lazarus believes was and remains the greatest in the club's 130-year history.

And for Lazarus and his team-mates it meant bonus money the players could share for putting the Third Division club into football's Hall of Fame as the first team from the division to win a final at Wembley – and against premier opposition.

They became the first team to lift a trophy under the Twin Towers since England captain Bobby Moore held the World Cup aloft the previous summer.

Lazarus said to your author in June 2013, 'All the players were supposed to sing with me but didn't want to so I ended up singing it. I didn't mind. I liked to get up and sing. It wasn't a hit and we didn't go on *Top of the Pops* but it boosted the players' pool. We weren't on any bonus to win, you know.'

Queens Park Rangers' Greatest Games

Lazarus and the team had plenty to sing about. The bare facts were that Rangers came back from two goals down at the interval – with former team-mate Clive Clark scoring both of West Brom's goals – to win 3-2 thanks to Roger Morgan, Rodney Marsh and Mark Lazarus.

But the day – full of sunshine on the eve of the Summer of Love – was a whole lot more. It was one to touch the emotions, send endorphins flowing and provide personal lifetime memories which will forever remain in the rose-tinted mind's eye of all those of a Rangers persuasion.

Lazarus has a treasure trove of those memories so before we go into the nuts and bolts of the 90 minutes which has given cause for everlasting celebration in London W12, let us share a few the match winner possesses.

The former winger, now 74, has them all compartmentalised and on instant recall, like his insightful recollections of the build-up after battling through six tough rounds to play the first one-off League Cup Final which had been a two-legged affair for its first six years.

He told your author in July 2013, 'We had a wonderful build-up. Stayed in a lovely hotel in London. Fats Domino, the singer, was staying there. He was over from America to do a concert. I like Fats a lot and we met him, although I didn't get the opportunity to sing his big hit "Blueberry Hill" with him!

'We got up on the Saturday morning and mingled around waiting for the coach to take us to Wembley. We're on our way to Wembley! There were crowds of people lining the street. It all added to the excitement.

'You never had to calm anyone down. There were a few young players in there. I was 27. I'd been around a bit. But you also had Les Allen, Mike Keen, Jimmy Langley and Rodney Marsh.

'Tony Hazell was a young boy and he may have thought "I'm up against a very good player in Clive Clark". But he certainly didn't show it as we journeyed to the stadium.

'We were all just pleased to be in the final. There was no pressure on us. We knew we had a chance and were a good Third Division side, but we were STILL a Third Division side. West Brom were a very good First Division side who had won the trophy the year before. With players like Clive and Jeff Astle. And they had just beaten West Ham convincingly in the semi-finals. To go to Wembley and beat such a team was not realistic. Nobody could have foreseen what happened.'

The calm mood on board the coach was reflected in the laughing of Lazarus and the players which greeted the sight of four Rangers supporters carrying a mock coffin with the legend depicted on it.

Lazarus said, 'The four of them had started in Westbourne Grove and marched to Wembley. People tagged on at Willesden and by the time we saw them there were thousands following this coffin. We all waved at each other. It was wonderful.'

Then the coach drove into the stadium and parked up close to the dressing room.

Lazarus said, 'We hopped off and went into the dressing room to see our all-white kit (instead of the familiar blue and white hoops with both sides ordered to change because the strips' colours clash).

'We had a read of the programme as we stood there in our lovely blazers and trousers made for the occasion. We went out on the pitch. A few supporters were already there. It was a beautiful day. The sun was shining. People were in shirt sleeves. What a day to go out and perform in front of 100,000 spectators. We went back in to get changed.'

v West Bromwich Albion 1967

Manager Alec Stock kept his pre-match instruction brief. Lazarus said, 'Alec didn't say much just simply, "This is our final. Just go out there and show the fans what you can do".'

Unfortunately the first half went pear-shaped for the all-white R's as Clark put West Brom two up.

