

R Y A N B A L D I



THE NEXT BIG THING

How Football's Wonderkids
Lose Their Way

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Just Getting Started

EVERY football-loving 15-year-old has had a version of the same dream: the pristine turf of a packed-out Wembley Stadium, the stands awash with flags and banners as the oldest rivalry in football resumes in front of a television audience of millions. A nine-goal thriller ensues as you, stationed on the wing, put in a virtuoso display of skill and invention, capped by a goal that sees the ball fired high into the crisp, taut net. The instant the referee brings his whistle to his lips to signal full time, the biggest clubs from around the land are falling over themselves to court your services.

Ally Dick lived this dream. When Scotland under-16s travelled to London to take on their English counterparts on 7 June 1980, it was standing room only as 69,000 flooded into Wembley, while the game was broadcast live on ITV. It was an era in which televised live football was a rarity, before satellite TV brought 24-hour, sport-dedicated channels.

Sponsors Halls Hudnut, makers of Dentyne chewing gum, provided the victors' prize: the Dentyne Trophy. But above all else, pride was at stake; England were looking to avenge a Victory Shield defeat to the Scots suffered months earlier.

Dick was the star of the show when Scotland beat England in their Victory Shield meeting in Motherwell, scoring both his side's goals in a 2-1 win. At Wembley, he once again marked himself out as an exceptional talent.

'It was a laugh, that game,' Dick begins, recounting the schoolboy fixture played before a scarcely believable audience. 'I was the youngest in the team; I was a year below everybody else. That was a game that every man and his dog came to watch

– all the scouts. You're just a wee schoolboy, you're not expecting that. You think maybe some people will turn up, but not like that. Someone said there'd be 50,000 people – 50,000 people? Come on.

'I already had tons of clubs after me, but because I hadn't signed any S-forms [a schoolboy contract with a professional club] – I was the only one on the park who hadn't – I was available. The phone didn't stop ringing the next morning.'

No wonder. The fact that Dick was not affiliated to a professional club was not down to any lack of interest in him, rather he possessed the clarity of thought as a teenager to keep his options open while still in school, allowing the buzz around him to grow. Distinctive gliding along the Wembley pitch thanks to an upright running style and the kind of flowing blond locks that would have seen him endorsing the highest-bidding shampoo brand in a different era, you didn't need a scout's trained eye to see that here was a player a cut above his peers.

Before the game, Ted Austin, the English Schools FA chairman, went into the away dressing room and told the Scotland boys he didn't mind them winning, so long as it was by a 5-4 scoreline, 'for the cameras'. They didn't disappoint. Two goals for future Celtic legend Paul McStay helped ensure a hat-trick for Paul Rideout (whose career would reach its zenith when he headed an FA Cup Final winner for Everton against Manchester United on the same ground 15 years later) didn't prevent Scotland triumphing 5-4. You're welcome, Ted.

Dick, scorer of a sublime, left-footed effort, direct creator of one of McStay's strikes and whose mesmerising wing play was the catalyst for most of Scotland's attacking success, revelled in the limelight. Calm under pressure, he was a born entertainer.

'That was my thing: the bigger the better, for me. I knew everybody else would be nervous. I liked the fact that it didn't affect me that much. I was quite calm and never got overawed. The bigger the game, the bigger the crowd, the better I was.'

'It was when we'd play reserve-team games away at Wycombe Wanderers, on a Wednesday night in pouring rain, that's when I struggled. I thought I was there to entertain. I was never one of these players who'd play it backwards, keep it simple.'

The Wembley match was the first time journalist Graham Hunter saw Dick in action. Like the 69,000 in attendance and the millions watching on TV, he was struck by the young winger's skill and sense of adventure.

'I didn't know any of the other players that day, but Ally stood out,' Hunter says. 'I'd grown up seeing wingers at my club, Aberdeen, with Arthur Graham and Ian Scanlon. Wingers were a big thing. I'm not old enough to have lived in the golden generation of Jimmy Johnstone and Willie Henderson, but I loved, at national level, Willie Morgan and Tommy Hutchison and Eddie Gray and John Robertson, who'd already won two consecutive European Cups [with Nottingham Forest] by the time I saw Ally play, so wingers were really *en vogue*.'

