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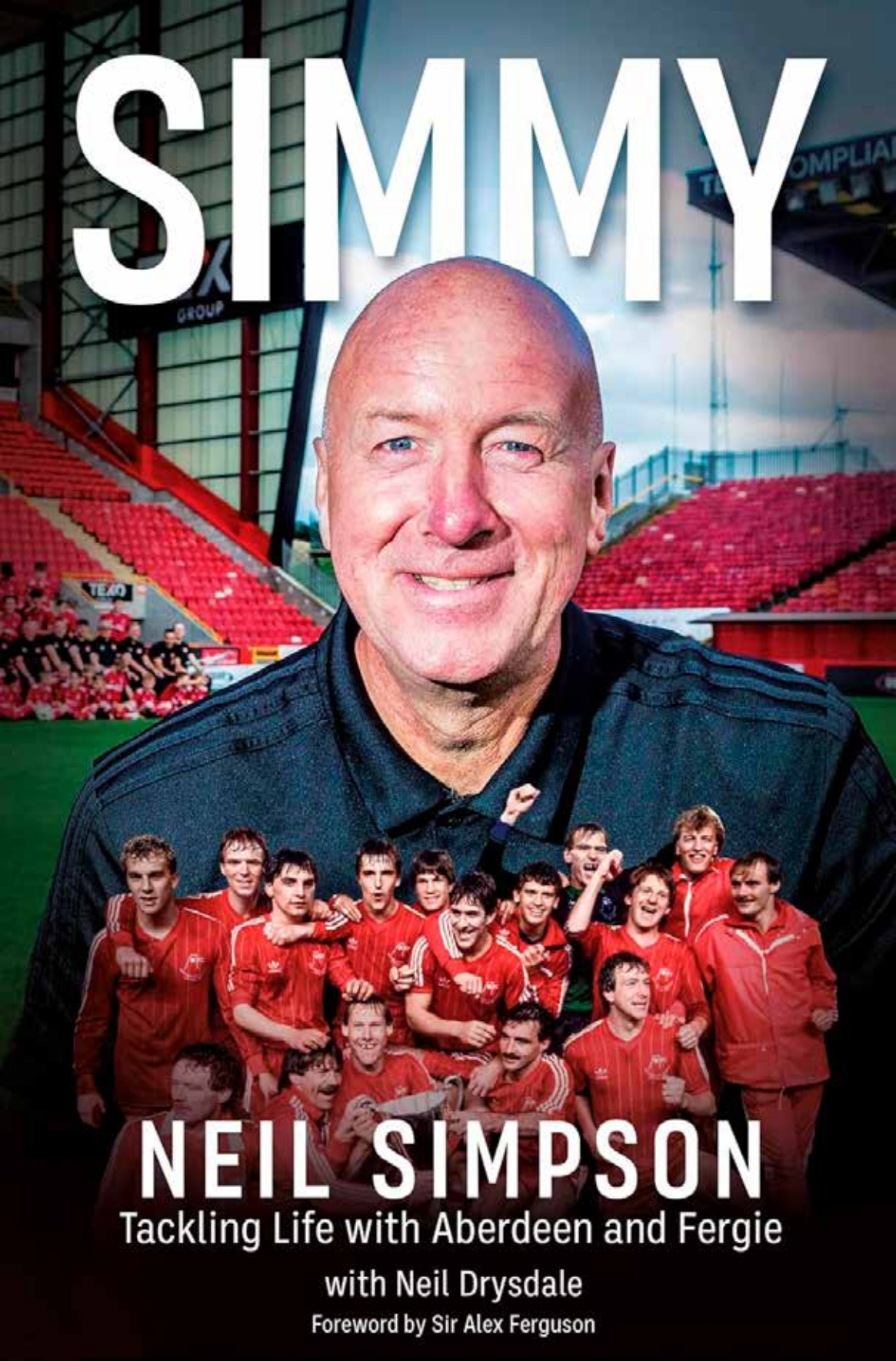

NEIL SIMPSON

Tackling Life with Aberdeen and Fergie

with Neil Drysdale

Foreword by Sir Alex Ferguson

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Newmachar, Netball and a Family Mystery

I'VE ALWAYS been proud of my roots in the north-east of Scotland and I regard it as a compliment when people tell me I wear my heart on my sleeve.

I cherished my family, who grew up in rural Aberdeenshire, worked hard all their lives and tilled the land and gathered the harvest wherever their services were required; and I soon learned to speak in the Doric dialect, which was common across the region.

I think I brought the same intensity and commitment to the table whenever I played for Aberdeen or represented my country on the football field and, from a very early age, I considered myself to be 100 per cent Scottish. It was in my blood, in my DNA.