The noise abatement society might have been called in as Rangers took the game to West Brom. Half the record final gate roared the team in all white as Lazarus, Les Allen and Keith Sanderson had the favourites on their heels, but it was Clark who began to keep a pre-match promise of 'I'll be the fellow scoring all the goals' when he put the Throstles ahead in the eighth minute.

West Brom took a stranglehold of midfield and it was left to Clark and Jeff Astle to give the Rangers rearguard palpitations.

Even so, QPR were able to show what they were made of. Allen, who last played at Wembley when he helped Tottenham Hotspur secure the first Football League and FA Cup Double this century six years earlier, forced West Brom stopper Dick Sheppard to save. And Marsh had the ball in the net from a bicycle kick before Lancaster referee Walter Crossley ruled the effort offside.

Clark was in lively mood. He skipped past an over-committed Hazell and a covering Ron Hunt to cross for Astle to bring a fine save out of Peter Springett.

The danger signs were there and soon the holders doubled their advantage. Again Astle and Clark were at the heart of the goal. The duo combined and the winger defeated Hazell once more to beat Springett after 25 minutes.

Rangers hung on and Roger Morgan forced a corner and from the kick his captain Mike Keen had one shot blocked before hitting the rebound wide.

The *Kilburn Times* reported, 'Their most ardent supporters were almost ill with disappointment at half-time as their white-shirted heroes trooped off with their heads nodding if not quite bowed.' But there was little doom and gloom inside the Rangers dressing room during the interval.

Lazarus said, 'We thought their second goal was offside but didn't panic. There was no ranting and raving from Alec at half-time. We were two nought down but we weren't bothered. We were still confident. It was a case of everybody saying "let's go out there and show 'em what we can do".'

Expectations were low among all those outside of the room as Lazarus and his teammates reflected on the opening 45 minutes. Perhaps red-shirted West Brom were of the opinion that a wounded animal is a dangerous animal as they opted to defend what they had. Marsh had an effort saved and Allen almost beat the offside flag from a Morgan ball.

Jimmy Hagan's side, unbeaten in the First Division, got twitchy. Sheppard was unsighted as a defender ran across his path and the ball hit the stopper and deflected goalwards, forcing defender John Kaye to clear as Allen charged in.

Marsh, after picking up the pieces of a blocked Allen shot, then ballooned over. Was that the moment Rangers would be confirmed losers?

No seemed to be the answer as he extravagantly dummied right before putting Morgan clear to the left for a shot which was scrambled away.

West Brom's heads seemed to have gone bar Sheppard but he was left helpless when Rangers reduced the arrears through Morgan who headed past him after Allen had chipped a free kick over the wall following a foul on Lazarus by Graham Williams after 63 minutes.

Doug Fraser brought down Marsh as tension increased in the ranks of Hagan's fading would-be heroes.

Queens Park Rangers' Greatest Games

Clark relieved the pressure for West Brom as he broke past Hazell, Hunt and Springett but crossed into an empty area where R's left-back Jim Langley, in his final game at the age of 38, comfortably cleared.

It was as if the Baggies had breathed their last. The 'red' fire was out, and Marsh almost immediately levelled in the 75th minute. The Rangers maverick broke from midfield with a relaxed stride, finding his way through the West Brom cover before hitting the ball low into the net off the stopper's right-hand post from the edge of the penalty area's D.

Rangers went for the kill. Lazarus came close to connecting with a cross from Morgan after Marsh had put the left-winger away.

West Brom defender Dennis Clarke chipped a mis-placed back-pass over Sheppard's goal. Lazarus was hauled down by his left-back Graham Williams. The pressure on the top-flight outfit was telling.

And finally it happened as the winning goal came eight minutes from time.

Rangers centre-back Ron Hunt ventured upfield, deep into the Baggies penalty area and, as an Albion defender fluffed his kick, he went for the loose ball to try and prod it home. Simultaneously the brave Sheppard dived at the defender's feet and the ball broke. Lazarus, with the goalkeeper face down, prostrate, sprinted from the edge of the area to meet it and guided it home with his left foot from close to the penalty spot.

