

JACK ROLLIN

TOMMY  
**LAWTON**

*Head and Shoulders  
Above the Rest*

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## CHAPTER ONE

# Born to be a Centre-Forward

TOMMY LAWTON was born on 6 October 1919 at Farnworth into a modest working-class environment, the son of a railway signalman, his mother a weaver. But his parents split shortly afterwards, his father indicating that it was the end of the line for him. So, the lad's upbringing and encouragement as a footballer were immeasurably helped by his grandfather, Jim Riley, who had also played the game at a reasonable level.

The school playground with a tennis ball usually discovers those more likely to possess an aptitude that sets them apart from the rest. Then it often depends on the enthusiasm and encouragement received to dovetail with this promising talent. Invariably there is an interested sports master. With T. Lawton at Tonge Moor Council School in Bolton it was Mr 'Bunny' Lee who spotted a weakness in the boy's left foot, encouraging him after school hours to kick with a canvas shoe on his right and a football boot on the left.

The opening of the new Castle Hill School in 1928 brought a scholastic change but fortunately the headmaster there, Mr Fred Milner, was equally enthusiastic. Tommy was no educational dunce and he succeeded in gaining a place at Folds Road Central

School in Bolton where, unbelievably, their Mr 'Pop' Lever was of a similar soccer mind, as was Mr William Horrocks, later headmaster. After playing in a trial game, Lawton was selected for the Bolton Town Schools XI. Tommy's scoring instincts kicked in with an amazing 570 goals in only three seasons at Folds Road and for the Hays Athletic team – the figure rounded up nicely for posterity. Still, the progress achieved was outstanding by any measurement, with the firm establishment of Tommy Lawton as a natural goalscorer.

Tommy recalled in his book, *My Twenty Years of Soccer*: 'At Folds Road we used to chalk a set of goal posts on the wall and practise shooting-in or heading-in. We used only tennis balls at that time and looking back I feel that such practice helped me considerably to become such a deadly "shot" with my head when I graduated to first-class football.' He added: 'Naturally my main ambition was to join Bolton Wanderers.'

While at Folds Road, in a school match, some spectators took exception to the big lad using his weight in shoulder charging but Tommy was assured by the experienced referee Bert Fogg that his tactics were fair. During this time, Lawton also played for Lancashire Schools and had several international trials, scoring three in one match at Brighton.

Tommy remembered hearing the locals talk in glowing terms of those great Bolton cup wins of the 1920s. His grandfather and Mr Lever, acting as his advisers, approached the club to enquire what jobs would be on offer while Tommy was on amateur forms with Wanderers. But one at ten shillings and another half a crown cheaper were both turned down. Liverpool was next on the list but they did not follow up after their initial interest. Further afield, Bury failed to follow up their promise of watching Tommy, then it was Sheffield Wednesday's turn. Their manager

Billy Walker offered digs and ten shillings pocket money on top of finding work but this prospect was vetoed by Mrs Lawton who wisely thought 50 miles away was a step too far.

On 5 January 1935 Tommy made his debut for Rossendale United in the Lancashire Combination against Leyland Motors. He had already scored 88 goals that season in the Bolton Amateur League. Rossendale won 9-0, Tommy scored four times and three of them actually counted! Their manager was Mick Tolman, who noted the potential of a player likely to command a healthy transfer fee one day. The *Liverpool Echo* of 19 January commented: 'Look out for Tom Lawton the Bolton ex-schoolboy international [an accolade too far] centre-forward creating a furore in league football.' All this, of course, before he had scarcely touched such heights, illustrating the know-how these Lancashire folk possessed.

Tommy worked for a while at Walker's Tannery making golf clubs, later using that product to some further leisure effect. This was before the Burnley experience. In February 1935 Tommy signed amateur forms for Burnley Football Club of the Second Division, working with the ground staff and in the club offices. His record as an accomplished goalscorer had preceded him. His debut for the 'A' team was on 23 February at Victory Park, Barnoldswick against Lancaster and, as reported in the *Burnley Express*, he scored twice in a 3-2 win with second-half goals described by the reporter as 'an opportunist drive and a brilliant header'. His career was to embrace these twin accomplishments many times over. The Lawton trademark had been firmly stamped. The Burnley 'A' team was: Wilson; Bennion, Kiddy, Wilkinson, Pickering, Metcalfe, Perrin, Graham, Lawton, Laidman and Macartney.

On 9 March 1935, the *Liverpool Echo* reported: 'Burnley are very pleased with their capture of Tom Lawton, the Bolton

Dixie Dean-like schoolboy centre-forward.’ The *Lancashire Evening Post* subsequently commented on the fact that two former County School team forwards who had both scored 100 goals in the season, Fred Taylor (Briercliffe) and Lawton (Bolton), were together at Burnley.

