



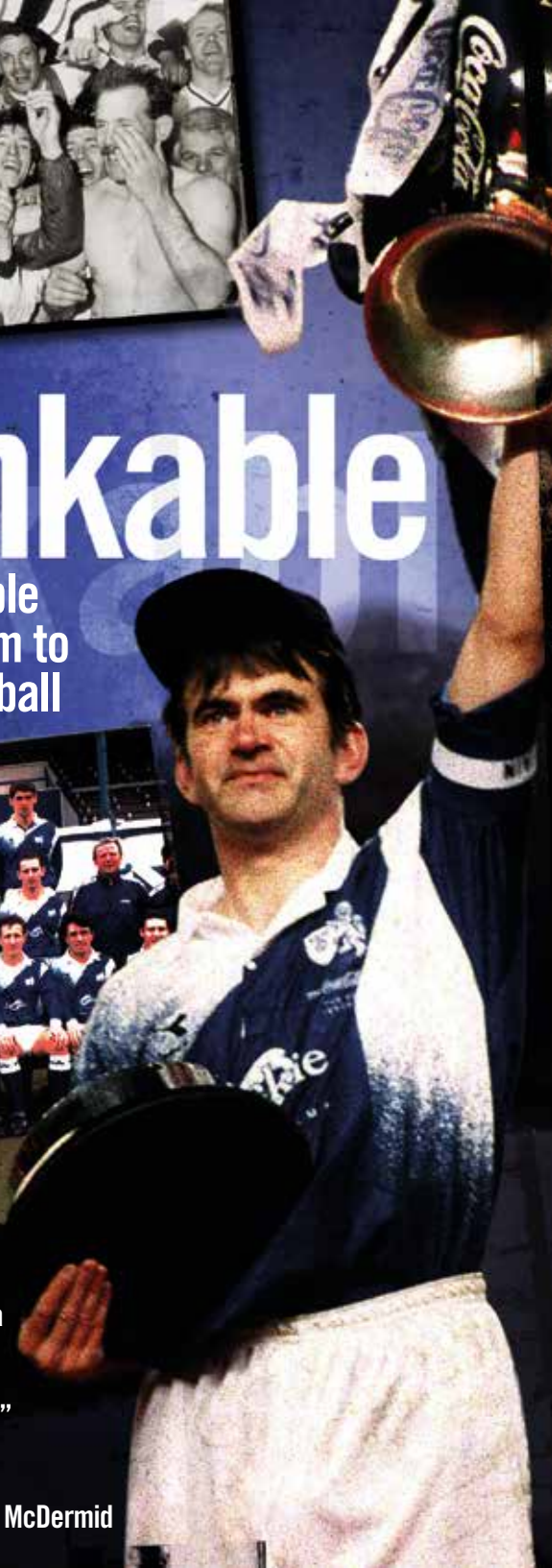
Unthinkable

Raith Rovers' improbable journey from the bottom to the top of Scottish football



"A well written and gripping story of a great team. Essential reading for all Raith fans and any football fan who enjoys when the underdog triumphs."
Gordon Brown

Steven Lawther Foreword by Val McDermid



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FOREWORD

by Val McDermid

TWENTY years ago, I was driving down the M62 from Hull to Manchester, listening to a football match on the radio. Not just any football match. I was listening to the Scottish League Cup Final between Raith Rovers and Celtic. My wee team, battling it out at Ibrox against the mighty green-and-white machine that was Celtic. We scored, they scored. They scored, we scored. I was screaming at the radio, heart swelling with pride, shrinking with fear. Extra time, no more goals.

Then the penalty shoot-out. The German author Peter Handke once wrote a novel called *The Goalkeeper's Fear of the Penalty Kick*. Never mind the goalkeeper. My nerves were shredded. Ten penalty kicks and still nothing between the sides. Then sudden death. And Paul McStay, the Celtic captain and talisman, missed his kick.

We had won.

I had to pull over on to the hard shoulder because I was blinded by my tears. I sat in the fading light of a November evening in the shadow of Saddleworth Moor, a grown woman crying like a bairn because my team had finally won a major trophy.

And that's what football has the power to do to us. It engages us, it ensnares us and then it enslaves us. We are drawn together in an ill-assorted tribe, united only by the love that not only dares

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to speak its name, it positively glories in declaring itself at the top of its voice. Often with added swear words.

