

DAVID ROBERTSON
WITH ALISTAIR AIRD



THE QUIET MAN

ROARS

The DAVID ROBERTSON Story

Forewords by Richard Gough and Walter Smith OBE

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CHAPTER 1

IN THE BEGINNING

MY NAME is David Alexander James Robertson. I was born on 17 October 1968 in Aberdeen and I made my name as a marauding full-back for Aberdeen, Rangers and Leeds United. After my career ended prematurely through injury, I moved into management and had spells in charge at Elgin City and Montrose in Scotland before moving to America. I started in grassroots football out there and eventually became executive director at Sereno Soccer Club. During that time, I had an ill-fated spell as head coach with Phoenix FC and when I left the States, I took on my current role as head coach of the Indian I-League side, Real Kashmir.

But before we get to all that I want to take you back to the beginning and my early years growing up in Aberdeen. My family and I lived in a council house in Inchbrae Terrace in a part of Aberdeen called Garthdee. My dad, Leslie, was a stock taker for breweries such as Ushers and Lorimers and my mum, Muriel, worked in Watt and Grant, which was regarded as one of the most upmarket and expensive department stores on Union Street. My sister Susan, three years my senior, completed the

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Robertson family unit at that time and my granny, my dad's mum, and my dad's sister also lived with us.

For both Mum and Dad, family came first. They were very private people and didn't want to impose on anyone. My dad used to travel a couple of times a month with work but every night he was home, he would take me to training. And hail, rain or shine he was there for the majority of games I played too. He was extremely supportive – his favourite phrase when I got out the car was 'remember to turn it on today' – but he would be blunt with me too. After games his feedback would be one of two things: I was either brilliant or murder! He didn't mince his words but never lost his temper once. Between him and my mum there's no doubt he was the soft touch.

I admit I did have a fear of my mum, but it was a fear of letting her down. She was a very warm person, but you knew if you stepped out of line, she would come down on you like a ton of bricks. I once got the belt at school – I can't remember what it was for – and it was a couple of months before a parents' evening. I was terrified of my mum finding out as I knew she would be disappointed, so I didn't tell her when it happened. But about half an hour before she was due to go to the parents' evening, I had to admit it to her as I didn't want her finding out from the teacher. In the end it wasn't mentioned!

I recall a time too when Mum sent me up to the local shop. It was snowing and the shop was at the top of a steep hill. I was despatched to get half a pound of chopped pork and she would always write in capital letters that it had to be cut thin. I picked up the meat and got the change and started to run home, but I fell. I skinned my knees and all the coins I was carrying flew out my hand. When I got home, Mum shouted at me as I had

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holes in my trousers and she also asked where her change was. I hadn't been able to recover it after my fall so had to explain that I had lost it. But the incident was soon forgotten about and I have a host of good memories of growing up.

Susan and I used to fight a lot – in later years it was usually over who was going to use Mum's car – but we always played together when we were younger. Like me, Susan is very quiet. We would talk a lot when we were in the house but when we ventured outside, we were both a bit shy. I wouldn't say we were scared to talk to other people, it was more that you feared saying something wrong that would see you getting ridiculed.

My brother Michael was a late bloomer, arriving 12 years after I did. My mum told me that both her and my dad were worried about what Susan and I would say when we found out she was pregnant. They had agreed that if I got upset, they would buy me a new pair of football boots. But instead of being upset, when they told me I was delighted so I never got those boots! For my mum and dad, Michael's arrival was like a new chapter in their life and, initially, it was a bit weird having a baby in the house. Susan and I both looked after him, though, taking him out for walks in his pram. And once he grew up, we ended up sharing a room together.

In the house in Garthdee, my dad had erected a dividing wall so Susan and I could have separate rooms. But after Susan moved out that wall came down and Michael and I shared the space. I remember us having bunk beds and he was a typical little brother. By the time I was full-time at Aberdeen I would take him down to Pittodrie and you could tell he was proud of me.

Incidentally, my middle names came from both my grandfathers. Mum and Dad couldn't decide which one to

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choose so I ended up with both. But over the years the length of name has caused me some problems, notably when filling in forms as my full name is often too long to fit in the boxes provided!

There was a real community spirit in Garthdee. This was a generation where we had no Xbox or PlayStation; in fact we only had two channels to choose from on the TV. Live football was a rarity too and even highlights were confined to either a Wednesday or a Saturday night. Our house phone was one of those old-fashioned dial ones and we didn't have an answering machine. I have often wondered how boys' club coaches communicated with their players back then, but in a similar way to the poverty I've experienced in India, we didn't know any different and we just got on with it. There was no trouble, and everybody got on with each other.

