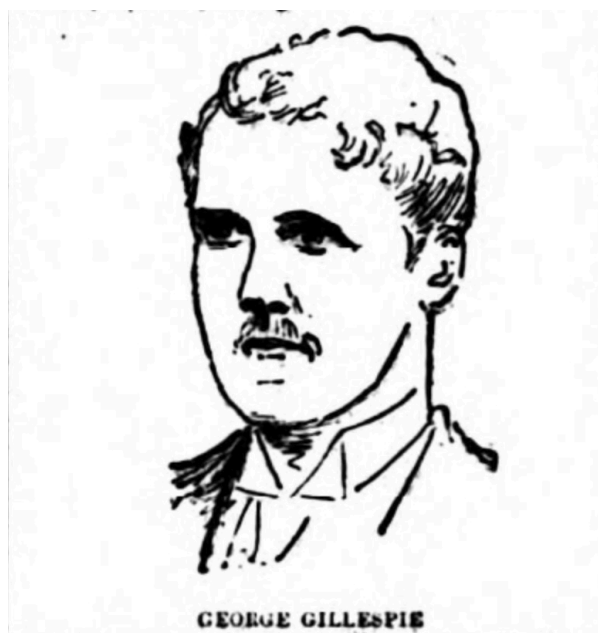


George Gillespie of The Rangers



A BRILLIANT BACK – AN UNBEATEN GOALKEEPER

Loth to leave my back line of famous players, I have chosen this brilliant and shining light specially in view of tomorrow's cup ties, in which he had an almost record career. George Gillespie began his cup-tie battles, as we said, by playing right back for Rangers in the unique Friday final on Hampden in 1877, and he finished by keeping goal for Queen's Park in the final of 1892.

He thus embodies an experience of cup play almost unequalled in the history of the Scottish competition since its institution in 1873. A club mate with him in the young Roslyn (old now), George Gillespie in the later seventies disclosed powers of kicking that for one of his years, and physique, I take leave to say, have not been surpassed. Tallish, yet not tall, he was for his years at football extremely boyish in appearance. He had, however, what youth always has with it, and that is abounding enthusiasm and confidence.

Failure had no place in his vocabulary, but ambition had a first. Hence it was that leaving the Roslyn, notwithstanding that it contained such past artists in the game as Dr W Findlay Ness, Glasgow; Dr William F Love, now in the Indian Service; George Goudie, a once famous athlete and a successful Glasgow merchant, he left the open pastures of Whiteinch for the circumscribed enclosure of old Kinning Park, the then Rangers' ground. His reputation had preceded him, even without the aid of 'spies, poachers or agents,' for GG went there of his own accord, to find wider, yet not easier, scope for his powers.

He just arrived at Kinning Park in the height of the Vale and Rangers' ascendancy. It was in the three famous finals v the Vale of Leven that he, a stripling, broke down, his legs giving way under the

stress of those vigorous attacks for which then there was little refuge and nothing in the way of penalty kicks that are awarded for tripping nowadays.

Like not a few noted players, GG, confident of his ability, stepped back between the posts, and thus became the predecessor of McAulay and Rennie, both of whom served an apprenticeship in the forward field before taking to the sticks. His experience gained as a tackler of forwards enabled him to utilise this when he stood before the inimitable dribblers and dodgers as the 'dernier resort, they had to defeat before they could score or claim goals.

His buoyant, cheerful nature, his clear eye, his deft hand, and his ready foot, all qualified for the position the SFA honoured him by entrusting its national defences in his hands. This it did in 1881, when at The Oval, London, he appeared as a member of the eleven that gave England one of the most decisive wallops she has ever sustained, the Scots winning by no less than six goals to one. It is rather curious that the keeper two years previously at the Oval was R. Parlane, his old rival in the Vale of Leven, whose team, owing to rejoicings incidental to the Boat Race day, lost by five goals to four.

I give the Gillespie team, not alone because of its brilliant achievement, but because of the experimental lines upon which it was built. It contained no fewer than four centre forwards, an experiment with a vengeance, never before and never since attempted by any of our national team selectors.

The author of this bold invention was the late and lamented ex-President Don Hamilton, whose boldness was successfully crowned with the utter rout of the enemy and the magnificent triumph of the Scottish invaders. The team was; George Gillespie (Rangers), Andrew Watson (Queen's Park – captain), Tom Vallance (Rangers), Charles Campbell and David Davidson (Queen's Park); Forwards – David Hill (Rangers), William McGuire (Beith), George Ker and John Smith (Queen's Park), Joseph Lindsay (Dumbarton) and Harry McNeill (Queen's Park).