Post-match there was a debate about whether Hunt had fouled the keeper, but there was no visible protest from West Brom as the ball went in.

Lazarus hit the post as he attempted to make it 4-2 before the Rangers crowd celebrated and big players like Marsh burst into tears.

The *Kilburn Times* reported, 'Out of an almost impossible situation the spirit and dedication of a Third Division team brought glory. They went on to win as thrilling a second half as Wembley had witnessed.'

Captain Mike Keen climbed the 39 steps to the Royal Box to take a grip of the League Cup, turn and lift it above his head towards ecstatic Rangers supporters.

And indeed Keen dedicated the victory to the QPR fans because 'they deserved to have something to celebrate'.

When the players returned to the pitchside, Lazarus had a plan. He wanted to share the moment with the supporters among them. Lazarus was known for racing over to celebrate with the fans when he notched a goal at Loftus Road. Logistically that was possible given the fact the spectators were so close to the pitch players could feel their collective hot breath when taking a throw-in.

Wembley, however, was a different proposition. Two fences and a greyhound track separated the supporters from the pitch. Even so Lazarus did his best to join them, only stopped by hugging, happy, tearful team-mates.

The muddled heroes in white shirts soaked in all the applause in the evening sunshine of a glorious day of weather and, in Rangers' case, of achievement.

Rangers returned to the hotel for a champagne party. Lazarus said, 'I've got a picture from that party of me eating a chicken leg and Jim Langley try to steal it off me.'

As for the game, Lazarus said, 'It was brilliant to score the deciding goal but when Rodney scored our second I think West Brom knew we were going to win. Their players started doubting themselves. The longer the game went on the more that was the case.'

'I also think the save Peter made from Astle inspired everybody to do what we did. If he hadn't made it we would have been 3-0 down. I always think we won because of that magnificent save. I do put a lot down to Peter.'

Lazarus told of a re-run the players saw of the final. He said, 'I was at a dinner with Rodney Marsh and the rest of the players and they showed a film of it. In the first half Rodney and I never got a kick. Never showed at all. But in the second half, of course, it was a different story.

'Rodney turned round to me at this dinner and said "bloody hell, I didn't know you played that well".

'I don't think I did that well, but showed a bit of form in the second half. We all upped our game then. I could have got a hat-trick.'

Lazarus is full of praise for everyone's role in Rangers' finest hour. He said, 'I was delighted for Mike receiving the cup. He was our playmaker. Kept it simple. Alec always used to tell him that when he got the ball to give it to me. I was at outside-right and he was my right-half.

'Rodney was fantastic. He scored all season. And didn't let us down in the final. People talk about Stan Bowles being the greatest Rangers player. I don't agree. There are plenty of others who are better – nothing against Stan. I know who'd I'd pick between Stan and Rodney.

'I was pleased for the manager. He'd done so much for us. He was a gentleman. Everybody played their part. It was the best team QPR have ever had helped by a fantastic group of supporters. Wonderful times.'

One of those fans was club historian Gordon Macey, then a teenager. He told your author, 'My dad went straight down Wembley after we beat Birmingham 4-1 away – before we'd played the second leg. Couldn't see QPR throwing away such a lead. You could turn up and buy tickets for cup finals in those days. The good old days!

'We'd beaten some good teams and felt we couldn't lose. When we went 2-0 down at half-time I thought "well maybe we can".

'My dad bought me a hot-dog to cheer me up. He had also got me a rattle and I painted it blue and white the night before and it hadn't had time to dry out. People around me got sprayed with the wet paint! The pitch was good unlike when Swindon beat Arsenal on it two years later. Wembley had just held the Horse of the Year Show on it!'

Marsh said in *Shooting To The Top* that the achievement was something he was 'going to boast about for the rest of my days.'