I met Dick at the Colessio Hotel in Stirling, the city in which he was born and bred. The 'Gateway to the Highlands', Stirling is a city rich in history, its vistas dominated by the picturesque Stirling Castle. But it is not a big city, home to just 36,142 people, according to a 2011 census. Still, Hunter believes geography had a part to play in Dick's footballing aptitude.

'He comes from a particular part of Stirling where there was a real bedrock of successful Scottish footballers,' Hunter says. 'He comes from the area where Billy Bremner was born and brought up, but also John Colquhoun, who went on to play for Celtic and Hearts, Brian Grant went on to play for Aberdeen, Gary Gillespie played for Liverpool, Willie Garner won cups with Aberdeen.'

'He was growing up in an area where being a football star, being a professional, was quite commonplace. That changes your aspirations. I would never say it was expected, but there was a pride in the area that if you were from that part of Stirling and you could kick a ball the least you'd end up doing was playing for Stirling Albion. And once an area begins to produce footballers, scouts just go back there.'

Dick never did play for Stirling Albion, although he did spend some time coaching the club's academy players in 2011; with respect to the Scottish League Two side, his aspirations were much higher.

After his performance at Wembley, Dick's stock was higher than ever. He'd already been courted by Scotland's biggest

clubs, even spending time training with Celtic, but his virtuoso display against the English, coupled with his lack of ties to any professional club, made him hot property. Within days of the game, he claims, 42 clubs made their interest known. Shortly after returning home from the London excursion, the *Daily Record* dispatched a reporter to Dick's house for a feature on the 15-year-old. In the short time the journalist spent at the Dick family home, an offer from Arsenal arrived in the post and a phone call came in from Tottenham Hotspur, the club the winger elected to join the following year.

'I had 42 clubs offering me contracts, whereas if I'd had an S-form,' Dick suggests, 'I'd have been tied to one club that whole time.'

'On the weekends, when I finished school on a Friday, me and my dad would fly down to London – or Manchester, or Birmingham – and I'd play with Tottenham Hotspur or Queens Park Rangers' youth teams.

'I'd play under an assumed name, because you weren't allowed to play at under-16s. Everybody knew who I was, but technically I was "Joe Bloggs". My school gave me permission to do that for three weeks out of a year. When it became clear that this could be my career, they gave me an extra three weeks' holiday at the start of the year.'

While club football was drawing into focus, Dick remained a key player in the Scotland under-age teams. In 1982 he would play a lead role in Scotland winning the European Under-18 Championships, starring opposite future Chelsea and Everton wide man Pat Nevin as the Scots topped a group that included a Holland side spearheaded by Marco van Basten – later a teammate of Dick's at club level – before seeing off Czechoslovakia in the final.

'I'd never come across Ally before,' Nevin told *Nutmeg* magazine, 'but his name had been bandied around a fair bit in the press. Expectations were high.'

'He was a year younger than me, but even so he was considered an older hand. We were chosen for a Scotland under-18s friendly at Fir Park; we played on opposite wings and both of us scored. In one of the newspapers the next day, the headline was brilliant. It read "Nevin and Dick shine."

Dick would compete in an even more talented Scotland side at the FIFA World Youth Championships the following year, held in Mexico. Their progress this time was halted at the quarter-final stage.

Despite a glowing youth career on the international scene, and despite spells at Tottenham and Ajax, Dick never earned a senior cap for Scotland, his prospects hampered by serious knee and ankle injuries.

Before spending seven years in charge of the Scotland national team, Andy Roxburgh oversaw the Scottish youth sides, and it was he who managed the under-18s to European Championship glory in '82.

'He was one we identified quite early as someone of potential,' Roxburgh says of Dick. 'Very few make the first team of their clubs when they are teenagers; Paul McStay was one and so was Ally.'