A grandly-built, grand-going team from goal to centre. The four centre forwards worked for the first time what has come to be known now as the inside game. The deadliness of their play is seen in the total of the goals.

It is rather saddening that of this brilliant galaxy, George Gillespie is the only one who breaks the link of their connection with the past and the present.

Next year, on Hampden Park, Scotland almost repeated the Oval performance, winning 5-1, with the following solid eleven; Gillespie (Rangers), A. Watson and A. McIntyre (Vale of Leven), C. Campbell, Peter Miller (Dumbarton), Eadie Fraser and William Anderson (Queen's Park), George Ker, William Harrower (Queen's Park), M. MacPherson (Arthurlie), John Leck Kay (Queen's Park).

The forward team, it will be noticed, contained no less than five Queen's players, and as a combination I beg leave to say it has never been surpassed. On the right wing Fraser and Anderson served up a pair of beautiful dromios who moved not as two, but as one sole on the field. Not till Chadwick and Millward's day has their poetic going been equalled on the football field and well may the Queen's Park of today sigh for the return of the 'Two Beauties' about whom there was not the vestige – no, not even the suggestion – of the 'beast' that has crept into modern play.

I should like, in justice to George Gillespie, to say that the two scores in these internationals form a successive record, the two matches realising eleven goals for Scotland, whereas England had only two. Gillespie's star, although in the ascendancy, was eclipsed by that bright luminary of Dumbarton, James McAulay, who, curious to relate, stepped back into goal from centre forward, and that with such success as to keep goal five times running for his country, and was never in a losing eleven, Scotland winning three and drawing two during his regime.

Against Wales, George Gillespie played four times, two for Rangers (1880-1881), and two for Queen's Park (1886 and 1890). Here, again, his life-saving records against the 'Sons of Cambria' were on a par with those against the Saxons, for of the four matches Scotland lost none, and scored nineteen goals to three.

Distressed Ireland was saved being more so, for only once did he keep goal against them, that being in 1891 at Glasgow, when the Scotch team won 2-1. George Gillespie, therefore, as head keeper never was on the losing side for his country.

Rangers lamented his migration to Hampden Park, and he followed in the wake of George Somerville, of Uddingston; Captain Bob Fraser (now at the front), and Alexander Hamilton. To both clubs he rendered yeoman service, and has left to both records that will take some beating. Recently, in dealing with Celts v Queen's Park's first match in 1888, I said that his display was marvellous – nay, phenomenal – for he was the saviour of his team, and thus not one of the 'muddied oafs' in that mudful encounter.

Personally, judging him, I fancy I see him now with that rather leonine head nicely posed and augmented with fair, curly locks. Sprightly, nimble, ambling in and around the goal as if the posts and bar were but to him toys.

Fond, yet not to a fault, of appealing to the gallery, I see him leap up, thrill the goal bar with his fingertips, and then twirl round the post after the most approved style of the funny man in an acrobatic group. These gambols were part and parcel of his business. Without them, goalkeeping would have been as dead a business as waiting at a cemetery gate. He enlivened his posts, he made them live, in fact, hence his popularity.

In this respect no successor has beaten him, for he had a winsome smile, a winning way; so much so, that the clubs and the public who admired him may well mourn his loss.

Retiring from the sport, he turned himself with equal success to business, and dying two years ago he left a splendid competency to a sorrowing widow and family, whilst a large circle of friends lament the loss of one whose chivalrous, cheery nature lent to life a charm.

(Scottish Sport, Friday, January 10, 1902)

Let's rewind just a little, to Monday, January 6, 1902, when in the same publication appeared an article about arguably one of the most famous matches to take place in the first fifty years of Scottish football. It was the Scottish Cup final of 1877, and it took three games to decide the outcome.

Rangers v Vale of Leven

The third and deciding tie took place at Hampden Park on Friday, April 13th with a 5.30pm kick off.

“Seeing as we are having presently a Rangers renaissance, it seems fitting that I should deal with this very unique final, in which they played such a conspicuous part. This match, and the two drawn ties which preceded it, were the precursors of those stirring encounters between Dumbarton and Queen’s Park, Renton and Queen’s Park, and later between Rangers and Celtic.

All the elements that conspire to raise enthusiasm and beget interest, not alone in the actual combatants in the final, but in the game (of which they were such hardy and capable exponents) were present and at work long before this fateful Friday in sweet springtime arrived.