However, initially at least, I didn't have much interest in football. My dad, who played amateur football, was an Aberdeen supporter and he would take me to games at Pittodrie, bribing me with sweets so I would go along. I think he just wanted me to get involved but I only went to a handful of games. And he would also take Susan and me to Duthie Park most weekends to kick a ball around. I know he wanted me to share his love for the beautiful game and for me to get into the school team, but try as he might, he just couldn't stimulate an interest in football. In fact, my sister would usually kick the ball more often than I did and, for me, the highlight of the trip to the park was getting an ice cream before we went home. But my relationship with football would all change in November 1976 when I fell in love with the game after Aberdeen upset the odds to beat Celtic 2-1 in the Scottish League Cup Final.

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Although they were on the cusp of arguably the most successful era in their history, silverware was a rarity at Pittodrie back then. Since their foundation back in April 1903 they had won just four major honours in Scotland: the Scottish Cup twice (in 1946/47 and 1969/70), the league title in 1954/55, and the League Cup a year later. But under the guidance of the eccentric Ally McLeod, the Dons progressed to the final of the League Cup in 1976/77, steamrolling the holders and Treble winners the previous season, Rangers, 5-1 in the semi-final.

Jocky Scott, who would go on to have a successful career as a manager at Dundee and also as co-manager when I was in the first team at Aberdeen, scored a hat-trick in that one, with the other goals coming from wee Joe Harper and Drew Jarvie. And the balding Jarvie was on the mark again in the final against Jock Stein's Celtic at Hampden. Celtic, playing in the final for the 13th successive year, scored first courtesy of a Kenny Dalglish penalty but big Drew equalised to force extra time. And in the additional half-hour substitute Dave Robb grabbed the winning goal for Aberdeen.

Unfortunately, Dad hadn't been able to go to Hampden. It was extremely difficult to get tickets for matches of this ilk in those days and it was commonplace to see hundreds of folk snaking round the streets around Pittodrie as fans queued for tickets for big games. Indeed, when Aberdeen welcomed Liverpool to Pittodrie for a European Cup tie in 1980, Dad queued from 5am and still didn't get a ticket. While he didn't wait in line as long this time, he still missed out on a much sought-after ticket and as the game wasn't televised, we had to content ourselves with listening to the commentary on the radio.

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He might have missed out when it came to attending the game but there was no way my dad was going to miss the open-top bus parade when the players returned to the north-east with the trophy. My mum, Susan and I went with him and I remember Mum buying us scarves and flags. Dad was in his element, proudly pointing out the players to me as the bus negotiated its way along a packed Union Street.

After the bus passed, we joined the crowd that followed it to Aberdeen's Pittodrie Stadium. For my dad, going into the stadium wasn't a new experience – he went to the majority of the home games the Dons played – but although I had been before, on this occasion I was awe-struck. The sheer size of the place and the fact it was packed just blew me away. Seeing what winning the cup meant to so many people got me really excited and changed my outlook when it came to football.

I was now hooked, and intoxicated by the game. Whenever I got the opportunity I would be out in the back garden with a ball. What used to be my sister's swing fast became a set of goals, complete with a fishing net which we draped over it. My mum's family are from Peterhead so we managed to get our hands on one of the big nets from the harbour, and night after night I would be out there until darkness descended, battering balls into my makeshift goals. And I would be out on any patch of grass I could find with my mates too, playing anything up to 50-a-side in communal areas with jackets for goalposts. I loved it.

Dad would now have a more willing companion when he went to Pittodrie. And I was so enthused that I didn't just attend first-team fixtures, I would go and watch the reserves too. I remember going to one reserve match against Queen's Park in

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February 1977 and although it ended 0-0, the lack of goals did not curb my enthusiasm.

On the rare occasions a game was shown on television, I would be alongside my dad too. Back in the 1970s live football wasn't the big deal it is today. It was usually just international matches and the Scottish and FA Cup finals that were televised live but, when they were on, I would position myself next to my old man on the sofa and drink in everything.

And it wasn't just watching football that appealed to me; I now had a hankering to play the game and perhaps pursue a career as a professional. There were, however, some initial bumps in the road. Only a few weeks after the League Cup Final I got a trial for the school team at Inchgarth Primary but didn't get in. I remember being disappointed and frustrated but, even when I was at Rangers, I always doubted my ability as a player, so I wasn't surprised. However, I stuck at it and eventually got picked. But my debut ended embarrassingly.