'He was very much the flying winger. But when we played those [European Championship] finals, our striker, Eric Black, was withdrawn. He was Aberdeen's striker and they had a cup final, so Alex Ferguson had to keep him back. Ally Dick and Pat Nevin were our two wingers, but because our strikers had been withdrawn, I decided to play them as strikers. When you think about false nines, that's very much how they played.'

'He was clearly a player of potential. He was doing well at Tottenham and then he went over to Ajax. In his case, it seemed to just fade away because he had injuries. He was a shining light as a teenager and never quite realised his potential.'

* * *

Dick had the football world at his feet in 1981. Wanted by every major club in the land, the 16-year-old surveyed his options carefully, but it didn't take long for the ambitious youngster to settle upon a destination.

'I used to go every weekend and summer holidays to a lot of clubs to train,' Dick recalls. 'I went to Aston Villa a lot, I went to Man City, QPR, Crystal Palace. I realised I liked London, so in my head I knew [that was where I wanted to play]. But I never told anybody.'

‘After being at a few London clubs when I was 15, I’d been to Tottenham three or four times and always had a laugh. I felt part of it. I thought, “Right, that’s the club for me.” I felt at home there.

‘I told my parents that was where I wanted to go. They said, “Keep your eye on it. You might change your mind.” I still continued to go to other clubs, but in the back of my mind – Tottenham. Then when I was 16 and I was able to sign legally it was still Tottenham.

‘I remember the day it was in the papers I’d decided to sign for Tottenham, and Crystal Palace turned up at my door. The guy says, “Whatever they’ve offered you, we’ll give you double.” It was nothing to do with money. I just enjoyed it [at Tottenham]. It was a great laugh. There was a nice family atmosphere. I was a quiet guy – I was confident but quiet – and I fitted in there.’

In addition to Spurs making Dick feel at home, the fact they had just won the FA Cup certainly didn’t hurt their hopes of winning the teenager’s affections. Moreover, Spurs were the most stylish side in the land, boasting such exotic talents as Glenn Hoddle and Argentinian duo Ossie Ardiles and Ricky Villa. Tottenham sealed their FA Cup triumph the same week Dick signed, beating Manchester City 3-2 in a dramatic Wembley replay. The famous, slaloming winner scored by Villa, swerving his way through what felt like the entire City team before slotting past goalkeeper Joe Corrigan, would surely have captured Dick’s imagination, appealing to his inner entertainer.

‘They flew me, my brother and my dad to the Saturday game, which was a draw, then they played the replay on the Wednesday. They said, “We’ll fly you down again.” But my dad was working, so we said, “Leave it.” And that was the game Ricky Villa scored the goal. That was the week I committed to Tottenham.’

Once he’d finished his schooling at 16, Dick left home for London, more than 400 miles south of Stirling, a seven-hour journey by car. He did so alone, leaving behind his family and moving in with a host family arranged by Tottenham. Although club trials and Scotland youth-team excursions meant Dick was as well travelled as a 16-year-old could hope to be in 1981, he could have been forgiven for feeling daunted by such a drastic

move. But the Scot had no reservations about moving south of the border. He had long been sure of a professional future in the game, and he knew England was the place to be if he was to become a top player.

'I knew when I was 13 years old I'd be a football player,' Dick matter-of-factly states. 'When I was 13, I was playing in the under-15s. I was always playing two years above and I was still the best player. Celtic were asking me to sign at that age. I knew I was good. I knew I was better than most.'

'When I was 14, it was guaranteed – as much as you can guarantee it – that I was going to be a professional football player. I knew that there would have been a lot of clubs offering me a contract, and I knew I would have a choice of all the top clubs, so I didn't have to wait around and play for Stirling Albion for a couple of years, or even Celtic.'

'A lot of people said, "Start off here [in Scotland] and build up." But Scottish football was kind of dodgy in the early 80s. I always wanted to play in England, so I thought, "Why put it off when I can do it now?" I don't regret a thing. I think I did the right thing. I did what I wanted to do and I've loved every second of it.'

