

Steven Lawther

WE LED IN MUNICH

The unlikely adventures of
Raith Rovers in Europe

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RAITH ROVERS FC

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The Special One

AS HE sits in the bar of the Balmoral Hotel in Edinburgh, 68-year-old Jimmy Nicholl still bristles with enthusiasm about Raith Rovers. The love and warmth he has for the Kirkcaldy club is unmistakeable. 'The six happiest years of my life were spent there,' says Nicholl. 'Of that there is no doubt.'

It is a remarkable assessment given his impressive resumé in football. His playing career took him to Manchester United, Sunderland, Glasgow Rangers, West Bromwich Albion, Toronto Blizzard and, whisper it quietly, Dunfermline Athletic. He featured in two World Cups for Northern Ireland, coming up against the great and good of world football. And for the last 30 years he has worked consistently in the game as manager and coach at several clubs including Rangers, Hibernian, Aberdeen, Dundee, Falkirk and Cowdenbeath, with his passion for football undiminished as he continues to assist Michael O'Neill in his role as Northern Ireland manager. He is one of the game's great characters, loved by fans throughout football, but nowhere is his legacy cherished more than in a small town on the coast of Fife.

The very mention of his name in Kirkcaldy brings a smile to the face of Raith supporters and evokes memories of the most successful period in the club's history. Nicholl achieved promotion to the Premier League not once, but twice, won the club their first national trophy and secured their first participation in Europe. Arguably the most defining moment of his time in charge was the October night in 1995 when he masterminded the trip to Germany, taking on the might of Bayern Munich in the Olympiastadion and having the audacity to take the lead. 'As an achievement, that was probably it,' he reflects. 'Getting Raith Rovers to that stage and that level and to give Bayern Munich a game. All these years later, you have got to feel proud.'

When Nicholl had first walked through the front door at Stark's Park in the winter of 1990, notions of taking the club to such heights seemed fanciful, yet he was not inheriting a club in crisis. Rovers sat fifth in the First Division table, just three points behind leaders Airdrie, and had a talented squad of players. His predecessor had made sure of that, having dragged the club up from the bottom of the old Second Division. 'Frank Connor laid the foundations,' says Nicholl. 'He did a great job. Some of those players had been struggling at the time and Frank brought them back so I inherited great players, a great squad, and a great team.'

Raith were in good shape, but Nicholl was untested as a manager and, at first, struggled. He would record only one victory in his first nine games in charge, a win percentage that in today's football might tempt some chairmen to reach for the panic button.

The board recognised that their new man needed time and allowed him the breathing space to settle into the job. Results improved but the remainder of the season unfolded

in unspectacular fashion and Rovers finished seventh. Salt was rubbed into the wound of a disappointing finish when Airdrie came to Stark's Park for the last league game and clinched promotion to the Premier Division, their fans invading the pitch at the conclusion. 'We were sitting in the dressing room hearing all the noise and celebrations,' recalls former Rovers defender Robbie Raeside. 'Jimmy was annoyed. He sat there and gave us this speech that was, "Listen to that. Remember that feeling and use it. This time next year, that will be us."'

Nicholl's prediction would prove correct, even if the timescale was a little out. The following season Rovers finished fifth, but 12 further months on, with full-time funding secured, his squad swept to the title, securing promotion to the Premier League with five games left to play. The move from part-time to full-time football had been instrumental to the success. It afforded Nicholl the opportunity to add mercurial talents like Craig Brewster and Peter Hetherston and assemble a strong collection of young apprentices who quickly injected raw and exciting talent into the first team. 'We had young players coming through that weren't scared,' says former Rovers player Davie Kirkwood. 'We had the likes of Jason Dair, Colin Cameron, and Stevie Crawford. Those guys were never frightened of a thing.'

