

A L I S T A I R A I R D



RANGERS FC

in the

1980s



The Players' Stories

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Contents

| | |
|--|-----|
| Acknowledgements | 9 |
| Introduction | 11 |
| Safe Hands: The Goalkeepers | |
| Jim Stewart (1981–1984) | 21 |
| Nicky Walker (1983–1989) | 31 |
| Case For The Defence: The Defenders | |
| Hugh Burns (1980–1987) | 47 |
| Ally Dawson (1975–1987) | 62 |
| Jimmy Nicholl (1983–1984, 1986–1989) | 73 |
| Stuart Munro (1984–1991) | 87 |
| Dave MacKinnon (1982–1986) | 100 |
| Stuart Beattie (1985–1986) | 112 |
| Colin Miller (1985–1986) | 123 |
| Richard Gough (1987–1998) | 134 |
| Dave McPherson (1977–1987, 1992–1994) | 151 |
| The Engine Room: The Midfielders | |
| Bobby Russell (1977–1987) | 169 |
| Derek Ferguson (1982–1990) | 178 |
| Ian Durrant (1982–1998) | 196 |
| Ian Ferguson (1988–2000) | 216 |
| David Kirkwood (1987–1989) | 237 |
| Up Front: The Forwards | |
| John MacDonald (1978–1986) | 249 |
| Gordon Dalziel (1978–1984) | 261 |
| Derek Johnstone (1970–1983, 1985–1986) | 271 |
| Iain Ferguson (1984–1986) | 286 |
| Mark Walters (1987–1991) | 296 |
| Statistics | 306 |
| Index | 319 |

**SAFE HANDS
THE
GOALKEEPERS**

Just Jim

Jim Stewart (1981–1984)

James Garvin Stewart's football career was stuck in a rut in March 1981. Aged 27 he was languishing in the Middlesbrough reserve team, his two caps for Scotland in 1977 and 1979 a seemingly distant memory. Enter John Greig. The Rangers manager was looking for a goalkeeper to provide competition for the timeless Peter McCloy and he looked to Teesside to find one.

'I got a phone call from Davie Provan, who was on the coaching staff at Ibrox at the time, to ask me if I'd be interested in signing for Rangers,' said Stewart. 'There was no question about that for me, it was 100% yes. A day later the Middlesbrough manager, John Neal, told me a bid had been made and would I like to speak to Rangers. There was no hesitation. At that time, I wasn't playing for Middlesbrough – Jim Platt was playing well – and my son had just been born so all the boxes were ticked. It was always a boyhood ambition to sign for Rangers. I had been linked with Rangers a couple of times when I had been with Kilmarnock and I thought it might never happen. But to sign for the biggest team in Scotland was a no-brainer.'

The transfer fee was £115,000 but, after signing his contract, Stewart barely had time to draw breath before he was donning the yellow goalkeeper's jersey.

'It wasn't like nowadays with the transfer window but there were still transfer deadlines,' said Stewart. 'I came up from Middlesbrough on the Sunday and agreed terms on the Sunday night in Joe Mason's

house in Kilmarnock as everything had to be registered for the Monday. We were due to play Dundee United on the Wednesday night and Greigy told me I was playing so I guess he saw me coming in to be first choice.'

He continued, 'I was happy with how I played but after the game [Rangers lost 4-1] there was a lot of soul-searching. I just had to regroup and recognise it wasn't always going to be as bad as that. We actually played United a few weeks later in the league and beat them, so that levelled things out a bit. When I had left Kilmarnock to go to England in 1978 United and Aberdeen were starting to come to the fore so it was a challenge for us.'

Stewart retained the gloves for the remaining nine league matches, making his Old Firm debut in a 1-0 defeat at Ibrox on 18 April 1981. Rangers won only half of the ten Premier Division games Jim played but he enjoyed better fortunes in the Scottish Cup.

'Charlie Nicholas scored the winner for Celtic in the Old Firm game but it was a great experience,' recalled Stewart. 'But it's about winning. There wasn't much in the game or much between the teams but I'd have rather we were poor that day and won. The strange thing about that game was that there were only three stands as the Govan Stand hadn't been completed by then. That made for an eerie atmosphere.'

He added, 'The Scottish Cup Final was incredible. My last game for Middlesbrough was for their reserve team at Lincoln City yet 12 weeks later I was playing in a cup final. It was great to get that opportunity so quickly but when Reddy [Ian Redford] missed the penalty in the last minute I wasn't too happy! But Coop [Davie Cooper], who was a great pal of mine, was brilliant in the replay. He had come on on the Saturday and done a couple of bits of magic but he was superb on the Wednesday night.'