'I was very mature for my age. I handled all that pretty well,' Dick says of moving to London. His landlady, whom he describes as 'very mumsy', was a mother of ten, with three of her children still living at home. Taking the teenager in as one of their own, the host family 'really looked after me,' he says. 'I was only there for a year and a bit before I bought a fancy house in a nice part of London, but I still used to go back, it was perfect for me. I'd been there before and stayed with that family when I was there training for a week, so I knew them, I liked them.'

On 20 February 1982 Dick became the youngest player ever to play for the Tottenham first team. Aged 16 years and 301 days, he started a First Division match against Manchester City at White Hart Lane. Although, 26 years later, John Bostock (Chapter 14) would break Dick's record as the youngest-ever Spurs player, to this day Dick remains the youngest both to start and feature in a league game, with Bostock coming off the bench in a 2008 UEFA Cup tie against Dinamo Zagreb.

Not only was Dick unaware of his little piece of history at the time, but his ascension to the first team took him wholly by surprise.

The summer he'd signed for Spurs, he'd been involved with the senior side during pre-season, making the odd ten-minute cameo in friendly matches. But when the 1981/82 campaign began in earnest, he spent his time with either the youth team or the reserves, which was exactly as he'd envisioned his early Spurs years, having joined the club so young.

Dick described his call-up to the first team as 'a total shocker. I woke up one morning in my digs, was getting my breakfast and the landlady put the newspaper in front of me. It said, "Ally Dick prepares to make senior debut." That was the first I'd heard of it. But I went to training on Friday and my name was in the 11. The manager told me I was going to be starting the next day.'

Even for the perma-laidback winger, the thought of starting a First Division game at White Hart Lane, aged just 16, caused sweaty palms. 'That was nerve-wracking,' he admits. 'I'm usually quite calm about things, but I think this was the first time I was nervous before a game. My legs felt numb.'

Ultimately, Dick found himself more comfortable at first-team level than he had been in the reserves, where the roughhousing and lax approach to properly applying the laws of the game was a shock to the system. 'When I turned up for the first reserve game, the guy I was playing against had a big beard and he kicked the shit out of me,' Dick recalls, wincing at the memory. 'And he was talking to me: "I'm going to break your legs." That was me learning football. I found the pace and physicality of it tough going. I was quick so I could get away, but that first year was tough, that initiation to reserve-team football. First-team football I always found easier – you played with better players, much more technical. But the reserves: with a handful of people watching, you get away with murder.'

Dick's seamless assimilation to senior football saw him become understudy to Tony Galvin, Tottenham's first-choice left-winger. Galvin, a Republic of Ireland international, was nine years the Scot's senior, robust and rarely injured. In an era long before squads 25-men strong, and with only two

substitutes permitted, Dick's first-team exposure was limited. He did, however, turn out in the second leg of the 1984 UEFA Cup Final. Anderlecht were Tottenham's opponents, and Spurs had returned to White Hart Lane with a credible 1-1 draw from the first leg.

The Londoners found themselves trailing their Belgian visitors 1-0 by the time Dick came off the bench in the 77th minute, Alexandre Czerniatynski having put Anderlecht ahead on the hour. Ossie Ardiles had replaced Gary Mabbutt five minutes earlier and Dick came on for defender Paul Miller as manager Keith Burkinshaw threw caution to the wind in search of an equaliser.

Captain Graham Roberts eventually scored with eight minutes to play, taking the game to extra time. Spurs won a penalty shootout, thanks to goalkeeper Tony Parks saving Arnór Guðjohnsen's decisive kick, to claim a second UEFA Cup, following their 1972 triumph over Wolverhampton Wanderers in an all-English final.

For Dick, though, the victory was bittersweet. Not long after coming off the bench, he injured his ankle, he believes, by treading on a sprinkler that hadn't been fully depressed beneath the turf. Ligaments were ruptured. It was the first of a series of serious injuries that would eventually contribute to his departure from top-level football aged 23, and eventual retirement at 32.

'The groundsmen will fight to this day,' Dick says, 'to tell you it wasn't, but ... you know the sprinklers that come out of the turf? I think it was that bit of turf that I stood on that gave way under me. [That was] the first time that I tore my ligaments, by just sort of jarring my ankle slightly, hyperextending it, in the UEFA Cup Final.