All of which left me a bit shocked when I discovered I was actually born in London!

Yet, sometimes, these mysteries crop up in family circles. It was only later that I found out that my mother, Sheila, a psychiatric nurse in Carstairs, had travelled to the capital and

checked into St Margaret's Unmarried Mothers Hostel in Victoria Park in Hackney. The original plan was that she would give birth before handing over the child – yours truly – for adoption, but once I was brought through to her in the hospital, she looked at me and said, 'I cannae give away this bairn.'

What I do know is that I wasn't in England for very long. Within a fortnight of my arrival into the world on 15 November 1961, I was heading up to Cluny, a tiny hamlet in Aberdeenshire, where I stayed with my granny and grandad, Joan and Fred. I was also looked after by my Uncle Freddie, who lived there until he got married to Auntie Meggie in 1968. I was their pageboy at the wedding and Mum stayed with us until she returned to work at Kingseat Hospital in Aberdeen and lived in the nurses' home while visiting us at weekends.

At that stage, and for the next half a century, I had no idea of my father's identity and, as you might imagine, given my interest in TV programmes such as *Who Do You Think You Are?* and *Long Lost Family*, I became fascinated with the quest of learning more.

In the early 60s, there was still a stigma attached to single women having babies, which perhaps explains the secrecy surrounding the journey down to London, but if there was gossip or malicious tittle-tattle from neighbours, I never knew anything about it. What I do know is that my grandparents couldn't have done more to help me, nurture me, encourage me and take me into the bosom of their household.

You have to bear in mind that this was around the time of Beatlemania, the Swinging Sixties and Prime Minister Harold Wilson's speeches about technological advances in Britain and the rest of the world. Yet there wasn't much sign of that in the Shire. Instead, with my grandad being a farm servant where the Feein' Market was part of his life – and he grew used to

attending these events and making himself available for hire – our family lived in different places and were regularly offered accommodation in one of the farm buildings. I have the highest regard for them.

They were out toiling in all weathers, often in filthy conditions, and a little snow or rain or hard frost didn't bother them. They couldn't let it affect their ability to work and this was when we were living in a house with an outside toilet, no electricity and if … well, if you needed to go to the toilet during the night, there was a pail next to your bed.

So it was gruelling for them. But I remember a childhood that was exciting and filled with wonderful things. My grandad had a huge garden where he grew every type of fruit and vegetable, and I used to help him when I was a tiny kid – I was probably more of a nuisance than anything else – but he got all the seeds, did the planting and there was an almost endless supply of potatoes, turnips, carrots … you name it, Fred grew it.

There weren't any other children where I was staying, so I was looking up to adults with threshing mills and combine harvesters, who took part in ploughing contests and walked about with bales of hay. But I could always make my own fun and, even at an early age, I was kicking a football off the side of a wall, time after time after time, working out angles and gradually becoming more and more infatuated with the game. The summer holidays were a time when my uncles and aunties visited my grandparents with my cousins, Frances, Charman and Dawn from England and Elaine and Ronald from Lanarkshire.

My Uncle Fred played for Monymusk – another little village in Aberdeenshire – in the summer league, so my grandad used to take me to the matches and I remember sitting at the side

of the pitch with a big smile on my face, watching the action intently. But also kicking a ball trying to pretend I was one of the players.

This was also in the days of black-and-white TV, so we would watch the wrestling on Saturday afternoons, then listen to the full-time football results when they were read out. It was just taken for granted, given where we were living, that Aberdeen would be in the conversation and there wasn't a time when I wasn't supporting the Dons.

Soon enough, I had turned four, then five, and I was making the daily trip of a mile and a half to get to Cluny Primary School, which was my introduction to formal education. In the first week, my granny cycled with me to the school to check that I knew where I was going, but thereafter she just accompanied me to the end of the road.

I was pretty independent from a young age and you had to be flexible when you were at such a small school, where there were only 12 to 15 kids in Primary 1, 2 and 3. In these circumstances, you realised you just had to muck in, especially when it came to sport.

So here's a story that might raise a few sniggers. Yes, the same Neil Simpson who later played football under Alex Ferguson, tackled the likes of Hamburg, Bayern Munich and Real Madrid and was obsessed with football, was introduced to organised physical education in a very different pastime. Not football, definitely not football.

But rather *netball*, where I was part of a mixed team – there was nothing else for it – as Cluny Primary took on Monymusk and Dunecht in some keenly contested games. I played in goal defence after the teacher had organised who was best suited to every position. And it never occurred to me that there was

anything unusual about it. We didn't have 11 boys or 11 girls in our year, so we had to be adaptable. In any case, it was healthy exercise, we were driven to the other schools in cars, which was a thrill, and there was a big buzz around our team whenever we won. So what was wrong with that?

