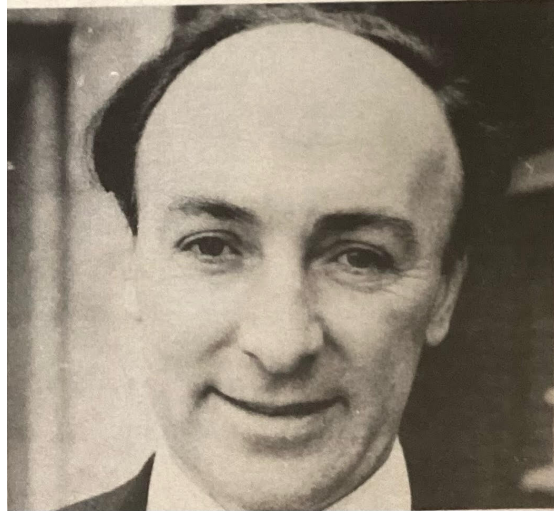


The match winner who knew his limitations



Billy Williamson

Nails were being chewed by the thousands as, with only five minutes to go in the 1947/48 Scottish Cup final replay, Rangers battled to breach a Morton defence which was as tough as old Hotspur boots.

Then Eddie Rutherford shot away down the left. Was this a chance? Jimmy Cowan, the Greenock keeper, took up position at the far post in anticipation of a cross.

But Billy Williamson, drafted into the side after the 1-1 draw on the Saturday, was one jump ahead.

‘Eddie was shaping to use his left boot,’ said Billy, ‘and that was his bad one, so I figured he would shoot rather than cross. You see, it’s always easier to shoot than lob the ball with your bad foot.’

Shoot Eddie did, and as the ball flew to the near post, Billy hurled himself through space to head one of the finest goals ever seen at Hampden. The cup belonged to Rangers.

That was Billy's only cup tie of the season. His next was a year later when he enjoyed another final fling. This time Clyde were the opposition and Billy (Sailor, to the fans) scored another spectacular goal in Rangers' 4-1 win. All of which tells us that if this man Williamson, who also collected a League Cup badge in 1946, was maybe no superstar, he was still a handy bloke to have around. If he is remembered essentially as a stand-in player he could certainly be a stand out as such.

'I was no ball player,' admits Billy, who was recently promoted from head P.E. teacher to assistant head master at Lenzie Academy, 'but I could run all day, and you had to be able to run in my day.'

'As an inside forward I had to be up in attack and back in defence. The Ibrox defence - the famous Iron Curtain - was not so much composed of five men but five plus two inside men.'

Billy could also take punishment with a smile - he was a rugby player as well, you see - and so was an ideal man for the job of unsettling defiant defences, like that Morton one in the 1948 final.

'They were a hardy lot,' remembers Billy. 'Men like Whigham and Miller and Jimmy Whyte. I think I was pulled into the replay just to try to knock them out of their stride. 'That was my style. I enjoyed physical contact. To me the game was about that. I liked nothing better than giving a fair shoulder charge. If a goalkeeper was standing there I liked to hit him hard.'

'I never kicked an opponent though. Rugby taught me discipline on the field, how to take punishment and give it fairly.'

Mind you it wasn't beyond Billy to indulge in "professionalism" of sorts. Shall we say he was rather adept at propelling himself through the air above the penalty box.

As Billy adds with a roguish grin, 'I was a gymnast. I could do these things.'

The two most memorable penalties Billy won, however, were not of his own making. They were against Moscow Dynamo in 1945.

Both times he was bundled off the ball by the husky Ruskies. Willie Waddell missed the first but George Young thudded home the second to make Billy's bruises worth collecting.

Actually, Sailor Williamson played in that game only by courtesy of the Royal Navy - in return for twenty stand tickets!

He was stationed at a naval establishment in Port Glasgow, serving as a P.T. instructor, when he was told he was being despatched to the south of England on a refresher course.

It was to last about four or five weeks and there was to be no leave. The Dynamo match was coming off within a couple of weeks. Days before the match Rangers manager Bill Struth received a telephone call from Billy's chief at Port Glasgow. He asked, 'would you like Williamson for the game against the Russians?' To which Mr Struth replied, 'Very much.'

Then came the deal. 'Okay, if you can give me twenty stand tickets for the match I'll see if I can get Williamson relieved of duties.' Mr Struth accepted the bargain.

A quick phone call from Port Glasgow to the south of England later and an officer took Billy aside and told him he was on four days leave.

The War - and Manchester City - claimed a few of the bustling years of this man who is aptly named by his school pupils as 'The Bull'.

He joined Rangers in 1941, after only six weeks with Petershill, whom he joined from Kirkintilloch Rob Roy, and then he was conscripted within months.

'Bill Struth fixed up many of his players with jobs in the shipyards so he could keep them together,' says Billy. 'And when i reported to Ibrox he told me he had a job for me as a checker in some yard. But I was already at Jordanhill Training College and carried on with my course until I was called up a few months later.'

When he could he travelled up from London to play for Rangers but in 1942, after being posted to the Manchester area, he signed for City.

'We were all at liberty to play for whom we wanted then,' he says. 'I went along to watch Manchester United, who had Johnny Carey at inside forward. I didn't think there was much chance of ousting him from the team.'

'So then I went to watch City. I didn't fancy their inside right too much so I offered them my services. I had three enjoyable seasons at Maine Road. City had a very good team with many internationalists in it, including Frank Swift.'

Playing in that company helped mature Billy, but he still feels indebted to Ibrox mates like Scot Symon for his education in the game.

‘Scot really bullied me into learning,’ he says, ‘if I passed a bad ball and put him in trouble he would make me retrieve the situation. I was lucky really to be at Ibrox with people like him, George Young and Dougie Gray.’

Billy left Rangers in 1952 for St Mirren and then Stirling Albion. Twenty years later he still cherishes his memories of Ibrox and, inevitably, Bill Struth.

‘He was a great man in every way,’ Billy says. ‘He had this knack of getting the best out of his players. He would never do you a bad turn so, consequently, nobody ever did him one.’

To illustrate the respect the players had for their manager, and the manager’s feelings for the club, Billy recalls this story...



● FLASHBACK — Some of the Ibrox ‘greats’ of Billy Williamson’s day when they won the Scottish Cup three seasons in succession . . . in 1947-48, ‘48-49, ‘49-50. Back row, left to right — Willie Waddell, Ian McColl, George Young, Bobby Brown, Willie Woodburn, Sammy Cox. Front row, left to right — Billy Williamson, Willie Thornton, Jock Show (capt.), Jimmy Duncanson, Eddie Rutherford.

'We were playing Hibs one day,' he said. 'They had that great forward line of Smith, Johnstone, Reilly, Turnbull and Ormond, and by half time they were winning 4-1.

'In the dressing room at the break, Bill Struth said simply, "The great reputation of Rangers is at stake here. Go out and save it."

Rangers went out and blasted Hibs for the remaining 45 minutes.

'We only managed to pull the score back to 4-2, but when we came off at the end the manager had tears in his eyes. We hadn't won on goals, but the club's reputation had been salvaged.'

Billy Williamson was probably Bill Struth's kind of man, if not his ideal player. A great competitor, dedicated to Rangers and the game for its sake.

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