

Chris Woods



It's said that Chris Woods kept more clean sheets for Glasgow Rangers than all our city hospitals put together – and perhaps it isn't too far away from the truth.

When Rangers first showed an interest in taking the talented keeper from Norwich City to Ibrox, they weren't alone. A host of clubs – including Chelsea – were interested, but the England international chose a move to Scotland, and it wouldn't be too long before he was putting up the shutters in these parts with alarming regularity.

From November 1986 to January 1987, Woods set a British record of 1,196 consecutive minutes of competitive football without conceding a goal. That's just four minutes shy of 20 hours. His record finally came to an end in that infamous Scottish Cup tie at home to Hamilton Accies, and *that* goal by Adrian Sprott. It was a phenomenal run, and it's a record – claims Woods – that still stands to this day.

But let's start at the beginning, and the moment Rangers beat off some stiff competition to land the imposing 26-year-old Lincolnshire-born keeper.

Woods recalled: "It wasn't really that difficult a decision to choose Rangers over the others. I'd spoken to Graeme Souness after the England v Scotland game at Wembley (the Rous Cup match which ended 2-1 for England, with both Terry Butcher and Souness on the scoresheet) and he put everything to me. Once I had a good think about it I didn't really have any second thoughts. My mind was made up pretty quickly.

“He told me all about Rangers and the fact that the club was a sleeping giant. I knew a bit about the Old Firm but with all due respect, I didn’t realise just how big a club Rangers really were, so to actually get there and be a part of it all really was something special.”

At the time, Norwich had just won the English Second Division title and were due to take their place at the top table. The Canaries had one of the best defensive records in the league, and Woods had played a vital role in ensuring his team finished the season seven points ahead of second-placed Charlton Athletic.

Norwich, The Addicts and Wimbledon were all promoted to the First Division, but Woods soon had other things on his mind as he was named in the England squad for the impending World Cup finals in Mexico. But when he finally agreed to join Rangers, did he find it difficult leaving a club that had just won promotion to the top flight of English football? After all, he had just spent six years with the Norfolk side.

He said: “I thoroughly enjoyed my years at Norwich. I had some really good times there but they were a smaller club and going to Rangers was a real eye opener for me. Mind you, I didn’t realise the intensity of being at a club the size of Rangers until I got up to Glasgow. The supporters would come up to you in the street and talk to you non-stop about their club. It was so far-removed from what I had been used to. It was probably only then I realised what Rangers meant to so many people, and the great expectation there was on the players to win things.”

But Woods quickly slipped into the groove and when Ally McCoist, Davie Cooper and Ian Durrant scored against Hearts in late November, 1986, it not only helped erase the painful memories of the previous midweek’s exit from the UEFA Cup at the hands of Borussia Munchengladbach, but also kick-started a run of games that would see him break the British clean-sheet record. It was a run that encompassed games against every other team in the Premier League, including Hamilton Accies twice, which would prove ironic as it was the team at the foot of the Premier Division table that would bring the glorious run to a grinding halt when they visited fortress Ibrox in a Scottish Cup tie. But all good things must come to an end, and for Woods, keeping the ball out of his net for just short of 1,200 minutes is right up there with everything else he achieved in a glittering 22-year career. He said: “I was very proud of that record because it was a fantastic run. As a goalkeeper it’s all about keeping the ball out of the net, a bit like outfield players scoring goals, so to keep so many clean sheets – and in a row – was a big thing for me. But it was something that just materialised, to be honest. About seven games into the record, people were talking about how close we were getting, and that was when it first started to register. I will always remember Walter Smith coming up and saying to me, ‘don’t worry Chris, I’ll let you know when you’re getting close.’ And then he didn’t speak to me for about another four or five weeks, so I realised then that maybe I hadn’t been as close as I had first thought.

“But it’s definitely an achievement I will always treasure, even though I think they tried to say it had been overtaken by Edwin van der Saar. The thing is, his run didn’t come in consecutive games. In fact, I even spoke to commentator Martin Tyler – who is known for being one of the best in the business at keeping all the stats – just to ask if the record still stands, and apparently it does.”