The ignorant often sneer at those of us who support teams like Raith Rovers. They mock the quality of our football. They scoff at the lack of prawn sandwiches and champagne. They snigger at our struggles to carve out a decent run of results.

More fool them. What they will never understand is the way a team like Raith Rovers brings people together and reminds us that our communities still have a beating heart.

I feel like I was born into a wider family than my biological one because my father and his father before him were passionate members of the Rovers tribe. Their spirits rose and fell on a Saturday in tandem with the club's results, and they never gave up hope that this season, or next season, or the one after would be the one that brought us glory.

They passed on that love to me. Wherever I am in the world on a Saturday, from Sydney to Helsinki, from Moscow to Minneapolis, I check the results. I have spoken to strangers in Rovers shirts from the Bahamas to Bournemouth, and within minutes, we've found friends in common and shared our hopes and fears for the coming games.

And nearer home, when times are tough, they're a kind of totem that we can pin our hopes to. It is no secret that Kirkcaldy has had to weather some serious economic storms in recent years. At times like that, people seek a source of optimism wherever they can. And in the spirit of 1994, Raith Rovers have rewarded us. They won the Second Division in 2008/09. They were runners-up in the First Division in 2010/11. And this year, as if to celebrate the 20th anniversary, they won the Ramsdens Cup, beating Rangers, the other half of the Old Firm.

Twenty years ago, Raith Rovers gave us something to dance in the streets about. They did it again this year. And because we're true fans, worshippers at the altar of hope over experience, we know it won't be 20 years before they justify our faith again.

Maybe next year? Right? Maybe on the 21st anniversary, we'll do it again. Right?

You bet.

THIS IS THE ONE

*Ibrox Stadium, Glasgow,
27 November 1994*

PAUL McSTAY left the centre circle and began the long, lonely walk towards the penalty spot. He had set off almost immediately after Jason Rowbotham's penalty kick had hit the back of the net and as he made his way forward he passed the relieved Raith Rovers player making the return journey. There was no acknowledgement between the two men as they walked within touching distance. McStay was deep in concentration, head down, contemplating the enormity of the moment he was about to endure.

The Celtic captain was idolised by supporters of the Parkhead club who had christened him 'The Maestro'. They loved the fact that his family was woven into the fabric of the Parkhead club with his great uncle Jimmy a former manager and his brothers Willie and Raymond having also played for the club. However it had been Paul who had truly shone in the green and white hoops with his wonderful touch, elegance in midfield and uncanny ability to produce an inch-perfect pass.

The Celtic supporters had quickly adopted him as one of their favourite sons as he helped the club win three Scottish titles, three Scottish Cups and a League Cup. When he turned down the lure

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of larger, more glamorous suitors to stay and become skipper, his place in the hearts of Celtic fans was cemented forever.

McStay had started the day in determined mood. Despite his glittering Celtic career, he had failed to lift any silverware since becoming captain. The club had experienced five long, barren, trophy-free years since 1989 as they struggled to compete with Rangers, their big-spending neighbours across the city. For a support used to perpetual success he knew that it had been difficult, almost impossible at times, to watch their bitter rivals triumph while they toiled.

This was to finally be the day that their disappointing run came to an end. Celtic had fought their way through to the League Cup Final and with Rangers having fallen in an earlier round, only Raith Rovers stood between them and their natural position as winners once again.

Few had accounted for the stubborn resilience of the First Division side. Rovers had proved more than adequate opponents, refusing to bow to the script that most Celtic supporters had written. They began the final with a swaggering confidence and had the audacity to score first.

Even when Celtic had fought back to equalise and then taken the lead with just six minutes remaining, Rovers found the impertinence to level when some of their most ardent supporters had given up hope.

They had more than matched Celtic in extra time and had scored all six of their penalties in the shoot-out to place intense pressure on the Glasgow side's captain. It was a pressure that McStay was acutely aware of as he progressed towards the penalty spot.

He knew that he had to score to keep his team in the final. If he missed the match was over.

As he made his way forward, each step seemed to attach an extra layer of tension to the moment. Around the stadium 45,000 fans were anxious for McStay to reach his destination and ready to urge him to score or miss with every last ounce of the energy they had left.

His Celtic team-mates waited in the centre circle, drained from 120 minutes of football and the weight of expectation. Beside them stood a Raith Rovers team equally drained but

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buoyed by the knowledge that they were just one mistake away from making history.