The bug was certainly starting to bite by the time I moved into 1970 at the age of eight. It was one of those summers where there was so much to inspire youngsters across different sports in far-flung continents and I lapped it up the same way I did a massive plate of stovies on a chilly winter's evening.

It started in April when Aberdeen picked up the Scottish Cup with a terrific 3-1 victory over Celtic at Hampden Park in what was an exhilarating final between the underdogs and most of the 'Lisbon Lions' of 1967. I was already a fan of Joe Harper – and players such as Bobby Clark, Martin Buchan and Davie Robb – but I was in heaven when wee Joey scored a goal and Derek 'Cup Tie' McKay added a couple of others.

This was a decade before the halcyon period when trophies arrived on a regular basis at Pittodrie, so that made it even more special. But, with hindsight, that was an excellent Dons team and they might well have won the Scottish championship the following season if it hadn't been for a terrible fire, which ripped its way through the stadium early in 1971. Thankfully, nobody was on the premises when the blaze happened and sports venues can be rebuilt, but there was a sense of anticipation around that Aberdeen squad and I felt it, even though I was living out in the sticks a good distance from the city.

A similar excitement gripped me when I was allowed to stay up late to watch the 1970 World Cup in Mexico and marvelled at the skill and the trickery of Brazil in particular, with the

likes of Pelé and Rivelino bringing magic to our TV screens. Scotland weren't involved, but that didn't really matter when I went outside in the weeks after the tournament. As usual, I was on my own, but I dribbled with the ball, threw it up on to the roof, where it would catch the guttering as it came down and I would bring it under control and set off on mazy runs, providing my own commentary.

It might go: 'Simpson breaks one tackle, then nutmegs another defender, and now he's heading into the penalty box and closing in on the keeper … and, wow, he has scored. Neil Simpson has scored for Scotland.'

This didn't just happen in football. During that wonderful summer, Edinburgh hosted the Commonwealth Games and, again, I was looking at Scots such as Lachie Stewart and Ian Stewart running themselves into the ground at Meadowbank Stadium in the long-distance events, and the crowd were going crazy as they won gold medals. It didn't always need to be gold either. I've never forgotten the stalwart Ian McCafferty blazing past the Kenyan great, Kip Keino, in the 5,000m, to collect a silver. The look of ecstasy on his face at the climax was something to behold. Well, seeing all this on the screen captured my imagination, and before long I was out running mile after mile to the road and back and pretending that I was a great athlete.

People sometimes make too much fuss about sport – it usually isn't a matter of life and death – but I know that I wasn't the only youngster who was inspired by watching heroes at the height of their powers. In a flash, wherever you went, the parks were packed and if football was king, lots of us loved Wimbledon and the Olympics as well.

Being a child, existing in your own backyard sometimes had painful consequences. I was a naturally energetic person

and, living in the country, there were always plenty of trees to climb. But, on one occasion, a branch snapped and I fell to the ground and broke my arm, which led to me going to the Sick Kids Hospital in Aberdeen.

Did it worry me? Of course not, it was all part of the rough and tumble (even though it hurt more than I let on at the time). What was far more distressing was the news towards the end of the year when my grandad, Fred, died of lung cancer. He had been a fit, healthy man, and I'll never forget how he was such a hard-working person that he always seemed to be on the move, toiling away here, there and everywhere. Understandably, it was a huge blow to my granny and it didn't just mean she had lost the man she loved, but that we would also have to look for a new home.

That was the reality of being part of the Feein' Market, but it still caused a significant amount of upheaval. On the positive side, though, my mum visited us every weekend. She was enjoying her work at Kingseat Hospital and it brought a smile to my face that I was able to see her so often.

Out in Aberdeenshire, we moved to Newmachar in January 1971 and my life changed again. In many respects, things were better than they had been. Praise be, we had an indoor toilet, I had my own room and the house was a lot warmer, which was a nice contrast from the days where you had to use the pail under your bed or risk freezing outside in your pyjamas.

It also meant that I had to attend a new school – a much bigger one – and that didn't start too promisingly. I never pretended I was a keen scholar, and my concentration wasn't great, so I found it difficult to focus on my studies and it hardly helped that there were so few pupils in the classes during the early years in Cluny.