'I'd only been on for 15 minutes. I got injured and I couldn't come off. I wouldn't have come off anyway. I kind of limped through the next 45 minutes with torn ligaments.

'At the end of the game, everyone was saying, "Come in tomorrow [to get the injury assessed]." We went to a nightclub that night and I was limping around, sweating. Then next day they sent me to the hospital and I ended up staying there for a few days, getting my leg in plaster. It wasn't an operation, it just

had to be stabilised for six weeks. That was my first injury that needed hospitalisation.'

After six weeks in plaster, Dick's injured knee felt right as rain. The following season, however, he would suffer an ankle injury from which he never fully recovered. Eager to impress in a reserve fixture his parents were in town to attend, he found himself 'going in for tackles I wouldn't normally go in for'.

In one such challenge, his studs caught in the turf. 'My ankle went back on itself,' he says. 'The [physio] said, "A couple of weeks; ice it and you'll be fine." I started playing again in about eight weeks, but it was still sore.

'After about three months, they sent me to see a doctor – the same doctor who did Paul Gascoigne's knee operations. They sent me to [the doctor's] house, because he lived quite close to me. So I went to this big, beautiful house in the centre of London. I explained to him about my sore ankle and he got a big needle, cortisone, and gave me about eight injections, all around my ankle.

'I went home and my ankle was great – it's gone, totally gone.' Although the initial pain was treated, Dick was later told by a physio at Ajax that his ankle should have been destabilised after the cortisone injections, and that playing on it without allowing it the proper time to heal likely caused lasting damage. 'Ever since then,' he says, 'I've had to wear ankle strapping. That's what stopped me playing in the end – it wasn't my knee.'

With his progress at Spurs checked by injuries, the club's signing of Chris Waddle in 1985 effectively put paid to Dick's prospects at White Hart Lane. Waddle, a recent England international, joined from Newcastle United and scored twice on his debut. Waddle was also a left-winger and shared stylistic similarities with Dick – a gifted dribbler with a desire to get fans out of their seats. With Galvin still around, the Scot was nudged further down the pecking order.

'That's me fucked,' thought Dick after picking up the *News of the World* one morning to read the headline 'Spurs sign Waddle.' He stayed with Tottenham for another year and credits the England winger, star of two World Cups, as a 'good person to learn off'. But Waddle's arrival made Dick's eventual exit an inevitability.

Rangers were keen to take Dick back to Scotland, and manager Graeme Souness personally called the player to sell him on the move. Dick was happy to join, but he informed Souness of his religious background – although he was never especially religious, he had attended a Catholic school. Souness assured Dick this wouldn't be an issue. But this was a full three years prior to Mo Johnston's taboo-busting move to Ibrox, becoming the first Roman Catholic to sign for Rangers since the First World War. The *Daily Record* got wind of Rangers' proposed move for Dick, running the presumptuous and inflammatory headline 'RC [Roman Catholic] signs with Rangers.' The deal was swiftly scrapped.

* * *

When one door closes, another opens. Dick's potential move to Rangers was beyond resurrection, but an unexpected option soon presented itself. 'Then, about a week later, Johan Cruyff phoned up,' Dick says, wearing an expression of incredulity. 'I thought it was my mate having a joke.'

Ajax had contacted Rangers over the possibility of signing Scotland international winger Davie Cooper. They were told in no uncertain terms that Cooper was not for sale, but Souness informed Johan Cruyff, his opposite number at Ajax, there was a young wide man of a similar profile to Cooper looking for a new club. He recommended Ajax take a look at Dick.

Dick picks up the story: 'That's when Ajax phoned me to come over. They'd just finished the season. They'd won the Dutch Cup. At the end of the season, they usually do a little tour to play the smaller clubs so the smaller clubs can make some money. It was five games in five days, and I played in all the games. They were like Sunday League teams, they were bad, so it was good for me – I looked fantastic. At the end of that, they called me and said they wanted me to sign.'