Success is supposed to breed success so hopes were high at Ibrox that the cup win would be the catalyst for Rangers to re-establish themselves at the forefront of the Scottish game. To prepare themselves for the rigours of season 1981/82 they welcomed high-calibre opposition to Ibrox. Friendlies were arranged against UEFA Cup holders Ipswich Town, and European champions Liverpool, and

Everton and Southampton also came north for testimonial matches for Colin Jackson and Sandy Jardine.

‘Liverpool was a busy night,’ recalled Stewart with a smile. ‘It was exciting to get the opportunity. I had played against them when I was with Middlesbrough so I knew what standard of team they were. They were packed with internationalists including Dalglish and Souness. We had gone to Sweden earlier in pre-season and played a number of lower league teams to build our match sharpness but when we got nearer the competitive action we were up against better calibre opposition. At that time the season started with the old League Cup section which came on the back of those games.’

In season 1981/82 Rangers were drawn alongside Morton, Dundee and Raith Rovers in their League Cup section. Stewart was between the sticks for the opening five matches – Rangers won four and drew the other – but he missed the final fixture against Raith and the first four league matches when he sustained an injury in training.

‘I turned my ankle at The Albion,’ said Stewart. ‘The grass park had been resurfaced but during a game I went over on my ankle and it blew up like a balloon. I knew it was going to be about three or four weeks out. I came back against Brechin City then played against Dukla Prague but I wasn’t fully fit. I lost a poor goal against Dukla and I was disappointed with that. But I played most of the season after that.’

Stewart played in all but six of the remaining 32 Premier Division matches. Included in that run was a first Old Firm victory – a Jim Bett penalty giving Rangers a 1-0 win at Ibrox on 9 January 1982 – and Jim was also the custodian when Rangers returned to Hampden for another rendezvous with Dundee United. The prize at stake this time was the League Cup.

‘Peter [McCloy] got injured the week before the final in a match against Celtic so I ended up playing,’ said Stewart. ‘I enjoyed it and it was good to get the feeling of being a winner again. I felt I had been fortunate to win two medals so early but we always competed in the cups at that time. At the start of the league season we tended to be decent but there was always a tailing off. That might have been

down to having guys that weren't used to going the distance. The older guys like Colin Jackson and Tom Forsyth were top players and they would pass on good habits to us. But the players who came in at that time didn't really fulfil their potential and I include myself in that too.'

Rangers enhanced what was becoming an unwanted reputation of being a cup team by reaching the 1982 Scottish Cup Final. Stewart played in all six cup ties but would be on the losing side for the first time when Rangers faced Aberdeen at Hampden. Rangers were leading 1-0 through a John MacDonald goal when a speculative effort from Alex McLeish restored parity. Three further goals in extra time saw the cup bedecked in red and white ribbons.

'Big Alex keeps telling me he did the same thing in training that week,' laughed Stewart. 'It was a total surprise when that happened, because I felt overall in the game we played well. Extra time took its toll on us a wee bit but I felt we had a real chance of beating Aberdeen that afternoon. I was also disappointed as it was the first time I'd played in a cup final and we hadn't won.'

A further dampener was put on the season when Stewart was not selected in the Scotland squad that travelled to the World Cup finals in Spain.

He recalled, 'I was fortunate enough to go to the 1974 World Cup but I never got to another one. I was in the provisional 40 in both 1978 and 1982 but I never made the 22-man travelling squad. It was a major disappointment as, in 1978, I felt my form was good enough with Kilmarnock and in 1982 I felt I'd had a decent season with Rangers. Unlike today they weren't as conscious of people's feelings so I only found out I wasn't going when the final 22 was announced.'

At the outset of season 1982/83 Jim Stewart was still the man in possession of the gloves at Ibrox. He played in each of the first 18 Premier Division matches and all 11 League Cup ties – tasting cup final defeat for a second time when Celtic won 2-1 in the final – but after shipping three goals in a defeat against Motherwell at Fir Park, Stewart was dropped.

'I have to be honest and say I wasn't playing as well as I should have been,' is Stewart's honest reflection. 'I lost a bad goal in the

Old Firm game a couple of days before Motherwell which was well documented as I should have done better with it. Overall, I thought I played well in the Celtic game but no one remembers that. Brian McClair scored a hat-trick for Motherwell at Fir Park and I knew I was struggling and needed a wee bit of help. But at that time there weren't any specialist coaches.'

He continued, 'Greigy was good with me. He told me he felt the change would benefit me and the team. It would give me a chance to get my confidence back and I could understand where he was coming from. I didn't have any complaints.'

Season 1982/83 should perhaps have been the campaign that Rangers kicked on and won the league title. At the start of the campaign the team were confident and playing good football – albeit too many draws were having a detrimental impact on the title push – but confidence was shattered one night in Germany's fourth most populous city, Cologne.