Across in the Celtic dugout, McStay's manager and friend Tommy Burns waited, arms folded, looking pale and scarcely able to watch. Opposite Burns in the other dugout stood Raith Rovers manager Jimmy Nicholl, proud of his players and declaring to his assistant Martin Harvey that they were now just one kick away from Europe.

Sitting in the main stand was Celtic reserve team coach Frank Connor, the former Raith manager who had laid the foundations of Rovers' team and helped shape the Celtic captain's early career. His loyalties lay divided. The same was true for ex-Rover John McStay, sitting among the Raith support and desperate for his former club to win but wishing that it was anyone but his cousin Paul taking the next penalty.

Directly in front of the Celtic player stood Raith goalkeeper Scott Thomson, frustrated at his failure to save the previous five penalties and determined to make amends.

As McStay reached the goalmouth Thomson threw the ball high into the air. The Celtic captain slowed his walk to gather the ball, letting it bounce in front of him before catching it. The stadium rippled with anticipation as they waited for him to take his penalty.

He reached down to place the ball and seemed to linger for a moment. Perhaps he was trying to make sure that it was in the perfect position. Perhaps he was trying to focus his mind and disregard the intense pressure he was under or perhaps he was just trying to delay the moment a little longer.

He paced backward nine short steps and as he started his run towards the ball he knew that he alone held responsibility for the next few seconds. Score and the immense pressure would shift to the next Raith penalty taker. Miss and the misery of the last five years would seem like a mere appetiser for the pain he would inflict on a battered and bruised Celtic support.

In the commentary position, Jock Brown searched for the words to adequately portray the drama that was unfolding before him.

'Unthinkable, surely for the skipper to miss,' he uttered and the crowd inside Ibrox Stadium held its collective breath.

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As Thomson dived, those associated with Rovers knew that in less than a decade their club had made the improbable journey from the bottom of the Scottish Football League to the verge of their greatest triumph.

This is the story of that journey.

GETTING NOWHERE FAST

Kirkcaldy, December 1985

GRAEME SCOTT sat in his office at the *Fife Free Press*. He had an end-of-year column to write about local club Raith Rovers but was finding it hard to muster any enthusiasm. The last few months watching Rovers had been grim. Actually, the last few seasons watching Rovers had been grim.

He was well aware that when he was handed the responsibility of being the main match reporter at Stark's Park it wasn't exactly a golden ticket to the glamorous end of the Scottish game. Raith Rovers were not the type of football club who had glory knocking on their door every season. To be honest, they were lucky if it came around to call every half-century.

Most of their 101-year existence had been spent plodding along in the middle tier of Scottish football and the record books showed that they had only three First Division titles to their name, the last of which had been almost 40 years ago.

There had of course been great teams and talented players at Stark's Park over the years. Rovers had nurtured Alex James and Jim Baxter, who would both play for Scotland and torment the English at Wembley. There was also their historic entry in the *Guinness Book of Records* as the British club who had scored

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the most league goals in a season – an incredible 142 on the way to winning promotion in 1937/38. It was an achievement that many younger Rovers fans used as a last line of defence when being taunted by their Rangers- and Celtic-supporting friends in the playground, but it wasn't really an adequate rebuttal to stories of Premier League titles and cup wins.

The harsh reality was that despite the odd title win, the infrequent promotion and rare appearance in a cup final, Raith Rovers had never won a national trophy. They were a club that tended to make up the numbers in the Scottish game, labelled by club historian John Lister as the 'great tantalisers', flirting with glory but never inviting it in. Yet even set against these relatively modest expectations, Rovers were seriously under-performing. Graeme Scott pondered the full misery of the last two seasons as he tried to force some words on to paper.

Scott had started covering Rovers in 1981 as they missed out on promotion to the Premier League under manager Gordon Wallace. A late-season collapse saw them overtaken by Hibernian and fuelled talk of the club intentionally throwing the league. It was a conspiracy theory that endured among the Kirkcaldy public for many years.

When Wallace left for Dundee United in 1983, his replacement Bobby Wilson seemed an imaginative appointment having enjoyed five years of success at Highland League side Keith. Wilson took up his post with Raith's centenary season of 1983/84 already under way and there was optimism that he could be the catalyst to reinvigorate the club.

In his programme notes for his first game against Morton on 24 September 1983, he spoke of the opportunity the Rovers job had presented him, 'It is indeed gratifying to be given a chance to succeed at the highest level of Scottish football and hopefully some of the success and luck which I enjoyed at Keith will follow me here.'

