

His name was Willie Woodburn



Had former Rangers manager Bill Struth put much store in first impressions of a man, he might never have signed the player who became possibly the finest centre-half the club has ever had - Willie Woodburn. For Willie did not exactly get off to the greatest of starts at Ibrox. He forgot to bring his boots for his trial match with Rangers - and then conceded a penalty during it!

'I was so excited at the idea of going to Ibrox,' said Willie, 18 at the time, 'I dashed from home, minus my boots. It was only when I was sitting on the train from Edinburgh to Glasgow I realised I'd forgotten them. 'When I got to Ibrox I told trainer Arthur Dixon, and in the end I had to take the field - against Third Lanark it was - in boots belonging to Jimmy Simpson, even though they were a size too big for me.

'During the match I gave away a penalty - true to form - but thankfully Mr Struth's mind wasn't swayed. 'In the dressing room after the game the buzzer went and I was called upstairs. Mr Struth asked "How would you like to play for Rangers?" and I replied "I would like that very much."

"Right," he said, "I can offer you £4 a week in the second team, and £6 in the first. Here's £20 for signing on and £5 expenses for tonight."

'And that was that. I left Ibrox a Rangers player and with what I regarded as a fortune in my pocket. At the time I was a second year apprentice plasterer earning 18 bob a week! As it happened, Willie's father was not quite so pleased as Willie himself at the rapid turn of events. Mr Woodburn senior, you see, was a Hearts fan.

'I hadn't told him I was going to Ibrox,' remembered Willie, 'and when I got home he was in his bed. He didn't know anything about what had happened until he read the morning paper - and he didn't speak to me for a couple of days.

'Well, he was a Hearts man but I think what annoyed him most was that I hadn't brought him into the picture about Rangers. But he soon came around.'

Willie's father had, in fact, known Bill Struth from 'way back.' They had worked in the building trade in Edinburgh together.

The news of Willie's signing at Ibrox, no doubt, came as a bit of a blow to Hearts and Queen's Park as well. He was training at Tynecastle and had actually played four matches for the Hampden side, who had spotted him during a cup semi-final tie with his club, Ashton Junives, at Stark's Park.

'I don't really know what happened with Queen's,' said Willie. 'I played these games for them, but nobody asked me to sign. What the form was with amateurs then, I don't know, but they must have had to sign something.'

Anyway, why should he have worried?

The year was 1937 and, with Jimmy Simpson on the way out, it wasn't long before Willie reached the £6 a week bracket with the first team.

When war broke out, Willie, like many other Rangers players, was fixed up with a job in the Clydeside shipyards so his playing career wasn't affected - until the beginning of the forties, when he sustained an injury which put him out of the limelight for several seasons, and very nearly brought about his transfer to England.

'Big George Young took over from me and did so well the team could not be changed,' said Willie. 'I carried on in the second team but I was quite happy to do so because in the wartime circumstances, it was really like a second first team.'

'We played in the North-East league against the first teams of sides like Hearts, Dundee and Aberdeen. Teams like these had guest players from the south, so the football was very good.'

'However, when the war ended and football got back to normal again I began to grow a bit disillusioned about my position and went to see Mr Struth.'

'Very shortly, Arsenal and Leicester came after me. They were both up in my house, as a matter of fact, and the fee being mentioned was £6,000. I can always remember that. But I kept stalling them for I didn't really want to leave Rangers.'

And as we know, he didn't have to. For Willie's luck came good at the right time. Dougie Gray, almost at the end of his long career, fell out of the right-back slot. George Young was moved there and Willie took over from 'Corky'.

So the famous 'Iron Curtain' was born. A formidable barrier which was to defy opposing forwards right into the 50s.

'We just seemed to knit so well,' said Willie. 'But we had a good blend. Two big fellows, George Young and myself, helped for a start.'

'Then Ian McColl and Sammy Cox could play football. Ian was quite an artist, really. If he was in a tight situation you could be sure he would always come out with the ball. Sammy was extremely versatile. He could win the ball and had the ability to play it away well.'

'And then there was Jock Shaw. At left-back he was a right tear-away. Like I say it was a good blend. In fact, that whole team was a good blend.'

To his teammates and the Ibrox fans, Willie became known as 'Big Ben' - and it's interesting, and amusing, to know why...

In 1947, Rangers flew to Lisbon to play Benfica, a match they won 3-0, by the way. Afterwards, the Portuguese laid on a spread, food the likes of which Britons hadn't seen since before the War. And the wine....

'I got a bit high,' admitted Willie, with a chuckle, 'and ended up toasting Benfica! That's why I got the name 'Ben'.'

Ben must have seemed like the 'fellow' in London of the same name to many opponents, such a towering figure was he on the football field.

A figure which became known in many corners of the world thanks to an international career which won him 23 full caps and seven for the league.

Willie has many memories of the international scene - like never having been on a losing side on three visits to Wembley - but the match which stands out most in his mind is a Scottish Cup semi final with Hibs at Hampden in season 47/48.

Rangers won 1-0, and Willie said, 'It was quite a feat as Hibs were a great side. We got more satisfaction out of beating them at that time than Celtic, although our games with the Parkhead side were always good ones.' Like so many of the 'old timers,' 52-year-old Willie, who has his own garage in Edinburgh, feels the game is not what it used to be. And he would subscribe to the belief that there aren't the same characters in it. Men like Torry Gillick.

'I remember sticking a good ball through to Torry once and he completely missed it,' Willie said. 'I bawled at him, "What are you playing at?" He replied, "Sorry, Ben, I was just thinking of what might have won the 3.30!" And there were more characters in refereeing circles too. Willie recalled a match at Shawfield officiated by one Bert Benzie.'

'He gave a penalty against us and Sammy Cox protested. Bert ran up alongside Sammy and said, "You don't think it was a penalty? Just read your evening paper and discover whether it was or not!"

In season 54/55, Big Ben went out of the game in the most unfortunate circumstances and on reflection he could well take consolation from the fact that he was a victim of the times.

Whereas players today can run up a record of half-a-dozen orderings-off Willie was suspended sine-die after his fourth.

'I feel like an angel when I see what goes on today,' he said, before adding, 'and the players I clashed with all played the following week.

'I was never sent off in big matches. Only against the smaller clubs, like Clyde and Stirling Albion. And the circumstances were usually the same. We were being held or only winning narrowly when we should have been way in front.

'I found that hard to take. I felt Rangers should win every game. And there was the needling from opponents in these sides. You would get some bloke saying - "so you think you can play football?" That sort of thing. Fair enough from someone you respected as a player, but it was difficult to take from someone you didn't.' As it happened, Willie could have contested the SFAs decision, and no less a legal figure than Lord Cameron told him he would win his case on the grounds that he was being deprived of his livelihood. But he let the matter slip.

'I didn't want to drag the club into the whole business,' he said. And anyway, he was 34 at the time, just about over the top, and suffering from Achilles tendon issues which had been threatening to halt him for a while.

As it turned out the SFA lifted their ban on Willie two years later - but the fans were never again to glimpse this great player in action. It was a travesty, but they still had their memories.

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