'Europe was always more exciting,' said Stewart. 'For the players it was a release from the Premier Division and European nights at Ibrox were always special. We played Borussia Dortmund and did well against them home and away. We played well against Cologne at home but when we went there it was like the Blitz! We were 3-0 down inside 20 minutes. John McClelland and Craig Paterson had come in to the team, both decent players with good ball retention, and we had Davie MacKinnon and Ally Dawson too. Our midfield had good ball players but it just didn't work, even though there were so many good players. That season, up until we played Celtic at Celtic Park, we hadn't been beaten but we drew too many games. For example, we went to Cappielow and drew 0-0 and these were games we should have been winning.'

Jim Stewart did not make a first-team appearance for over eight months. He was eventually recalled for the comprehensive 10-0 win over Valletta in the European Cup Winners' Cup in September 1983. In a European Cup fixture against the same opposition seven years later goalkeeper Chris Woods took, and missed, a penalty. Back in 1983 Rangers were also awarded a penalty but Jim was not tempted to step up.

'I never even thought about it,' laughed Stewart. 'We had gone to Malta and won 8-0 and Greigy told me I would be playing in the second leg. It was good to get back in.'

Two appearances in the Premier Division followed in October but they would be the last Jim Stewart would make for the Rangers first team. The first of those league appearances was in a 2-1 defeat against Motherwell at Ibrox in what proved to be John Greig's last Premier Division match in charge.

'I was put back in the team for the Motherwell game which gave me a chance to establish myself again,' recalled Stewart. 'We were leading 1-0 [courtesy of an Ally McCoist penalty] but there was a lack of confidence about the place and it affected us.'

He added, 'Greigy had a lot of good ideas and was proactive in terms of a lot of the things he did in European games. He got dossiers of different teams and he was quite thorough. I just think at the time, as a team, we didn't gel. But he could have walked away with the Treble in his first season.'

Appearances for the reserves in season 1983/84 were not guaranteed either. Stewart spent the early part of the campaign sharing the gloves with young Andy Bruce and by the season's end had played just 14 times for the second string. His final appearance in a Rangers jersey came at Muirton Park on 1 May 1984, a 3-3 draw against St Johnstone in the Reserve League West.

'I was surprised I didn't get an opportunity under Jock as he had tried to sign me when I was at Kilmarnock,' said Stewart. 'I think because Jock knew Peter [McCloy] and had worked with him and been successful, that gave him the edge. There was never any animosity. Peter and I used to travel together and we got on well. There wasn't a lot of dialogue with Jock but soon after he arrived, I went in for a cartilage operation which meant I'd be out for eight or nine weeks. Nicky [Walker] was signed so by February 1984 I knew I wasn't going to play. I went to Dumbarton on loan and they were competing for promotion to the Premier Division. I played three or four games for them. I knew at that time it was the end of the road at Rangers.'

When his contract expired in the summer of 1984, Stewart joined St Mirren but game time at Love Street was limited.

‘It was a major disappointment to leave Rangers,’ reflected Stewart. ‘Initially things went well, with the cup finals but, overall, I was disappointed, particularly with myself. There were occasions where I could have done better than I did and there will always be disappointment for me that I never played in a team that won the league. Ultimately, as a Rangers player you are judged on winning the league.’

He continued, ‘Alex Miller was the manager at St Mirren and he phoned me to say he was looking for experienced back-up for Campbell Money and for someone to help him try and progress. I was happy with that arrangement.’

In his two seasons in Paisley, Stewart made nine league appearances. He made his debut in a 4-0 defeat against Aberdeen at Pittodrie in October 1984 and his last appearance came on the infamous final day of the 1985/86 season. Alex MacDonald’s Hearts had led the title race for most of the season. All they needed to do to clinch the title was avoid defeat against Dundee at Dens Park. Meanwhile, at Love Street, nearest challengers, Celtic, had to rack up a high score against Stewart’s St Mirren in the hope that defeat for Hearts would allow them to nick the title on goal difference.

‘It was the worst day of my life,’ said Jim. ‘I hadn’t been playing at the time but Campbell pulled out with an injury a couple of hours before the game. We lost 5-0, Celtic won the league so it wasn’t pleasant, what with me being an ex-Rangers player.’

The Celtic match was Stewart’s last for the Buddies. Ahead of the 1986/87 season former Rangers team-mate and now Partick Thistle player-manager, Derek Johnstone, took Jim to Firhill. He joined other ex-Rangers, Kenny Watson and Colin McAdam, in the player pool but was limited to just eight league appearances. His final match as a professional was on 27 January 1987, a 3-0 win over Queen of the South at Firhill.

‘At that time, I felt the chances of me signing for a club in the top league were remote so I decided to retire,’ said Stewart. ‘Goalkeeping coaches were beginning to become a new thing so I started to look into that. I also joined the Ministry of Defence as a police officer and

I was there for about eight or nine years. I then got a chance to go into freelance goalkeeping coaching and I really enjoyed it.'