Dick found the intense focus of training tough – 'Those boys were fit ... it was full on' – and far advanced of the rudimentary practices still common in England at the time. He was also struck both by Cruyff's methods and his forceful personality. The Ajax and Barcelona legend is revered as one of the greatest footballers

of all time – perhaps the best ever from Europe. And as a coach, his ideology – an extension of the Dutch Total Football model he helped shape with Rinus Michels in the 1960s and 70s – laid the foundation for decades of success at Barcelona, whom he managed from 1988 to 1996. He was regarded as one of the game's great thinkers. And no one was more enamoured with Cruyff's genius than Cruyff himself.

'You definitely know when you're in his presence,' Dick remembers. 'He's got this aura, a glow effect around him. He was something special.'

'He was very arrogant, had an arrogant air about him. It was tough to grasp his methods, because obviously they were talking in Dutch the whole time. But he'd turn to me and explain everything in English, then I'd pick it up.'

One of Cruyff's many maxims was that 'Playing football is very simple, but playing simple football is the hardest thing there is.' And mastery of the basics formed the core of his methodology.

'Everybody thinks it's this secret, unusual, fantastic way. It's nothing like that,' Dick explains. 'It's simple, very basic. They get the basics very spot-on. We'd do the same thing, day in, day out. But that's what you become good at. You do it without thinking – one touch.'

'These guys had it down to a fine art when it came to possession – playing the ball, moving away – and closing down. One thing I noticed right away: the goalkeeper – even back then, in the mid-80s – was great with the ball. Stanley Menzo, you'd knock the ball back to him and he was the sweeper, basically.'

Dick had joined a talent-rich Ajax team who had been Eredivisie champions a year earlier. Among their number were several players who would go on to win the 1988 European Championships at international level, such as Frank Rijkaard, Marco van Basten and Arnold Mühren, while a teenage Dennis Bergkamp was making an impression as a pacey right-winger. Another star of Euro '88, Ronald Koeman, a 23-year-old midfielder at the time, would leave for PSV shortly after Dick's arrival. Dick admits he didn't know who Koeman was at the time, but he quickly discovered the magnitude of the departing Dutchman's talent. 'When I got to Ajax, Cruyff said, "You play

on the left. When you get past [your maker], rather than cross all the balls, look to the edge of the box. Drive it to the edge of the D for him," – this wee blond guy. And every time I played the ball to him, he hit it sweet as a nut; he must have scored five goals, straight in the top corner.

I always remember saying to the guys, "He's a good player, eh? He hits a nice ball." Little did I know, it was Ronald Koeman. He'd just signed an £8m deal to go to PSV.

Even without Koeman, who bequeathed his No.8 jersey to Dick, Cruyff's Ajax side was resplendent with world-class stars. 'When I got changed at Ajax,' Dick remembers, 'it was Arnold Mühren, me and Marco van Basten.

Mühren was about 38 at the time, but he was the perfect player to play with as a winger: he'd get it and give it to you, so you had plenty of chances to cross in to Van Basten, Johnny Bosman, and Frank Rijkaard would be steaming in – all great in the air. A lot of chances were converted.'

Rijkaard and Van Basten would join AC Milan at the end of the 1986/87 season, joining up with fellow Dutchman Ruud Gullit to win back-to-back European Cups in '89 and '90, but not before helping Ajax clinch the Cup Winners' Cup. Dick's season was ended in the second round of the competition, however, rupturing a cruciate knee ligament in a 4-0 defeat of Olympiacos in October.

'At Ajax, there was no reserve squad. If they had injuries, they'd draft someone in from the youth team. You had 18 professionals, that's it. So you're in the first team right away.

'The left-winger who'd have been my opposition, my challenger, was a Dutch international winger called Rob de Wit. At the time I'd signed, he'd had a stroke that summer, so the position was all mine. At the beginning of the season, I started all the games. And in the Cup Winners' Cup I started all the games.

'When the Olympiacos game came around ... that's when I got injured. I toe-poked the ball to get away and the guy came in sideways and got me. I knew right away something wasn't right. I got up and tried to run it off, but I came off at half-time.'