Rovers' first foray in the Premier League proved short-lived and a combination of league reconstruction, inexperience and a lack of resources made it virtually impossible for them to avoid relegation. 'We fell short,' reflects former Raith defender Shaun Dennis. 'You have got to invest money to survive but then it's a risk. If you still go down and have players on two-year contracts on the same money as in the Premier League it cripples the club.'

So, Jimmy just had to borrow and beg for what he could get.'

Despite the relegation, Rovers won praise for their fearless, attacking football. 'We were a great team,' says Ally Graham, a striker at Stark's Park from 1993 to 1996. 'A real good attacking team. People feared us. We went to Ibrox [in January 1994], drew 2-2 and we should have won. Some of the team goals we scored were top drawer. Absolute top drawer, and I think the fans appreciated our style of football.'

Back down in the First Division for 1994/95, the priority was to fashion a quick return to the Premier League, a feat easier said than done. Early results were less than impressive as Rovers felt the hangover of relegation. 'There was a lot of frustration at the start of that year,' explains former striker Stevie Crawford. 'We had got a lot of plaudits the previous year when we had gone up into the Premier League and there was probably the expectation that we would go on and win promotion again, but we weren't getting any momentum.'

Team-mate Stephen McAnespie provides a far blunter assessment. 'We were shite,' laughs the ex-Raith defender.

Rovers may have been temporarily toiling but Nicholl, along with assistant Martin Harvey, had created an environment at Stark's Park that was built for success. The young manager fostered a work hard, play hard ethos around the club, understanding implicitly that the greatest environment to perform in was one that was ruled by fun, not fear. 'All I ever wanted was them walking out their front door in the morning looking forward to training,' he explains.

Nicholl fashioned a workplace that players adored. 'There were managers who I played under who, to be

honest, were fucking hopeless,' reflects former midfielder Alex Taylor. 'They were no fun to play for and the coaching police should have taken them away, but at Raith Rovers, Jimmy was the opposite. He was great fun, and his training sessions were always enjoyable. He wanted you to have fun, take chances and you never ever got bored.'

The team spirit at Stark's Park became legendary. 'It became like a club with your pals,' says Shaun Dennis. 'We were all desperate to get into training to see each other. Jimmy used to sit in the tearoom every day and would keep everybody entertained. Players started turning up half an hour early for training and staying behind for an extra hour at the end of the day. You didn't want to leave just in case you missed something.'

'What a carry-on we had,' adds Taylor. 'I used to travel up with the likes of Ronnie Coyle and there was a gang mentality. A lot of the guys were great storytellers. It didn't matter how many times you had heard a story it was great to hear it again because they always put a few extra lines on, added bits or exaggerated. I really enjoyed the laughs and the banter. I was often the butt of it, but I really didn't mind, because it was funny.'

Team spirit and fun was important, but it was underpinned by Nicholl's professionalism, tactical awareness, and football knowledge. 'People look at Jimmy and his personality and they think that he is just a laugh,' says Danny Lennon, 'but he knows the game inside out and because of that some of the football that we played was breathtaking.'

Jimmy Nicholl loved a joke, but he was a professional. He firmly believed there was a time to work and a time to play and it was important that players did not confuse the

two. He was content to let his squad relax and bond on nights out, but demanded focus and determination when it came to training, playing, and working for the team. He also understood football. 'Training was different every single day and you did have a laugh,' says Davie Kirkwood. 'But it was his professionalism and knowledge of the game that stood out. Without that, Raith Rovers wouldn't have had the success they had, it was the perfect combination. It was having a bit of a laugh and a bit of fun, but when he came to the serious stuff, you switched on.'

'You go to events and reunions these days and Jimmy is very modest,' says Robbie Raeside. 'He says, "Aww, we just used to play five-a-sides and do this and that." But I remember Jimmy taking a bag of balls up to Randolph [Industrial Estate] and they were size two or three, tiny balls and he had us all practising passing and inside, outside foot and all sorts of different passing with these tiny balls. You go online now, and you have these laptop coaches coming out with the same as if it is the latest thing. Jimmy used to do that 30 years ago. He is a great tactician, and people need to know that.'