It didn't. Rovers struggled throughout the season, unable to escape the threat of relegation. Only a late upturn in form gave them hope going into the final day. They travelled to Meadowbank knowing that a win would secure their place in the First Division if Ayr failed to win against champions Dumbarton.

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The sizeable Rovers support inside Meadowbank Stadium watched the Kirkcaldy side keep their side of the bargain, but a surprise 3-0 defeat of Dumbarton by Ayr meant that Rovers were relegated. It was an unfortunate end to the season but the closeness of the finish could not mask the inadequacy of the team and the entire club to the challenge of First Division football.

John Litster later reflected, 'A centenary season should be a highlight in the lifetime of a football club and should have inspired the players to greater efforts. Raith Rovers' centenary was certainly characteristic of the majority of the club's history – it brought only struggle, disappointment and, ultimately, failure.'

If Wilson's first season was poor then his second proved to be no better. Despite his claim that 'we won't be in this league for long', the club struggled to adapt to life in the Second Division and limped through 1984/85. A poor start left them quickly out of the promotion race and although they won nine of their last ten league games, they finished in a disappointing seventh place.

As an Aberdeen fan, Scott had reported on all this with a degree of stoicism. If he had been at Pittodrie following his own club he would have just witnessed Alex Ferguson's Dons side clinch consecutive Premier League titles. Instead he was at Stark's Park watching Raith Rovers.

When Scott had phoned Wilson in the run-up to the 85/86 season he had found him in confident mood. The excellent finish to the previous campaign and four pre-season wins, including the defeat of a strong Hearts team, had bolstered confidence. Wilson believed that everything was in place for this to be Raith Rovers' year.

'We've got the same nucleus of players who finished last season so strongly and the players I've held on to are becoming better footballers,' he said. 'Remembering the way we finished last season, people are expecting us to do well because the players have proved that they can do it. My target is obviously to win promotion. After the experience of last season, it is important that we get off to a good start.'

They didn't. Rovers lost to St Johnstone and Stranraer and after just two games sat second-bottom of the league with no points. Only the inferior goal difference of Meadowbank Thistle saved them from the lowest league position in Scottish football.

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Results continued to disappoint as the season progressed and Rovers quickly found themselves off the pace of a promotion challenge. They had briefly threatened a revival in November by demolishing Stenhousemuir 9-2 at Stark's Park, the biggest win recorded in the Second Division since the leagues had been reconstructed 11 years earlier, but any momentum gleaned from such an emphatic win was obliterated the following Saturday when the team travelled to Edinburgh and lost six goals in the second half against Meadowbank. At the final whistle there was anger in the stands, with Rovers' fans coming close to blows as they argued among themselves.

Wilson approached the referee and told him, 'I hope you're as happy with your performance as I am with my fucking team.'

It was a comment that led to him being reported to the SFA, although he maintained the abusive language had been directed at his own team and not the referee. The final, fatal blow to the season occurred in early December when Rovers travelled the short distance to East End Park to be dumped out of the Scottish Cup by local rivals Dunfermline. The Raith supporters left East End in the rain after the 2-0 defeat knowing that, with all hope of promotion long since extinguished, the result ended their campaign.

The impact of the loss was immediate. Chairman John Urquhart announced that the manager's position was going part-time in a cost-cutting measure, making pointed reference to the cup defeat in his statement.

'It's very unfortunate that this happened but we lost around £34,000 last year,' he wrote. 'Without the possibility of a money-spinning cup tie to come we had to closely examine our expenditure. It is regrettable that we had to take this step, but making the manager's job part-time isn't going to affect the playing side of the club. Bobby will still be able to devote as much time to that.'

Scott reflected on a miserable season and thought about his end-of-year column. He could have written a regular, run-of-the-mill article full of platitudes about how it had been a difficult year and how the manager was working hard to turn things around but that wouldn't have reflected the truly awful nature of the situation.

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He phoned Wilson and spoke at length about the state of the club and the challenges facing the Kirkcaldy side. Wilson didn't hold back and told Scott what he thought was wrong, who he thought was responsible and just how dire the situation actually was. After that, the column wrote itself.