The injury ruled Dick out for eight months, missing Ajax's 1-0 win over Lokomotive Leipzig in the Cup Winners' Cup Final. He had been hopeful of returning in time to take part in the final –

which, held in Athens' Olympic Stadium, would have made for a satisfying closing of a loop, having suffered his injury against Greek opposition – but he 'didn't want to push it' and risk further complications.

Although Dick recovered sufficiently to be available for selection by the start of the 1987/88 season, injury problems persisted. Ajax again reached the Cup Winners' Cup Final and this time Dick was in the squad, but he didn't make it off the bench as the Amsterdam side slipped to a 1-0 defeat against Mechelen. He made just six appearances that term.

By his own admission, Dick was never the most dedicated trainer. He loved nothing more than showing off in front of a full stadium, but the hard hours on the training field were a nuisance. His fitness level had dropped during his eight-month absence and it would never truly recover.

'I didn't play much that season,' he says. 'I got the odd game. A lot of injuries. I struggled a bit. I remember I went on holiday that year and came back very unfit, overweight. I was unfit, had a bad knee – I knew I wasn't going to be first choice. I tried to get back in but I was struggling.'

Cruyff left Ajax in the months before the Cup Winners' Cup Final defeat to Mechelen – who were managed by Aad de Mos, the former Ajax boss sacked two months prior to Cruyff's appointment in 1985. Before Cruyff left, though, Dick had managed to anger the headstrong Dutchman by confessing a desire to leave, further contributing to his lack of first-team opportunities.

'At the time, I was homesick,' Dick says. 'I heard Celtic were in for me and I was in the right place to come home. Near the end of the second year, I went in and asked Cruyff if it was true [that Celtic were interested]. I said, "If it's true, I'd like to go."

'I thought I was doing the right thing. I found out it was the wrong thing to do – never let them know you want to leave. I was a young guy; I didn't know that was a bad thing to do. I didn't tell them I wanted to leave; I just told them if Celtic came in, I'd definitely be interested.

'I was on the fringes then. You know you've gone back a bit then. If the left-sided player was injured, it wasn't automatically

me who'd come in. I never threw my toys out of the pram or anything, but I gave up a little bit. I was fed up in Holland and I just wanted to go.'

Dick left Ajax in 1988. At 23, his résumé boasted a UEFA Cup victory and runners-up medals in the Cup Winners' Cup and UEFA Super Cup, in addition to his youth honours with Scotland. Yet, while records of his total appearances vary from source to source, he likely had fewer than 50 senior games under his belt.

The rumoured Celtic interest never did materialise. Upon leaving Ajax, Dick returned to England, training with Wimbledon and Southampton in an effort to regain fitness and earn a contract, before signing with Brighton & Hove Albion. He would last just eight months with the Seagulls, though, fighting a losing battle against mounting injuries.

'I was always injured,' Dick says of his ill-fated spell with Brighton. 'Right from the get-go, I had a bad back, probably from my knee. I battled for fitness the whole time. I could never get to that fitness level that everybody else had.'

'I never made it easy for myself: I was lazy, I hated training. It was very difficult for me to get ultra-fit.'

Dick decided to take some time away from the game when he left Brighton in an effort to allow his body to heal. In the early 1990s, he was tempted back into football by an offer to play for South African side Hellenic. What was supposed to be a three-month deal was eventually extended to six. Although meeting his future wife while based in Cape Town retrospectively colours his time with Hellenic positively, he again found himself 'constantly injured', while registration issues meant he only played a handful of games.

Next came a spell in Australia, with Melbourne's Heidelberg United – 'I loved it. The pace was slower, perfect for me. If I wasn't feeling great I didn't have to train. It was very relaxed. I probably would have stayed there longer but the manager got sacked.'

A chance to return to South Africa presented itself and Dick signed with Seven Stars, the club who, coincidentally, would later become Ajax Cape Town, a sister club of the famous Amsterdam side.

During his time with Seven Stars, Dick took the opportunity to coach in nearby townships as part of an outreach project the club ran. A humbling experience, he encountered startling poverty, with many of the children shoeless for the sessions.