So, when we moved to Newmachar, my mother was given an envelope with information on how I was doing in different subjects, which she was instructed to pass on to the headmaster. I didn't know it at the time, but my mum had steamed the letter open with the help of a kettle and was pretty angry on reading the assessment: 'This pupil is not very bright. I would recommend that he gets moved down a year.' She travelled with me to Newmachar Primary and was clearly determined to stand up for her son.

But, as it transpired, that wasn't necessary. The head, Mr Rollo, read the letter and responded, 'Let me be the judge of whether Neil should get put down a year.' And he was as good as his word. I stayed where I was, I soon got into the swing of things with my new classmates, and that was never really an issue thereafter.

The move couldn't have suited me better. Until then, I'd had nobody to measure myself against. I had simply been one of those wee boys, taking part in any old kickabout I could find – and these were few and far between. But I would take a ball with me wherever I went. And I had an imagination as well.

If I didn't have a ball, I used to get hold of a sock and stuff it with anything I could find, so I could kick it about in the house. Or I would even find a balloon and practise keepie-uppie, silly wee games all by myself, pushing myself to improve and keep setting new milestones. It hadn't worried me that I was on my lonesome because that had been the situation since I first arrived in Aberdeenshire.

However, now I was at Newmachar, I made friends and we all egged each other on with a very healthy rivalry. My best pal was Michael Gordon, whose father owned the big shop in the village, and his nickname was 'Spunky'. And I had another mate,

Ian Robb, who was called 'Nobby'. And, by the by, there was a third amigo, Ian Hunter, whose dad was a stonemason and who went by the moniker 'Cocky'.

So yes, that's right, my three buddies were called 'Cocky', 'Nobby' and 'Spunky'. We didn't think anything of it and we were innocents, where others might have laughed at the innuendo. But we were more interested in playing football. And we did.

In fact, it was virtually never-ending. We managed to have kickabouts morning, noon and night. We played before the school bell rang, we were back into it at break times, we played in our lunch hour and we kept going after school had finished both before and after our tea, and it was a case of carrying on until you were too tired to continue.

The venue didn't matter. There were many occasions where we played in the park in the village with the swings as one of the goals and the wall as the other, and it wasn't a hindrance that there was a roundabout in the middle of the makeshift ground.

I think one of the reasons Scottish football doesn't seem to have the same amount of talent these days is that kids no longer play outside in all conditions and in mixed aged groups like we did. When you were simply one part of a big crowd of youngsters with no referee or organised tactics, you had to learn to look after yourself.

Don't get me wrong, there is a place for community facilities and sports villages, especially in a country with a climate like Scotland, and the world has moved on. Yet there was something about these little pitches, packed with children involved in matches where first to 20 was the winner, which added steel to your personality.

Once I was into the swing of things at Newmachar, I also began my love affair with the Dons up close and personal. My

first-ever Aberdeen match wasn't actually in the city, but at the old Airdrie ground, Broomfield, and it was a treat during the summer holidays in August 1970 when I was taken to the Scottish League Cup game by my Uncle Fred while I was staying at his and Auntie Meggie's in Bishopbriggs. It wasn't a classic, and the Dons had to rely on a Steve Murray goal to gain a 1-1 draw in the usual cauldron of noise at the old tightly packed stadium. But Aberdeen proved their worth when the sides met again a fortnight later at Pittodrie and won 7-3, with my idol Joey Harper finding the net no less than four times.

These were special nights, and one or two classic encounters are forever etched in my memory. Perhaps among the most stunning was a tussle between the Dons and Celtic in 1972 when Aberdeen's mercurial Hungarian recruit, Zoltán Varga, who had talent to burn, scored a magnificent goal at the end of a sweeping move when he dinked the ball over the hapless keeper Evan Williams.

Varga truly was an exceptional performer, who later went on to play for Ajax and Borussia Dortmund, but his efforts were matched by Celtic, and Kenny Dalglish was in inspirational form, producing a dazzling diving header as his team secured a 3-2 win.

It was heady stuff for a nine-year-old and I recall the Celtic supporters noticing me on the way out at the end and shouting, 'Watch out for the wee man,' just to make sure I didn't get crushed. What an atmosphere there was on these types of occasions.

My life was changing and my horizons were broadening. I had pals now and we would jump in the back of the van owned by Sandy Hunter – Cocky's dad – and he would take us to Pittodrie and meet up with us after the game had finished.

I also joined the Cubs with leaders Jenny Gray and Joan Burnett and was given my first proper pair of football boots, which were called Shooting Stars. I was pleased as punch, and though I later learned they were produced by Winfield – which was basically Woolworths – I didn't care about that. They were mine, I felt proud to put them on and I cleaned them thoroughly later on.