He added, 'I cried. I could not help it. The tears rolled down my cheeks and I had to use the bottom of my shirt to wipe them away. Queens Park Rangers had just won the League Cup and, suddenly, all the tension and worry and emotion which had been bottled up inside of me began to drain away.

'I know it is impossible, but I wish every player could have the experience of being on the winning side in a cup final at Wembley. There can't be anything in football to match the big red glow.'

Les Allen said to the *Kilburn Times*, 'If there's a club in the country which deserves to win a major trophy it is Rangers.'

Langley said, 'I cried, it was the greatest moment of my life', while chairman Jim Gregory added, 'It was great. Just great.'

And Stock felt Rangers would win because of the side's 'talent, fitness and mood', adding that 'football's not a question of kicking a ball around.'

Stock said to the *Kilburn Times*, 'We won didn't we. Worried? Of course I was worried but the boys showed great spirit. It takes a great team to come back after being two goals down in a Wembley final.

Queens Park Rangers' Greatest Games

'There was some doubt about that winning goal but we deserved to win because we showed greater professionalism. We wanted to win and didn't give up.'

The only downside was that Rangers were not allowed to play in the Inter-Cities Fairs Cup the following season as a result of their win. The rules stated that only teams from each country's top tier would be able to play in it.

It would have been fascinating to have seen if those premier teams from the continent would have succumbed like the one which faced Rangers on 4 March 1967.

Lazarus gave his in-depth description of Rangers' goals to your author in July 2013.

He said, 'The first? I got the ball on the right-hand side. I went passed Graham Williams their left-back and he pulled me down. Free kick to us. Les Allen took the free kick. Roger Morgan headed it in.

'Number two? The ball was played by Mike Keen up to Rodney. He turned on the ball looking to play someone else in and couldn't see anybody. He just took the ball further and further towards goal. Nobody came to him. Didn't have to beat anybody.

'He was looking to lay the ball off somewhere. But he couldn't see anybody to lay it off to the closer he got to the goal. I think he was just outside the area. He just shot and the ball beat the goalkeeper, hit the inside of the post and went in.

'My goal? Ronnie Hunt had the ball. He passed me the ball. I flicked it up in the air and expected to be pushed. Ronnie kept on running. I hit it with the outside of my foot. The ball went up in the air. It looked like a rugby ball it had so much spin on it. When it came down it was still spinning so much that when their guy tried to intercept it he missed it. Ronnie carried on running and it went towards the goalkeeper. The ball is still spinning.

'Their goalkeeper tries to grab the ball on the floor. Ronnie had carried on running and there was a collision. The goalkeeper never had the ball and Ronnie was quite entitled to go for it. But they went together for the ball. I think Ronnie got to the ball and pushed it on to the keeper's hands or body. One of the two.

'The ball came back out. I happened to be there and just hit it in with my left foot into the corner of the net. There was somebody on the goal line. I think it was John Kaye. I had to be precise in where I put the ball. I just clipped it into the left-hand corner. I did quite well!

'I could have had a hat-trick. I hit a six-yard volley from a corner which was saved on the line by a player who didn't know much about it.

'Then I picked the ball up in the centre of the pitch on the halfway line, went past a couple of West Brom players to the edge of the box, hit the ball and the keeper just pushed it on to the post.'



v Leeds United 2-0

Football League First Division. Loftus Road
24 April 1976. Attendance: 31,002

QUEENS PARK RANGERS:

Parkes
Clement
Gillard
Hollins
McLintock
Webb
Thomas
Francis
Masson
Bowles
Givens

Referee: W.J. Gow (Swansea)

LEEDS UNITED :

Harvey
Reaney
F. Gray (Lorimer)
Bremner
Madeley
Hunter
Harris
Cherry
Jordan
McKenzie
E. Gray

I'M GOING to get drunk. What are you doing Gerry?' That is what a disconsolate Stan Bowles said to his captain Gerry Francis after the dynamic duo had watched Liverpool defeat Wolverhampton Wanderers to seal the title and deny Queens Park Rangers their first top-tier Football League crown from a London television studio.