As I have told you, the Leven lads had ousted both Third Lanark and Queen’s Park in the dark, but by no means dead, days of November and December, 1876, and now they were fated to meet St Mungo’s sole representative in the final.

It was their ambition to conquer the city, completely subdue its football sons, and make the little insignificant, hardly known village of Alexandria more famous even than the second city of the Empire.

The Rangers’ ambition, as all young organisations are, were no less eager to uphold the honour of the city of their adoption, and seeing ‘The Vale’ had overthrown the mightiest of the mighty within the city’s bounds, Captain Vallance and his men were resolved to prove themselves the almighty and rend the Vale in twain.

That both teams were almost equal in determination and ability may be gauged from the fact that their first meeting on the ground of the West of Scotland FC, at Partick, on March 17, ended in a draw of one goal each, whilst their second on the same field on April 6, ended similarly, after a scene which since has been repeated in finals, but not, I fancy, for the good of the game. Rangers claimed another goal in this second match, asserting with great vehemence that the ball had gone under and not over the goal-bar. The referee’s decision was against them, however, and thinking his decision wrong and unfair, Rangers’ patrons invaded the field of play, and it was impossible to finish the tie. Many imagined, so keen and bitter were Rangers’ feelings, that they would, as they did later on v The Vale, decline to play, but to their credit when the last and final bout of all came on, Captain Vallance led on his men amid salvos of applause from the 10,000 present.

No doubt you will, seeing this was the first final ever played on a Friday evening, want to learn why it was arranged for the weekend. In answer, I have to say that it was to oblige the large shopkeeping classes in the west of Scotland, who had hitherto been denied seeing the match. The experiment was fully justified by the attendance, for Hampden in this respect established a first record for the national competition.

Well do I remember the scenes that took place prior to the tie. Never before was there seen such hurrying and scurrying all along Clydeside from Dumbarton upwards. Old and young men, boys, youths, aye, even old maids, matrons, and maidens were infected with the later day enthusiasm of the ‘fitba daft,’ and heedless of all danger or difficulty they padded it to the battle field, whose fame as such has not been excelled in Scottish football story.

Boys I knew then, grown men now, left the village school at midday, heedless of the dominie’s tawse, even though they had burnt tips, and boldly started to walk from the Vale to Glasgow. There

was enthusiasm for you, my noble and luxurious lollers in handsome cabs, loungers in electric cars, or 'bannereteers' of brakes and bounders of brake clubs!

Panting and breathless, the eager, excited throng reached Hampden, many of them having as much difficulty to raise the price of admission (6d) as they had to get to the ground. Hundreds unable to raise anything but a brick on which to stand, took possession of their grand stand with all the imperial airs of a Kaiser or a Czar, and were not to be robbed of their 'thrones.'

With these preliminary observations, I place the two teams before you, with a short running commentary upon their 'personnel' and their peculiarities of style as teams.

Rangers:

Goal – James Watt

Backs – George Gillespie and Tom Vallance (captain)

Half-backs – William B. McNeil and Samuel Ricketts

Forwards – W. Dunlop, James Watson, Peter Campbell, David Hill, Aleck Marshall and M. McNeil.

Vale of Leven:

Goal – William C. Wood

Backs – Alexander McIntyre and Archibald Michie

Half-backs – William Jamieson and Alexander McLintock

Forwards – John Ferguson (captain), Robert Paton, John McGregor, David Lindsay, John McDougall and John C. Baird.

Umpires – T. Barnett, Havelock FC; JR Stewart, Caledonian FC

Referee – J. Kerr, Hamilton FC

As regards style, the two were very alike, being fast and free, with little or no posing or parlour passing. McDougall and Baird made an ideal wing on the one side, and Peter Campbell and Moses McNeil on the other. Campbell was one of the prettiest and most poetic of dribblers, and on the touch moved as graceful as a sylph.

John Ferguson (now of Kilmarnock) was also a sturdy, fast and capable forward; whilst as regards pure strength and boldness of going, W. Dunlop has had few equals in Scottish football: James Watson, a cultured forward, and now a master at Kelvinside Academy.

George Gillespie, it will be noted, played back before he stepped into goal, and became there one of Scotland's surest and cleverest defenders.

It is to be noted that whilst on the Vale side, Wood is the only member of this team deceased, no fewer than five Rangers have reached long ere now Life's golden goal, and are in 'Touch' awaiting the call of time for all.

I have spent so much space on the preliminaries that my room for descriptive account of the game is curtailed. I will attempt in what is left me a vivid and succinct and accurate account of the play, memory of which in many minds must be fresh.