The coaching role earned Stewart a return to Ibrox. In January 2007 Paul Le Guen left Rangers and Walter Smith, then manager of Scotland, returned to the helm. Stewart had been part of Smith's coaching team with the national side and in the summer of 2007 was invited to take on a similar role at Ibrox.

'I enjoyed working with Walter because his man-management was first class,' recalled Stewart. 'There was a coach in situ when Walter took over but I was with Hearts doing pre-season in Germany when Walter called me and asked me to come back. For me, there was no question about it.'

Stewart would hold the role of goalkeeping coach for ten years, working under Smith, Ally McCoist, Stuart McCall, Mark Warburton and Graeme Murty. He worked with a number of excellent goalkeepers, helping to hone and develop the skills of a young Allan McGregor, and his time at Ibrox was eventful. During his decade there, the club made a UEFA Cup Final appearance, won three successive Premier League titles and endured the darkest day in the club's history when they went into administration in February 2012.

'Working with Allan was an experience,' laughed Stewart. 'People talk about the off-the-park stuff but he was the first guy in each morning and he was diligent doing his work. When it comes to making saves that win games he's right up there with the best.'

Of the tumultuous end to his first season as coach, Stewart reflected, 'The games mounted up but Walter's way was to take it a game at a time. We had won the League Cup, qualified for the Scottish Cup Final and were in contention for the league. We played Zenit in the UEFA Cup Final and they were a top team. The aim was to try and stay in the game as long as we could but once they scored the goal, it was really difficult to turn it around.'

After clinching a third successive title in 2010/11, Walter Smith stepped down and his assistant manager, Ally McCoist, moved up to the top job. It was the natural progression and Jim Stewart was a trusted member of McCoist's coaching entourage. However, just

eight months into his first managerial job, the Rangers icon saw his beloved club plunge to the depths of despair.

‘At one stage of the [2011/12] season we were actually 15 points ahead of Celtic,’ recalled Stewart. ‘Everything was going well but behind the scenes we weren’t getting the players we targeted pre-season and there wasn’t a good feeling about the new owner. When all hell broke loose, we couldn’t believe what was happening.’

He added, ‘Although it was really serious, we had a great bunch of lads and the football humour helped get us through. One day Coisty came out the shower claiming he’d had a “Bobby Ewing” moment and that administration and liquidation hadn’t happened. We all told him it hadn’t and to get back in and have another shower! He knew the club and had a focus on what he wanted to do. You could see how much it was affecting him. He was so desperate for the club to succeed and for him to succeed as a manager as well. I wasn’t privy to a lot of it but you knew things weren’t right. Ally spent more time putting out fires than he did with the team.’

Rangers ended up demoted to the bottom tier of the Scottish game but Jim Stewart was part of the journey back to the top. He remained as goalkeeping coach after McCoist left Rangers in December 2014 and worked under Mark Warburton and Davie Weir in the season that the club clinched their return to the top flight.

‘Every time a new manager came in I thought my time was up,’ said Stewart. ‘When Alistair took over from Walter we had the continuity, but when Mark came in there was always a concern over whether I’d be kept on. I knew Davie Weir well and I got a phone call from him and he told me they wanted me to stay. It was really enjoyable and I had a good working relationship with Mark and Davie. I thought that at last the club was turning the corner and we were building a team.’

Warburton and Weir left Rangers in February 2017 and although Stewart stayed at the club under interim manager, Graeme Murty, he eventually departed when Pedro Caixinha took over in July 2017.

‘Pedro decided to bring his own staff in so I met with [managing director] Stewart Robertson and was told my services were no longer required,’ recalled Stewart. ‘It was hard to take but that’s football.’

When I came in in 2007, I would have taken ten years' service so I don't have any qualms about it. I had the chance to put ideas into place and there are four or five goalies now coming through the system that we identified. A lot of people aren't afforded that length of time so I was very lucky.'

Having served his boyhood heroes in two capacities, Jim Stewart's part of the story concludes with reflection on his time at Ibrox as a player.

'The highlight was winning the Scottish Cup; that would be the one that stuck out,' reflected Stewart. 'The Saturday game was disappointing but to win by the margin we did in the replay was fantastic. My biggest regret is that I didn't do as well as I thought I should have done. I wouldn't change anything, though. In our history the goalies we've had have always been top drawer and I got great support from the fans, they were first class. When I left in 1984 I was 30 and felt there was plenty of life in me. I took it quite badly when I left as it was my ambition to go to Rangers. But, looking back now, I was just delighted to get the chance to play for Rangers.'

Jim Stewart made 107 appearances for Rangers and recorded 39 shut-outs (36.4%). He won a Scottish Cup winners' medal in 1980/81 and a League Cup winners' medal in 1981/82.