Ten days earlier Rangers had ended their season at the summit thanks to a 2-0 victory over Leeds United at Loftus Road amid scenes of joyous pitch celebrations.

But a fixture pile-up due to European commitments had given the Reds the advantage of knowing exactly what they had to do at Molineux to leapfrog the 'best team never to win the Football League' – either a victory or low-scoring draw.

Rangers got to within 13 minutes of the championship when a John Richards goal for Wolves was cancelled out by one from Kevin Keegan. And, as news reached the ground that Birmingham City had drawn at Sheffield United to relegate Wolves, the Midlandsers collapsed and Bob Paisley's side completed a 3-1 win thanks to additional goals from John Toshack and Ray Kennedy.

But the power, panache and guts of the 2-0 dismantling of Don Revie's Leeds proved a testament to why Queens Park Rangers were rated the best side in England in the hearts and minds of the nation, even though the official title went to Merseyside.

It was a testament to their manager Dave Sexton, who sadly passed away in 2012.

Those are the beliefs of the team's loyal stalwart Ian Gillard.

Gillard remains mightily proud of his side, late manager and his own contribution as they combined to reflect just why he considers that side the greatest team in QPR's history on a sunny afternoon in front of 31,000 fans shoehorned into an arena that was rocking.

He said to your author in June 2013, 'The atmosphere was electric. Absolutely. It was a very hard fought game. They had Billy Bremner and all those sort of top players, but we just kept going and going and the result came right for us.

Queens Park Rangers' Greatest Games

'We knew we had to wait ten days before knowing if we'd win the title or not but it was fantastic after the Leeds game. All the players went up into the directors' box and were applauded by the fans.

'We were QPR's greatest side because everybody fought for each other. There was a great team spirit. We had our little blips, different results and all that, but we all stuck together.

'I'm a great believer in that it takes a team to win. You can have your individuals, which we did with players like Stan and Gerry. But you also have to all pull together and that's what we did.

'That's how we beat Leeds. Dave [Sexton] did a marvellous job. He made one or two changes, brought Don Masson in for £100,000 from Notts County, got in a couple of 'freers' and blended the team together.

'He used to go to training camps in Holland and studied German football. He got us to play in a more continental style with players rotating positions and we adapted to it.

'When myself and Dave Clement used to bomb on from full-back midfield players would drop in. The manager was so advanced in his techniques and coaching. He got us playing the way he wanted us to play and he proved a point in the 1975/76 season.

'It was a choker that we missed out in the end. But a lot of people, not just QPR, thought we deserved to have won the league that year. We worked our socks off. We reached a pinnacle for the club.'

Rangers refused to be distracted by a sense of injustice – over the timing of Liverpool's final fixture – as they set about Leeds.

They were able to lift themselves up, puff their chests and say to Liverpool and anyone else within earshot, 'If we are going down we are going down fighting to the last drop of blood. You have got to rip this trophy from our grasp. We ain't letting it go.'

Their fantasy football was on display alongside grit and determination for all to see as a season's-best crowd recorded gate receipts of £34,718 as Revie's Leeds came to town.

The supporters were ready to hail their heroes as champions. That in itself could have put pressure on the players who knew defeat – and most probably a draw – would gift the title to their Merseyside rivals.

But Rangers dug in against a team who rivalled Liverpool at the top of English football in the 1970s.

Leeds had a formidable line-up made up of most of the players which had forged their reputation as a force in English football.

They had Norman Hunter and Paul Madeley at the back with Paul Reaney and Frankie Gray at full-back, experienced skipper Billy Bremner and Trevor Cherry in midfield with talented Eddie Gray out wide and Joe Jordan, a battering ram of a centre-forward alongside the mercurial skills of Duncan McKenzie. And Peter Lorimer, known for his rocket-like shooting, was on the bench.