The Game.

It is with no uncertain kick that stalwart Tom Vallance sets the tie agoing at 5.30 amid the plaudits of the work-a-day throng, ten thousand strong. 'Mosie' McNeil, game to the heels, is seen tearing down upon Wood, but before he gets there in comes McLintock, the ever-watchful, intercepts his progress, and the wind aids Captain Ferguson and his men to steal away to Watt.

W. McNeil (brother to Mosie and Harry) puts in clever tackling at half back, and with Gillespie checks the eager Vale forwards, of whom McDougall, Baird and McGregor were the brilliants.

The pressure of the Vale is strong and resolute, and all the resources of Rangers are tested to save their citadel from capture. Like a Saul, Vallance towers above his gallant colleagues, one of whom, James Watson, in effort to save and help, heads the ball through his own goal, and Watt is left looking as a lost sheep.

Undaunted by this self-inflicted disaster and encouraged by a crowd largely gone on the popular Light Blues, Rangers play up but at half time Vale lead 1-0.

Sailing, or rather gliding, with the wind, the girlish, buoyant figure of Campbell is seen stealing along the touch for Rangers. Nearing Wood, he sends in a long, low, trundling shot, which a child might save, but which Wood, good man though he is, lets past him, and the scores are equal, whilst Rangers are hilarious with delight.

A great scrimmage ensues round Wood's charge, and W. McNeil, burly and bustling, has the second goal for Rangers, who are mad with ecstasy, and entertain visions even of the cup.

Baird, the unresting, ambitious, and pulsating Vale forward, however, against the wind, cools Rangers down for he equalises – two goals each, and all are after the ball with increased energy for the winning goal.

Bravely, Rangers strove for the mastery, but that grit, that dourness, and that ability which overthrew Third and Queen's stands to the Leven Lads, and when Baird places number three past Watt this proves the winning goal. The Vale are victorious and their cup of joy full to overflowing. The losers played gallantly, but had to give way to greater weight and combination, and so it came that a Vale village beat a great city.

In the evening of this triumph the Vale was rife with the choruses of the inhabitants, and round the Smollett Fountain, cups were quaffed in honour of the first county Scottish Cup holders.

On Monday, February 5, 1900, the following obituary appeared in a contemporary periodical...

Death of Mr George Gillespie

Scottish football circles received on Saturday, with painful surprise, the news of the death of this most popular player and gentleman.

Although retired some years ago from the game, in which he was so conspicuous a figure, Mr Gillespie kept in close touch with it, and attended of an afternoon, the most important matches.

So recently was he seen in public that it is very hard indeed to believe or to realise that he is no more, but alas, for him, death has captured him at his post, and he has in life's prime reached life's goal.

Gifted by nature with a very pleasing physique, of genial, pleasant, almost fascinating manner, George Gillespie became a great public favourite, in fact, he ranks in this respect, as one of the best. Originally of the old Rosslyn, of Partick, he graduated to the Rangers, and with stalwart Tom Vallance (he a stripling), stood up at back against the Vale of Leven in their ever-memorable Scottish Cup ties of 1876/77 and 1878/79. These terrible struggles told upon his rather tender tendons that he was forced to give up playing back and retire into goal. Here he displayed an ability and agility only equalled by keepers such as James McAulay, Edward Doig, James Trainer and men of their stamp. There, between the posts, with a coolness and dexterity seldom equalled and never surpassed, he has duped the best forwards of his time and saved times without number the Rangers and Queen's Park, as also his country, from defeat.

It was a sore wrench for him to part company with the Rangers, but he had ambition, and these were satisfied when he made Hampden his Mecca in 1884.

His international honours were not in keeping with his merits, for he played v England but twice, viz, 1881 and 1882. Against Wales he had four caps – 1880, 1881, 1886 and 1890, and against Ireland he played in 1891.

He also played against London and Sheffield for Glasgow. His Scottish and other cup honours amount to a record. He had three Scottish badges, two Glasgow, and four Glasgow Charity so that he had ample tokens of his prowess to show his friends.

It is seldom that playing power and personal charm are so happily blended as they were in Mr Gillespie. He never lost his popular hold of the public, and in business and private circles he was the 'Genial George,' the friend of many, the enemy of none.

To his widow, his family, and his relatives, we are sure, in this sad affliction the sympathy of a wide circle is extended. The memory of the departed will long be preserved in British football as that of one who did his duty nobly in public and in private, and who leaves not a word or deed to besmirch his good name or blemish his reputation.