But Tom had another reputation, as a junior cricketer in Bolton. In fact, before the new football season, he played for Burnley’s ‘A’ team and carried his bat for 42. He topped their batting averages in the Lancashire League. However, the first football trial match at Turf Moor – such an appropriate name for a football ground – took place on 24 August 1935, mostly youngsters plus a handful of professionals, including a couple of new signings. Tom Lawton, as he was invariably referred to in the *Burnley Express*, featured in the Clarets team. The reporter commented: ‘The forwards were splendidly led by Lawton who fed his wing men with accuracy and good judgment.’ He scored their second goal.

On the following Tuesday, the likely Central League team featured against the ‘A’ side, effectively the third XI, with Lawton leading its forward line. Against the professionals he showed promise. For the third trial he was brought on in the second half for the probable first team at the expense of England international George Brown, shipped into the stiffs. At the time there was no hint of a more permanent situation affecting the two players. Despite suffering from flat feet and needing arch supports in his boots, Lawton’s footwork was speedy, swift and sure.

Events moved on apace. It was on 7 September that 15-year-old Tom played for Burnley’s reserves at Huddersfield in a Central League match. Burnley’s team was: Scott; Hartley, Hubbick, Oliver, Johnson, Hindmarsh, J. Lawton, Rayner, T.

Lawton, Kilcar and Weale. Jack Lawton was unrelated, though also came from the Bolton area, and had played for Manchester North End. However, displaying good control and shooting capability, Tom Lawton also possessed the confidence to dribble through the opposing defence on one occasion. Two days later he scored for the reserves in a 2-1 win over Preston North End. Then came the move that stunned Burnley supporters – when George Brown was transferred to Leeds United for £3,000 following an offer the club could not refuse, with takings at first-team matches often less than a third of this figure.

However, for the moment Tom Lawton switched back and forth with the 'A' team and, notably, on 19 October he was on hand for their first win of the season, beating Darwen reserves 5-3, Lawton recording a splendid four-timer. Three weeks later he snatched a hat-trick against Lancaster and was also included in Burnley's Northern Midweek League side that included both professionals and amateurs, which furthered his education.

Near the transfer deadline in March, Burnley signed Bob Brocklebank, a forward from Aston Villa, and he made his debut at Southampton. Then, on 28 March 1936 it was announced that 16-year-old Tom Lawton was to make his Football League debut at centre-forward against Doncaster Rovers at Turf Moor.

Tommy had already played in a dozen or more Central League games and had hit 18 goals for the 'A' team for whom he had appeared the previous week and scored twice against Morecambe reserves. The twin newcomers roused interest to the extent that a gate of 12,350 was attracted. But it was a poor game and ended 1-1. Lawton was then 16 years 170 days and, as expected, was well marked by the 23-year-old Doncaster centre-half Syd Bycroft, signed from Newark. He was a shade taller than Tommy plus a stone heavier and was making his



first appearance at centre-half, though he had led the senior attack once before. He had previously been with Bradford and Hull City. But Tom showed sufficient promise to be given another chance. Burnley's team for his debut match was: Adams; Richmond, Hubbick, Hindmarsh, Johnson, Robinson, Hancock, Brocklebank, Lawton, Hornby and Fletcher.

W. M. Johnston's *The Football League 1935–36* referred to Lawton as follows: 'A youthful prodigy showed exceptional promise for the future.' Burnley clearly thought along similar lines and they kept him in a week later at Swansea on 4 April. Lawton scored twice at Vetch Field in Burnley's 3-1 win. His first came within three minutes of the restart after the break when a mix-up in the Swansea defence allowed him to lob into an empty net. Less than half an hour later he accepted a pass from Brocklebank for his second and throughout had better support.

Some 15 years later in his *All-Star Football Book*, Tommy referred to scoring in each half. 'Could I forget those two goals? Of course I could.' He had even forgotten the half-time break for starters. But on the day he had been brought back to earth when a colleague said: 'Tha've a long way to go and a lot to learn.'

However, on Good Friday 1936 Burnley entertained Manchester United and hoped for further points in their battle to stave off relegation. Though Lawton was generally well held by George Vose in the United defence, it was discovered after the match that he had sustained a groin injury. The match ended 2-2, against the team that would go on to win the league. However, as a result of his injury, on Easter Saturday the teenager missed the Norwich City match at Turf Moor, which produced another precious point in a 1-1 draw. Tommy also missed the return with Manchester United and the 4-0 defeat that ensued on Easter Monday.

Tommy was restored to the side at Bury on 18 April and responded with two goals in a 4-0 win at Gigg Lane that buried thoughts of demotion. His first after 35 minutes was a beautifully judged header following a cross from his namesake Jack Lawton, the second in the 80th minute when he rounded a defender and shot in off the crossbar.

Following a goalless draw with Tottenham Hotspur, Lawton scored his fifth goal for Burnley and his first at Turf Moor against Leicester City from a ground shot into the far corner. He also earned commendation for his splendid distribution. Burnley lost their last league game of the season 2-0 at Fulham but finished a comfortable 15th in the league table. During the latter stages of the season, Tommy had played seven league games, scored five goals and acquitted himself satisfactorily. He was still just 16 years of age.