Nicholl took the vast experience he had gleaned throughout his impressive playing career and brought it to Raith, bringing a meticulous approach to every aspect of managing a football club. 'I would write everything down,' he recounts. 'From 1992 when we went full-time, I used to keep a wee diary of everything in notebooks. If a player was ill one Tuesday when we had a hard session, I would write it down. Then maybe three weeks later the same player is ill again and misses a Tuesday again, I would think, "There's a wee pattern developing here." I would also write wee notes on the games from the weekend in them.'

Those notebooks are an archive that would make for fascinating reading today, but they provided Nicholl with an understanding of his players that was unparalleled. He understood personalities and fashioned his squad with the right mix of character to make the team function, nurturing them to learn and grow as players using what he had learned throughout his own playing career. ‘Managers can give players confidence in terms of playing you,’ he explains. ‘But also, in the way they talk to you and how they handle you. Experienced managers should know the different characters in each player and how to handle them.’

Nicholl’s management of players was exemplary. He seemed to intuitively understand what players needed and how to get the best out of them. ‘If he wanted to speak to you,’ says former winger Barry Wilson, ‘he would throw you a ball and you would take the ball and he would walk out on to the pitch with you. You would just sit on the ball at the centre circle and talk. No one was around. No one was listening through walls, and it never got heated. There was just respect.’

‘He had patience,’ explains Julian Broddle, a regular at left-back between 1993 and 1996. ‘I struggled at first when I got to Raith, but Jimmy knew I could play. When I was going through a tough mental period at Partick Thistle, [manager] John Lambie took me to a hypnotist and all that sort of stuff. He gave me this cassette and said, “You have to listen to that before every game.” Jimmy Nic just showed patience, stuck by me and played me most of the time. He understood that if I played, I would get confidence again.’

‘He once left me out for a game against Dundee,’ recalls Ally Graham. ‘The boys couldn’t wait to run down to the tearoom to tell me that I wasn’t in the squad. We got beat

and the manager pulled me into his office on the Monday morning and says, "See that game, you would have been perfect for that game. We would have won that game if you played. Next week you are playing." That was the way he worked. He was building my confidence up again to get the best out of me. He made you feel wanted and he gave you the confidence that you needed.'

That players talk with such warmth about a manager they have not worked with for decades, shows the strength of relationship that was built at Stark's Park during Nicholl's time in charge. Many still credit their most successful time in football or their future careers to what they learned under his guidance. 'There is a lot of stuff that Jimmy showed me on and off the park that I still carry with me,' reflects Stevie Crawford. 'When I played with Rovers, I went into games never frightened of trying to express myself and never being frightened of making mistakes. It was Jimmy who created that through natural enthusiasm and his energy.'

Nicholl's unique combination of enthusiasm, intelligence and tactical awareness had created the perfect conditions for success, but as Raith struggled at the start of the 1994/95 season, it would need a catalyst to jump-start their campaign. That would come in the shape of the League Cup which began on an August evening in the unlikely setting of Dingwall. It is an evening that fan Jonathan Tippetts-Aylmer recalls with fondness. 'I went up to Dingwall on the supporters' bus,' he says. 'My overriding memory of that game is that it was brand-new terracing we were on so there were no barriers and when Ally Graham scored a header, we were all on the pitch hugging him. We got dropped back off in Kirkcaldy outside the Novar Bar after midnight and as I was waiting on my dad coming to pick me up, Gordon

Dalziel and Ronnie Coyle ran past me saying, "Hurry up, we've still got half an hour until Jackie O's shuts!"

In that slightly surreal moment, neither the young supporter waiting on a lift home or the Rovers players in a rush to get to the local nightclub were aware that they were about to embark on a journey that would lead them to unimagined success and unthinkable heights.