Something else which sticks out in Woods' mind from his time north of the border is the afternoon when all hell broke loose – and he ended up in jail.

It was the 17th of October, 1987, and definitely one of the most emotive Old Firm games of the period to take place at Ibrox. We hadn't even reached the 20th minute when fussy referee Jim Duncan red carded both Woods and Celtic striker Frank McAvennie for nothing more than a 'handbags' confrontation.

From that moment on, the atmosphere remained at fever pitch – with both sides (on and off the pitch) – going at it hammer and tongs for the remainder of the game. Rangers came back from two goals down that afternoon to rescue a point thanks to strikes by Ally McCoist and Richard Gough – with Graham Roberts going in goal, conducting the Ibrox choir, and Terry Butcher also seeing red. Looking back, it has to be one of the craziest games in Scottish football history, but was perhaps symptomatic of a time when jealousy ruled, and Rangers appeared to be the favoured item of choice for those in the game desiring target practice.

Woods might have played for England, been on the bench for a winning European Cup team, amassed a list of honours to rival the best, coached at three Premiership clubs – including Manchester United – and enjoyed a career spanning more than 600 first-team appearances, but he will NEVER forget *that* Old Firm game.

He said: "Yes, it was a little bit different, to say the least. To have to go to the police station the next day and actually have your rights read to you was all a bit surreal. Obviously they were trying to make a point about things like that happening on the pitch but I just thought it was much ado about nothing.

"The referee and the police etc made so much of it in court, you know, the fact that it was going to make the crowd more violent. To be honest, I was actually staggered when the referee sent Frank (McAvennie) off to start with, because I knew straight away that I was going as well, and the upshot was that we missed the League Cup final because of the suspension, which was a great shame. Looking back, it was all just a bit bizarre."

Woods was Graeme Souness's second signing, and admits he wasn't really aware of the scale of the changes taking place at Ibrox when he signed his contract.

He said: "The only thing we focussed on was getting out on the pitch and playing football. We didn't really get to know an awful lot about what was going on off the pitch, and the way it was being run commercially.

"What I do remember clearly is that we didn't start the season particularly well and there were a few moans and groans coming from the stands. I think we were about nine points behind Celtic at Christmas, in the days when it was only two points for a win, but we ended up winning the league by quite a few points so it was a phenomenal run we managed to go on and sustain, and I think it ended up making everybody happy. At least all the Rangers supporters, that is!"

But throughout the four years he spent at Ibrox, Woods insists he quickly grew to love the club – and it's a passion that has never left him.

He said: "Rangers genuinely is the type of club that becomes a big part of your life. And when I talk about Norwich being a really friendly club, even with the vastness of Rangers it was exactly the same. You got to know all the people that worked at the stadium, and any time I've gone back up there, those same people have still been working for the club, and if they weren't it was only because they had sadly passed away. I can say with hand on heart that Rangers are definitely a club that will always remain part of me."

It was a shock to most when it was announced, in the summer of 1991, that Woods was leaving Rangers and joining Sheffield Wednesday. The Light Blues had signed Andy Goram from Hibs, and it appeared the club simply wasn't big enough for two world-class keepers.

Woods recalled: "It wasn't a great time for me. I'd had viral labyrinthitis and hadn't played for a couple of months, and I remember coming back into the fold for the first time since getting the bug, and going out for a run round the Ibrox track. I was trying to run down the touchline and I couldn't even focus on the line. It was jumping all over the place and even when I came back to play, if I wanted to come out for a cross, and was running to go and collect the ball, it would have been juddering about and I couldn't focus on it properly, so I had to overcome that as well. After a period of time it cleared itself, but it was a frightening time to be honest.

"But despite moving on to pastures new, I will always look back on my time at Ibrox with great fondness. Not just at Rangers, but the time I spent in Scotland will always be dear to me. At the beginning it was a whole new experience but it was one I absolutely embraced and loved. It is something I am so glad I got the chance to do. I made some great friends and played for a great football club and won trophies as well so it is a part of my life that I will always treasure, that's for sure."