I may have made my name as a full-back but in the fledgling days of my career I was a left-winger. And it was on the wing that I played for the school team but, if I'm honest, I was a bit of a one-trick pony. I had lots of pace so all I would do was knock the ball beyond the full-back and use my speed to beat him. I felt I wasn't blessed with a huge amount of technical ability, though, and a few years later Alex Ferguson would tell my dad that I lacked sufficient guile to make it as a winger.

That's maybe why I didn't impress in my initial games for the school team. For my first appearance I was selected as sub after one of the regulars called off as he was ill. But when I came on I had such a poor game that I was actually subbed off! In fact,

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my mum and Aunt Betty, who were at the game, said they were embarrassed by my performance.

But what I lacked in self-confidence I made up for in determination. I stuck at it and got a run in the team. And I impressed in one game against Cummings Park, setting up our first goal and then scoring our second all within the first five minutes. We won that one 5-1 and I was starting to make a name for myself due to my surging runs down the left wing.

And my development was helped by the fact that I supplemented my games for the school team with appearances for the Boys' Brigade football team. I was a member of the 62nd Company of the Aberdeen and District Battalion and I loved the fact they had a football team. I was now playing three games every weekend. I would play for the school on a Saturday morning, my boys' club team in the afternoon then in tournaments for the Boys' Brigade on the Sunday.

The officer who ran the Boys' Brigade team was a quiet chap called David Wyness, and he had a significant influence on my career. He decided to pen a letter to Aberdeen, wherein he suggested they should send a scout to watch me. They did but I would have to wait a few years before they took me on. There weren't any youth academies back then and the lowest age group at Aberdeen was under-14. That meant I had to content myself with game time in the interim for the school, the Boys' Brigade and my boys' club team.

The boys' club I was playing for was Deeside and that all came about after the second year of playing for Inchgarth Primary. At the end of the year, I was picked for a team called Garthdee Gola who took part in a tournament called Champion Street. That took place in the summer holidays and the idea was

that if you lived within a certain radius of a big street – Garthdee Road in my case – you were eligible to get picked. You then played two or three games a week, with the final for the Denis Law Trophy taking place at Pittodrie.

After a convincing 5-0 win over Mastrick Dynamo, Garthdee made it to the final in 1979 and it took place at Pittodrie on 1 September before Aberdeen faced Meadowbank Thistle in the second leg of a second-round League Cup tie. Although the ground wasn't full – there were only about 6,000 there – it was by far the biggest crowd I had ever played in front of and it was such a thrill to play at the home ground of my local team. Our team manager, Adrian Thomson, laid on a double-decker bus to ferry the families to the ground and although we lost 2-0 to a team called Netherview Spurs, we stayed on to watch the senior match. Having won the first leg 5-0 this was about going through the motions for the Dons but they got a bit of a fright when having twice taken the lead through goals from John McMaster and Gordon Strachan, a late goal earned Meadowbank a 2-2 draw. Incidentally, my mum ended up £50 richer too for she was picked out as the face in the crowd in the local paper the following day.

If I ever needed confirmation that a career as a footballer was the one for me then I got it that night at Pittodrie. The whole experience was magical and fuelled my desire to make an impression on any scouts coming to watch Deeside's games. And I must have impressed those that watched the games as both Aberdeen Lads' Club and Deeside Boys' Club came in for me. I didn't think I was good enough to play for either team, but the coach of Deeside was chap called Ian Connell, who lived not far from us. He made me feel at home, so I elected to play for Deeside.

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I had a great time with Deeside. I was only ten when I joined but I worked my way through the age groups and there were numerous highlights, including four goals in an 8-0 win over a team called Perth City in the second round of the Scottish Juvenile Under-18 Cup.

But I wasn't just making an impact with Deeside. My form for the school team saw me selected for the Aberdeen Primary School Select side and getting picked for that really thrust you into the shop window. Since Aberdeen's youth teams only started at under-14, they instead brought boys from the Primary School Select in for training, keeping them on for a while as they went on to secondary school then deciding who they wanted to sign and who they didn't.

Under the watchful eye of coaches Lenny Taylor, George Adams and Bobby Clark, we used to train on a Monday night on the red ash pitch that sat opposite Pittodrie and is still used to this day as a car park on matchdays. I had worked with Lenny and Bobby at schoolboy level and Bobby was an Aberdeen legend. He had kept goal for the club for over 15 years and in 1971 went a phenomenal 13 consecutive matches without conceding a goal. As you can imagine, my dad was absolutely buzzing that his son was being coached by such an iconic figure and I'll never forget the lessons I learned in those sessions.