They had made a decent fist of a title challenge too and went in boasting the best away record in the league bar Liverpool in the season, having taken maximum points on eight occasions.

But Rangers took the game to their Yorkshire visitors. Bowles drew a foul from Bremner with the Leeds player believing his opponent had dived. Don Masson took the free kick which marauding defender Dave Webb, in echoes of his winning goal in the 1970 FA Cup Final against Leeds while at Chelsea, headed towards goal before being denied by visiting goalkeeper David Harvey.

Don Givens had a drive which cannoned off Leeds defender Paul Madeley.

The hosts almost hit the front with a beautifully worked move involving interplay between Don Masson, John Hollins and Don Givens who squared it for Gerry Francis to hit a volley from the edge of the box which Harvey saved low to his right.

Francis, resplendent in his bushy side-burns, had an effort blocked following a Dave Thomas cross from another Masson dead-ball kick by Harvey.

Masson had a shot charged down before Rangers thought they might have been awarded a penalty by referee Bill Gow.

Another well worked move between Thomas, Hollins, Masson and Frank McLintock put Bowles in possession in a central position on the edge of the D of the penalty area.

Bowles used his left foot to control the ball and his right to skip by Norman Hunter in a flash before crashing to the turf under a challenge from Carl Harris before Mr Gow waved away appeals for at least a free kick.

It was suggested Bowles might have dived, although a replay showed he was caught by Harris – a few inches OUTSIDE the box.

Tension rippled through the ground before Hunter relieved it for a few seconds by splitting his shorts and putting a new pair on after exposing his underpants.

Webb headed away a rare Leeds raid but Rangers continued to press. Another sweeping move saw McLintock, Bowles and Francis combine to create another opportunity. It ended when a Bowles shot took a deflection off a Leeds defender and a touch close in from Francis but the alert Harvey saved.

Patience was a hard quality to find but Sexton knew his side had to find it and keep plugging away as Mr Gow sounded the half-time whistle.

It seemed as if it would pay off with another superb movement when Bowles and Francis worked a one-two down the right to leave Leeds left-back Frank Gray chasing shadows before Bowles lifted the ball high towards the far post. Dave Thomas nodded the ball back across for Francis who was unable to make full contact with a bicycle kick and the ball went just wide.

Leeds gave Rangers a reminder they were not there just to make up the numbers as they threatened on the break and giant Rangers keeper Phil Parkes, who had received the Player of the Year trophy from boxer John H. Stracey before the kick-off, saved twice from Duncan McKenzie and once from Trevor Cherry.

Harvey then had to save bravely at the feet of Don Givens after the Republic of Ireland international had latched on to the ball following a slip-up from Leeds centre-back Paul Madeley dealing with a long Frank McLintock ball.

Finally QPR got their breakthrough when Dave Thomas put them ahead. Givens headed on a McLintock ball from the right and the diminutive Thomas nodded into the net at the far post unopposed. Francis drove just wide and energetic midfielder John Hollins headed over as Rangers searched for a second.

Again Leeds threatened on the break and substitute Peter Lorimer blasted wide from 20 yards, then McKenzie forced Parkes to save. And the QPR goalkeeper grabbed the ball on the line after a goalmouth scramble with Bremner left appealing to the referee, apparently either insisting the ball had gone over the line or that a Rangers defender had handled.

QPR allowed the tension to flow out of their bodies with their second goal. A superb long ball with the outside of his right boot by McLintock to Bowles on the right wing set it up.

Queens Park Rangers' Greatest Games

Bowles cut in, bamboozled Hunter and, with Francis screaming for a pass, elected to guide a left-footed shot into the far corner off goalkeeper Harvey's despairing hands.

Bowles looked almost embarrassed in his celebration as Dave Clement hugged him and one group of supporters waved their 'Bowles is God' flag.