At the start of the new season Tommy scored two goals in the 3-0 win over Nottingham Forest at Turf Moor. He also scored in the 4-1 defeat at Chesterfield but twisted his knee when Burnley lost 2-0 at Fulham, so missed the Aston Villa game on 12 September. His place was taken, ironically, by a new signing from Bacup – a schoolmaster at that – in John Gastall who scored on his debut. Though Burnley lost 2-1, Gastall kept his place and scored three goals in the next two winning games. After two matches looking for a goal, Lawton returned, with Gastall shifting to the right wing in the 1-1 draw at Southampton.

That was three days before Tommy's 17th birthday and amid speculation that he was about to turn professional at Turf Moor. He had already been selected to play on the following Saturday at home to Tottenham Hotspur. On the afternoon of his birthday he had an interview with club officials

accompanied by his grandfather Jim Riley, who was employed at Turf Moor on the ground staff and was acting as his guardian. No announcement was made, which merely served to alarm supporters that the youngster's future might be as a professional but not at Turf Moor.

The revelation of what happened might well have ended Tommy Lawton's career as a professional footballer before he had even kicked a ball for money. Grandfather Riley had demanded a £500 signing-on fee! Threatened by the Football League with suspension for the player, common sense prevailed, though how Mr Riley remained in any meaningful employment at Burnley Football Club became a mystery, yet doubtless anything to keep the club's prize possession was paramount.

However, on the Friday Tommy signed as a professional for Burnley. A report in *Topical Times* explained that the necessary forms were completed at chairman Tom Clegg's mill offices. The following day Lawton scored all three goals in the 3-1 win over Tottenham Hotspur. His first was after only 30 seconds and was so quick that only on the mobbing by eight other Burnley players did the reality dawn on the spectators. His second was a 16th-minute header from a cross by Jimmy Stein. Finally, the hat-trick came from a brilliant effort in the second half after he had missed a couple of reasonable chances. Gastall had provided the trio of openings and Lawton had shown clever anticipation in accepting them.

Newspapers, never lacking the obvious adjective, were already calling him 'Boy' Lawton, shades of Cliff Bastin, etc. Shortly afterwards *Topical Times* pre-empted the Marvel comic of 1939 by calling Lawton 'the boy wonder'. Burnley's team on that day was: Hetherington; Richmond, Hubbick, Robinson, Woodruff, Clacher, Gastall, Brocklebank, Lawton, Miller and Stein.

Tommy later remarked: 'When as a lad at Burnley I was lucky to play between inside-forwards Bob Brocklebank and Billy "Golden" Miller. Both knew the exact type of pass on which a centre-forward thrives and my development was hastened by their support.' At 17 Lawton was the youngest to score a league treble.

Burnley scored only once in their next four matches before Lawton managed three goals in two wins – 2-0 at West Ham and 3-0 against Norwich at Turf Moor. At Upton Park the *Topical Times* headlined: 'Tom Lawton Sets the Thames on Fire', and apart from his two goals his general play was impressive. After being beaten 3-0 at Newcastle, a 2-2 draw at home to Bradford produced another Lawton goal. After another draw, 1-1 at Barnsley, Burnley won three on the trot, though Tommy's one goal against Sheffield United was to be his last in the claret and blue.

Following the 2-0 reverse at Doncaster Rovers on 28 December, after having beaten them 3-0 on Christmas Day, the *Burnley Express* said Lawton was unfit and he was not selected to play on 2 January 1937 at Chesterfield.

According to the opening gambit in his 1946 book, *Football Is My Business*, events leading to his departure from Turf Moor were unusual to say the least. On a daily basis it was young Tommy's first task after a spot of training to sort the morning post in the club offices before the arrival of the secretary, Alf Boland. He also had to answer the telephone.

The following call took place some three months after he had signed professional forms. Tommy answered a call and a voice said: 'This is George Allison, manager of Arsenal. Can I speak to the secretary, please?' Tommy responded, explaining Boland's absence: 'This is the assistant-secretary speaking,' he

said. There was more chat then the Allison bombshell: 'I want to make an offer for the transfer of Lawton.'

That morning Wolverhampton Wanderers, Everton, Newcastle United and Manchester City also called. One club among these famous five was ultimately successful; however, in *My Twenty Years of Soccer*, Lawton revealed that there had been eight clubs chasing his signature. Anyway, on 31 December 1936, Wilf Cuff and Tom Percy, representing the Everton directorate, together with the club's secretary, Theo Kelly, invaded the Burnley boardroom. Burnley manager Tom Clegg, who had watched Tommy in a schoolboy international trial and had predicted an international career, asked Tommy whether he would agree to sign for Everton. Following a conference with his grandfather Jim Riley, Tommy agreed. As to the exact figure involved, the initial reports put it at £3,000, later £7,000, until it settled to a general acceptance of £6,500. Amazingly, the arrangement included Grandfather being included in the transfer to take a similar job on the Goodison Park ground staff to the one he had managed to retain at Turf Moor.