‘The kids would get two slices of bread and a slop of strawberry jam. That was their lunch. It was the same everywhere we went. It broke your heart.

‘We used to turn up for training sessions, there’d be 40 kids and 20 of them never had shoes, they’d just be barefoot. It was that poor. They were lovely wee kids, polite as you could get. But it broke your heart. Every day, you realise how lucky you are. We used to give out free crisps – we were sponsored by a chip company. I think they just turned up for the crisps, they were so poor.’

When his time in South Africa came to an end, the 32-year-old Dick joined Alloa Athletic, signing for a Scottish club for the first time in his professional career.

‘The very first game, a bad tackle comes in and tears the ligaments in my ankle, the same one. That was it. I’d been on the park ten minutes. I still thought I’d play, but it just never started again.’

* * *

Dick has spent most of the two decades since his retirement working as a regional distribution manager for the *Daily Mail* and then chocolate manufacturer Mars. Football has flitted in and out of his life. He took part once in ‘The Masters’, a series of six-a-side tournaments for retired pros broadcast on Sky Sports during the 2000s, representing Ajax. In 2011 he tried his hand at coaching, leading sessions for young players at Stirling Albion, and he now oversees a local university team, but the effects of his old injuries still trouble him.

‘I used to join in training,’ Dick says. ‘Now I’ve noticed I can’t do that. I join in for ten minutes then I have to stop, my ankle gets stiff and sore the next day. It’s rotten when your head wants to do something but your body won’t allow you.’

The ankle issues, which date back to the 1984 UEFA Cup Final, when he was just 19, now prevent Dick from walking long

distances, while his surgically repaired knee's lack of mobility means he has to kick a leg out straight when bending to tie his shoelaces.

'I remember the first couple of weeks at Tottenham, we'd do stretching and I could kneel down and lie flat on my back with my knees bent. I remember watching all the other guys and there were only two other guys who could do it. The older guys were bolt upright, and I was laughing at them. When you're 16, you think, "Never in a million years will that happen to me."

'You think you're invincible at that age but it catches up. I've had operations on both my knees, and they throb, ache, are sore. I can't bend my one knee completely. It was quite flexible before that, so that's kind of weird. And it interferes with your everyday life, playing with your kids and stuff.'

When the injury he sustained against Olympiacos in his first season with Ajax was assessed, the specialist told Dick he wouldn't play football again. The doctor was only half right. He was just 21 at the time and he would play on for 11 years, but never consistently at a high level. His Ajax career wound down quickly thereafter and his return to English football was as brief as it was uneventful.

'When I was at Ajax and I got injured, I accepted it pretty quick. I know a lot of guys strive and want to get back to the top, but I accepted the fact I would never be at the top. It probably helped because I'd done a lot, had a lot of medals,' Dick says, explaining how focusing on what football gave him, rather than what it took away, helped him achieve a healthy perspective.

'I never regretted anything. I always considered myself very lucky that I'd done all that before I got injured. I was happy with that and I accepted it. I think that was key to me being balanced and happy and well adjusted. I'd been involved in five European cup finals before I was 22 – I was very happy with that.'

Upon joining Tottenham as a 16-year-old, Dick was only given 25 per cent of his weekly wages, with the club funnelling the rest into a pension fund which, he says, is still fully intact. While this gave him a degree of financial peace of mind as his career in football wound down, he didn't reap the kind of rewards

from the game that would have allowed for a life of leisure post-retirement.

Dick was 27 when the Premier League was formed in 1992. He should have been at his playing peak as satellite television was flooding football with money. With a little more luck, or were he to have benefitted from modern medical and sports science better treating and working to prevent the injuries that plagued him, Dick, Graham Hunter firmly believes, would have been a superstar.

‘Today,’ Hunter is adamant, ‘make no fucking mistake about it, he’d be earning Ángel Di María money. He’d be better than [Raheem] Sterling has proven himself to be. I’m not being derogatory about Raheem Sterling, but, for my money, Ally was a better player.’

‘And when I talk about his technique and his left foot: it was from the fucking gods.’