But when the slight, shaggy-haired figure so beloved of the Rangers faithful returned to the centre circle he gave a wink to those offering congratulations close by.

He almost created a third goal when he turned Trevor Cherry inside out before crossing but Clement was unable to get over the ball and his header sailed over the bar.

Shortly afterwards the match was all over. Rangers had done something unique in their history by finishing their season top of the top division in English football for the first time having collected 27 of a possible 30 points in their last 15 games, and they had remained unbeaten at home. The fans rushed on to the pitch jumping up and down and chanting 'champions'. Premature, clearly. But who was going to begrudge them?

The race for the title developed into one which saw the emergence of shock contenders. Liverpool, reigning champions Derby County and Leeds United, the 1974 winners, made up the usual suspects for a challenge. Aston Villa, under Ron Saunders, had been tipped to make a bid but it was another promoted team which shook up the favourites. Manchester United did so well they looked odds on to be crowned before their bubble burst in March.

Rangers, of course, were the other surprise package to the wider world outside London W12. Dave Sexton's team had been damned by faint praise by those who tipped who would do what during the season.

One pundit reckoned they were 'the best looking team in London', which was not saying much as north London rivals Tottenham Hotspur and Arsenal almost went down the previous season with West Ham United, although the Hammers had lifted the FA Cup, and were not that far away from the danger area themselves.

Sexton had instilled his tactical nous and adventurous approach, reflected in adopting Holland's fluid Total Football concept, into a team largely got together by his predecessor Gordon Jago, with the Stan Bowles-Gerry Francis partnership its axis.

And after Rangers' opening day performance against Liverpool (as described in a previous chapter) the world, or at least the Football League First Division title, seemed their oyster.

Gerry Francis, appointed England captain in September, was bullish about their chances as the gladiators gathered their weapons for the battle. He said at the time, 'We can beat any team in the country. If we can get consistency into our game there's no reason we can't be in the top three.'

Rangers were top by the end of September after reaching the summit of the top division for the first time in their history during the month when a Mick Leach goal secured a 1-0 win over Leicester City.

But they suffered their first reverse when Leeds came back from a Stan Bowles penalty to beat them 2-1 with a slip-up from Frank McLintock letting in Allan Clarke before Peter Lorimer hit the winner. But R's bounced back to top spot with a five-goal win against Everton, yet slipped to fifth before regaining momentum as they embarked on an astonishing record-breaking run when John Hollins and Francis fired the goals which defeated Aston Villa 2-0 at Villa Park on 31 January 1976.

They proceeded – during mild weather which kept pitches in good condition and allowed R's to play their free-flowing football – to extend an unbeaten sequence to 12 matches in which they won 11, netting 27 goals and conceding only seven.

They battered Wolverhampton Wanderers, Spurs at White Hart Lane, Ipswich Town, Coventry City, Everton and Middlesbrough and were too strong for Leicester City, Stoke City, Manchester City and Newcastle United. The only point dropped was in a goalless draw against Sheffield United.

The Bowles-Francis partnership thrived with their 'telepathic' understanding and their attributes as individuals. Francis put his foot in and offered a creative spark to earn him a comparison to footballing great Dave Mackay, who also had similar qualities which were rarely combined by others.

And Bowles insists he felt 'invincible' as he destroyed opponents with his skill, pace, flair and goals, while entertaining the crowd.

His private life, as Bowles admitted in his autobiography, caused Sexton grief. His gambling habits, time-keeping and regular transfer requests were three reasons.

He revealed how the habits constantly left him short of cash, leading him to seek win bonuses BEFORE games, a fashion shoot with a naked 'stunna', made-up 'exclusives' for the tabloids and turning up less than 15 minutes before the kick-off after watching a bet go down the drain.

Bowles told how chairman Jim Gregory indulged him with regular cash handouts and the loan of a house rent free (though Bowles sold the greenhouse in it to team-mate Dave Thomas to fund his gambling).