With both Bobby and Lenny being schoolteachers, they were big on discipline and neither of the two of them swore. There was very little shouting; it was all about encouragement and training, and playing games in that system wasn't too dissimilar to being at school. It was more like teaching than coaching.

Unlike Bobby, Lenny didn't have the same playing background, but he was well-liked at the club and he was part of the furniture.

Fergie really trusted him, and they had a very close working relationship. He's just a great guy and there's not one player I know who has a bad word to say about him. When we attend reunions, even the guys he let go, the ones that he didn't think were good enough to make it at Aberdeen, all speak highly of him.

The encouragement he offered didn't stop when I made the first team, particularly if I was going through a hard time. One such occasion came after I cost Aberdeen a point in a league match against Motherwell in October 1986. We were struggling a bit at the time – we had only taken four points from our previous five games – and our cause wasn't helped by the fact the manager had had to call upon 26 players since the start of the season. To put that figure in perspective, he had only used 27 in the entirety of 1985/86.

We fell behind that day when Alex Kennedy scored for Motherwell but goals from Davie Dodds, his first for Aberdeen, and Willie Miller had us 2-1 ahead with 16 minutes to go. It was then that I stepped in and ended up getting slaughtered by Fergie. John Reilly, who had come on as sub, picked up the ball inside the box but there wasn't any danger. However, I must have thought there was as I lunged into a challenge and took John down. The referee awarded a penalty, Andy Walker scored, and Fergie was apoplectic. It was only my fourth league appearance, but Fergie was quoted in the press as saying that he had paid the price for playing a 17-year-old defender. He said that you could have got away with playing a forward at that age, but you were taking a chance with a defender.

I was pretty low after Fergie raged at me and my face was tripping me when I took myself along to my sister Susan's wedding later that night. But Lenny was brilliant afterwards. He

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simply asked what I had learned and what I would do differently next time. It was pretty much along the lines of, 'You can't change what's happened, but you can use it to your advantage to improve your game going forward.' Even though by that time I had left the youth system, Lenny was still there for me and would always have time for me.

In addition to training we would play games against Highland League teams on a Monday night and the ash park we played on was the only one in Aberdeen. It was a decent pitch but wasn't anywhere near the standard of the ones we would play on when we went to Glasgow. They were beautiful and we would often struggle when we played there.

After leaving Inchgarth Primary in the summer of 1980 I moved on to Harlaw Academy. I'll admit that I was never the best scholar – I left in the winter of 1984 with just a single 'O' Level in arithmetic – but the move to secondary school gave me more opportunities to play football. I was a regular in the school team and became captain too. The team was looked after by the Modern Studies teacher, Mr Ewen, and I really looked up to him. He had made over 100 appearances for Aberdeen between 1957 and 1962 and had been part of the team that lost out to St Mirren in the 1959 Scottish Cup Final.

He stayed next door to us when we moved to Peterculter and all the pupils knew about him playing for the Dons. But he was such a humble guy and never spoke about his career; it was all about him looking out for his team. We all had so much respect for him and his knowledge of the game was first-class. It was a privilege to play for him.

We won a few trophies during my time at Harlaw. I remember being skipper when we lifted the Sportsman's Trophy one year –

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we beat a team called Linksfield in the final – and I was starting to catch the eye of scouts who attended our games. I managed to impress them enough to earn a place in Aberdeen Secondary Schools select team and that led to national success.

I started with them initially at under-15 level. I was only 14 at the time but the coaching team reckoned I was good enough to train and play with the older lads. And that offered me the opportunity to be part of the team that won the Scottish Cup when we beat Edinburgh 3-0 at Tannadice in 1983.

The tournament had started in 1901. The last time a team from Aberdeen had won the trophy outright was back in 1947 – in 1978 Aberdeen had been declared joint winners with Ayrshire – and we made it through to the final thanks to a 4-1 win over Dumfries. The coaching team must have rated me as they picked me as part of the XI for the final. Similarly to the experience with Garthdee it was incredible to play on the same turf as a top-tier side. Indeed, this was the ground of the Premier Division champions that year. I was deployed at left-back and Lenny told me I had a storming game. Edinburgh were a good side and had won the trophy in 1979 and 1981 but goals from Laird, Lawrence and Brown gave Aberdeen the victory. I can also recall a torrential downpour at the end and staying on to watch the Dundee United match that was played later the same day.