Suddenly, there was no shortage of matches on the radar and I was in the thick of them and dashing about like a daftie. We came up against different sides, from the likes of villages such as Belhelvie and Kemnay, and I remember a contest where we won 4-0 and I scored a hat-trick. One of these goals saw me dribble through the whole opposing defence – it was similar to the goals I had imagined when I was playing on my own in the garden after watching the World Cup – and it was only later that I discovered that my nickname was 'The Pusher'. That was because I used my arms a lot. But I was keen as mustard, which my team-mates relished and, while it was fun, I never offered less than 100 per cent in these battles.

By the time my age had moved into double digits, I realised I was obsessed with football. But I never forgot that other people in my family were dealing with harder things. My granny certainly wasn't well off and after her husband died it was a struggle, not that I ever heard her complain. There was no money for luxuries and Joan had to keep close tabs on every penny. But she was a good person, somebody who knuckled down and made the best of things. People used to be astonished at how much I ate at mealtimes – I loved my bowls of soup and my meat and potatoes and plates of jelly – but there always seemed to be another helping if I needed it and, while we weren't rich, we were never hungry.

It helped that it was a close-knit family, and whenever aunties and uncles came to visit, I would be given treats and enjoy trips

to Aberdeen, which were always enjoyable. My auntie Myra and uncle John always bought me a new pair of boots every season. At that point, I was almost star-struck when I walked along Union Street and looked at all the grand stores and packed streets – it looked so glamorous to a youngster.

I had no idea that oil had recently been discovered in the North Sea and that the region was poised for a dramatic transformation as the 1970s carried on. We didn't see many newspapers out in Cluny or Newmachar, so it pretty much passed us by.

Nor did I discover much about my father in these early years. It was like a door that was permanently locked, a place where nobody wanted to go, let alone be caught asking awkward questions. There was no mention of it at school until maybe Primary Six when a classmate would ask, 'Have you got a dad?' and I would tell them, 'No, I dinnae.' And that was the end of the discussion. But, of course, it wasn't the end of the discussion. Far from it.

Strangely, though, it didn't worry me as much then as it would do later in my life. And besides, both my mother and my grandmother were on their own by this stage, so we did our best in different ways to help one another. But what strikes me, even as I write these words, is how these resilient, resourceful women managed to overcome adversity and ensure that I never wanted for anything. It taught me the value of perseverance and putting your back into any task that faced you, but, for a young boy, there was so much fun to cherish from these years.

And the first glimpse of what might lie ahead in the future arrived when I went to Pittodrie to watch Aberdeen tackle Honvéd in the European Cup Winners' Cup in 1970 – a night where there were more than 20,000 fans inside the ground, who

witnessed a classic twisty tale with fortunes changing every few minutes.

I was shocked when the visitors took the lead through László Pusztai – who was a classy performer and internationalist – but I was shouting and cheering along with thousands of others when the Dons stormed back with three goals. Arthur Graham levelled matters before a typically opportunistic strike from the ubiquitous Harper and a third from Steve Murray gave the Scots a real fighting chance.

As it worked out, that 3-1 victory wasn't quite enough, with the drama carrying on in the second leg in Hungary behind the Iron Curtain. I heard later about how Aberdeen went 3-0 down, before Murray levelled the tie at 4-4 to send matters to penalties. It was the first time this had ever happened in European football history, and the Dons were eventually pipped in the shoot-out, but they were a decent team and Honvéd progressed further into the competition before being eliminated by Manchester City.

So, even amid the disappointment, there was a bit of optimism building about the club and that only increased in the years ahead. For my part, I was just delighted that I had gained the opportunity to learn what Pittodrie was like on a big cup occasion – even if most of the players were still in a different world from the one I inhabited.

Most, but not all. Because there was this massive fete at Cluny Castle, which drew a huge number of visitors from all over the north-east, and one of the attractions on offer was a 'Beat the Goalie' competition, with Scotland and Aberdeen legend, Bobby Clark, and Dons favourite, Jim Hermiston, both Pittodrie Hall of Famers, in attendance.

Anyway, you paid your money, you were given three penalties against these players and it was too good a chance for me to miss

when I went along to the event. I took two penalties against Jim and one against Bobby, and, what do you know, I stuck the ball past the latter and into the net. I was jubilant. What an afternoon! I wasn't so successful against Jim, but there's a photograph somewhere of me and these two smashing lads together at the fete, and it still gives me a warm feeling.

The majority of big-name players would never do this type of thing nowadays or not without being paid a lot of money, but Aberdeen were a community club and they realised they had to go out and meet the people who supported them.

I was one of them. Always have been, always will be. And that experience simply fuelled my desire to see where football would take me next.