And Sexton, also, largely tolerated the lifestyle of his star player who was able to perform to his optimum on the field for the sake of the team.

The back unit – which mainly consisted of full-backs Dave Clement and Ian Gillard with veterans Dave Webb and Frank McLintock in the centre – was tight in front of giant stopper Phil Parkes, while displaying a taste for getting forward. Webb was often seen in opposing penalty areas causing havoc and seeking a goal.

In the middle, Don Masson, in front of the back four, had the skill and passing ability to get the team on the go before the likes of Francis and Bowles weaved their magic along with super-fit Dave Thomas and goalscoring Don Givens on the wings, supported by the versatility of Mick Leach. It was no wonder Bowles thought they were worth a £400 punt for the title. It was not a question of charging into the title equation, it was a case of turbo-charging into it.

Even Liverpool, during a decade synonymous in football with their dominance of it, looked up rather than over their shoulders after the Boro drubbing which featured a goal double from Francis and one apiece for Bowles and Don Givens in a 4-2 romp.

Rangers were back on top and the title was in their hands. If they won their remaining three fixtures it mattered not a jot what their Anfield rivals did.

Then came a defeat Rangers supporters will forever bemoan, a surprise 3-2 reverse against Norwich City at Carrow Road on 17 April 1976.

It was an encounter which justifiably could have made the final cut for this book such was its significance, but one your author felt might be too uncomfortable to dwell on for too long, especially for R's fans who went to East Anglia that day.

Dave Thomas scored a goal which rates among the best of any of the 67 Rangers eventually scored from their 42 games that season as he weaved through the home defence in a blur.

But there was no consolation to be had for the Hoops because the destination of the title had been ripped from their grasp by the mid-table but on-song Canaries and the fact that Bob Paisley's Reds had stuffed Stoke City the same afternoon.

Queens Park Rangers' Greatest Games

It meant Rangers not only had to win both their final games, but hope Liverpool slipped up in at least one of theirs.

Frank McLintock and Gerry Francis popped up with the goals as QPR pipped Arsenal at Loftus Road on Easter Monday.

Anxious Rangers fans tuned in transistor radios to see how Liverpool had got on against Manchester City at Maine Road that same afternoon. The news was bad. City were not the force they were at the end of the 1960s and the Reds had romped in.

And then it was down to the last fixture. Francis said to *Backpass* magazine in 2011, 'We had a great team and ought to have won it, really.'

Of the ten-day delay, Francis said, 'That would never be allowed to happen now; the last matches would kick off simultaneously. It was out of order because it meant Liverpool knew what they had to do.'

'Give Liverpool full credit. They were always up there, decade after decade. They were a big club, a buying club rather than a selling club like QPR.'

'We were still a small club really. So they were able to build on winning the league, which they did. That season, though, I honestly thought we were the best side.'

The understanding Francis and Bowles had was a big part of that. Francis said, 'We had such an understanding. Telepathic. I could play things blind and he could do the same. Really, really enjoyed playing together.'

Bowles said, 'Gerry and I hit it off straight away. Terry Venables said right away when we played together on the first day in a five-a-side at training – we'd never met each other before but just hit it off straight away. I loved playing with Gerry.'

They got on off the field too, although Francis recalls the relationship had its moments.

Francis said, 'We were sitting down eating our lunch and there was a knock at the door. His wife at the time answered the door.'

'It was the bailiffs. They came in and took the table we were eating on, the chairs we were sitting in and the television we were watching. After they'd gone we looked at our plates of food – they were on the floor. So that was life with Stan Bowles.'

Francis said of watching Liverpool beat Wolves 3-1, 'It was sad to watch 90 minutes of football and see your whole season go up in flames.'

Reds captain Emlyn Hughes, now passed away, said at the time, 'QPR had come from nowhere. Suddenly it's "whoops we're challenging for the title". And it gets into a player's mind thinking "are we capable of winning the league title?" It gets into your mind. We knew if we just hung in that we'd eventually win it.'