We retained the trophy the following year with a 2-1 win over Lanarkshire at Blairgowrie. Kincorth Academy's Douglas Baxter scored both goals in that one and the lads made it three in a row in 1985 when they defeated Ayrshire 4-1 in Perth. This was the first time in the history of the competition that a team had won three times in succession but, although I played in the

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team that retained the cup in 1984, by the time of the win over Ayrshire I had moved to under-18 level and was making good progress at Aberdeen.

I enjoyed success when I progressed to the under-18 school select too and I can recall in one game being denied a hat-trick when I missed a penalty in a 3-1 victory over the North of Scotland in the last eight of the Scottish Cup. I scored the first two goals and after Douglas Baxter, the chap who had scored twice in the Under-15 Scottish Cup Final, made it 3-1, I had the opportunity to net my third. I couldn't beat the goalkeeper from 12 yards, but I played well in the game and, in one of the many newspaper clippings I have, myself and Andy Langridge were singled out as being the star performers.

As an Aberdeen fan I hoped what I was doing for the variety of teams I was playing for would be enough to convince the club's hierarchy to offer me on an 'S' Form. That was how schoolboys were signed back then but little did I know that another opportunity to sign for a club was on the horizon. I had been recommended to a chap called Jack Buchanan, a scout for Manchester United, who were managed at the time by Dave Sexton.

When I found out Jack had been impressed and wanted me to sign for United, I'll be honest, I burst out laughing. I thought there was no chance that a team as iconic as Manchester United would be keen on me, but it transpired that the interest was genuine. Jack even came to my parents' house to persuade me to go.

The club wanted me to go down and train during the summer holidays but there was a stumbling block. At that time, you had to be 14 to sign what were called 'associated forms' in England

but, as I was aged 13, I could sign schoolboy forms in Scotland. It was, however, a terrific boost to be coveted by United.

But that wasn't the last time I was given the chance to go to Old Trafford. A few months after Alex Ferguson left Aberdeen, I played for the youth team in the BP Youth Cup tie against Celtic at Parkhead. We lost 2-1 and arrived back in Aberdeen about midnight. I drove home to Garthdee in my Vauxhall Astra GTE, a car I couldn't afford, but en route I noticed a car behind me with its lights flashing. It was getting closer and closer so young and naïve as I was then I decided the best way to give the car the slip was to drive faster. I must have reached 80mph in a 30mph zone, yet the car was still right behind me. I then got a horrible feeling it might be the police, so I pulled over. The car following did likewise and from the driver's seat emerged Alex Ferguson.

I was invited into the passenger seat of his car and he basically said he wanted me to go to Manchester United. I told him I would be interested but nothing materialised. Archie Know eventually went with Fergie to Old Trafford, but he took the team for a couple of games before he left. For the last of those fixtures, in midweek at home to Clydebank, I was left out. I had had a good run in the team before that, starting the previous six league games, so it was a surprise when I found out that John McMaster was coming in for me at left-back. However, I heard from Teddy Scott a few months later that this had been a ploy by Fergie. The new Aberdeen manager, Ian Porterfield, was present that night and Teddy told me I had been left out so Porterfield wouldn't know about me, which would make it easier for Manchester United to come in and sign me. In the end it didn't work out that way and I

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actually established myself as a regular in the first team under Porterfield.

Back in the early 1980s, though, my eyes were firmly fixed on a move to my local club and I eventually struck gold. We were playing on the ash park one night when out of the corner of my eye I saw a very important spectator. Alex Ferguson was a regular attender at our Monday night sessions but on this occasion as he took up position next to Lenny and George Adams, his presence must have galvanised me as I scored a couple of goals. My dad had been watching the game and afterwards he told me he was sure Fergie had picked me out from the crowd. And that was confirmed a matter of days later when Lenny called and asked me straight out if I wanted to sign for Aberdeen.

All of a sudden, the interest from United paled into insignificance. I was wanted by my team, my dad's team. I had the chance to follow in the footsteps of the players I watched from the terraces at Pittodrie; there was no way I was going to turn that down.

When my dad and I travelled to Pittodrie to sign my schoolboy forms I don't know who was more nervous, him or me! It must have been difficult for him. As a parent he must have been worried about what would happen if I didn't make the grade, but on the other hand, as a dyed-in-the-wool Don, he must have been desperate to see his boy donning that red jersey.

That was the summer of 1982. I had started on the path towards a career as a professional footballer and it happened to begin at the outset of one of the landmark seasons in the history of Aberdeen Football Club.