'Time to re-think at Stark's Park,' wrote Scott as he leaned heavily on his conversation with the manager. 'As the year 1985 passes into the record books, Raith Rovers' fans are entitled to ask whether there is any reasonable prospect of an improvement in the immediate future. Disillusionment on the terracing has never been greater as Raith languish in the lower reaches of the Second Division and seldom in recent years has there been so little significance attached to a season at such an early stage. A season which began in such a mood of optimism has gone badly wrong and all talk of promotion has long since ceased.'

He continued, 'Apathy is all too evident within Stark's Park and there are some who question the ambition of those who run the club and whether they really want to get out of the Second Division.'

At present, Raith Rovers are a club drifting aimlessly, and unless remedial action is taken quickly, they may well sink without trace.'

He finished the article with a stark warning for all at the club, 'The time has surely come for a rethink in attitude at Stark's Park – or Raith Rovers face a future in the backwater of Scottish football.'

It was forceful and heartfelt, vocalising the intense frustration felt by Wilson and most of the support. For a local reporter to write such a damning article about the club that helped fill his sport pages every week could have risked biting the very hand that fed him but its publication passed with little comment from Stark's Park, perhaps reflecting the accuracy of its assessment.

With hindsight, the publication of Scott's article marked the beginning of the end for Wilson's time in Kirkcaldy. Coach Dick Campbell resigned soon after claiming, 'The standard of players at the club is just not good enough,' and after a home defeat to Cowdenbeath on 11 January 1986, in front of just 600 fans, the Rovers board decided that enough was enough. Wilson had not won a match since the thrashing of Stenhousemuir back

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in November and the club was languishing fifth from bottom of the Second Division.

A few days later, after Rovers had beaten Newburgh Juniors in a midweek friendly match, Urquhart broke the news to Wilson that he was no longer the manager of Raith Rovers. The chairman prepared the formal statement to announce the sacking, 'We wish to intimate the termination of Bobby Wilson's employment as manager of Raith Rovers. Results have not been going our way, although we feel there is ability in the team. The post will be advertised, and we hope to make a new appointment as quickly as possible.'

Urquhart added that he regretted having to take the sacking decision and was sorry to see Bobby leave the club.

If the board had hoped that Wilson would go quietly they were mistaken. Wilson was bruised by his time at Raith Rovers and his comments left people in no doubt who he blamed for the state of the club.

'I feel strongly that I've not had a fair crack of the whip,' he said. 'I was totally disillusioned with the board of directors, and the players have also lost confidence in them. They are not channelling their efforts in the right direction, and the right hand does not know what the left is doing. My former club, Keith, was run a lot more professionally than Raith Rovers who are heading down a one way street.'

He concluded ruefully, 'I thought I was improving myself by coming to Stark's Park but accepting the manager's job was the biggest mistake of my life.'

For the senior players at the club the decline in standards had been difficult to watch. Defender Chris Candlish describes the shambolic way the club was being run. 'We didn't have enough players,' he says. 'Most of the guys I played with were all leaving and we weren't replacing them with quality [players]. There suddenly was no money in the place.'

I had to bring my training gear home to get washed; there was no team bus either. I remember going to Greenock in a car, with Bobby driving. I was thinking, "What the hell's going on here?"

Speaking to people who were around the club at the time, there is a degree of sympathy for Wilson.

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'I don't think Bobby knew what he was letting himself in for,' says journalist Scott. 'His time coincided with ever decreasing circles. There were cutbacks on budgets on and off the pitch. He was a good guy but he wasn't given the tools to work with. He was scraping the barrel in terms of who he could recruit.'

Candlish agreed. 'It wasn't really Bobby's fault,' says the former Rovers player. 'The club had no money and was going nowhere. It really was hand to mouth from Saturday to Saturday.'

Former captain Donald Urquhart felt the manager was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time.

'Bobby tried hard but he wasn't the man to take the club forward,' he says. 'The whole club was so low from top to bottom. The club meant everything to me and it was so bad. Players were coming in who just didn't have it. It killed me because I loved Raith Rovers.'

Regardless of exactly who was to blame for the position Raith Rovers found themselves in, it was clear the Kirkcaldy club had reached one of the lowest points of its 101-year existence.

The situation was worsened by the fact that the local ice hockey team, Fife Flyers, had recently won the British Championship and were playing to increasingly large crowds.

Rovers were in danger of being abandoned by the Kirkcaldy public. As Scott started the calls to find out who was being considered as a replacement for Wilson, he was certain of one thing: given the dismal situation on and off the field at Stark's Park, the next manager would need to be something of a miracle worker.