

John MacDonald - Living the Ibrox Dream



If Davie Cooper was Rangers' talisman, then John MacDonald was the supporter who lived the dream. But not only did he fulfil a long-held ambition by playing for his boyhood heroes – he also scored more than 100 goals for the first team. But MacDonald and his goals almost never made it to Ibrox. He revealed how he was all set to join Ipswich Town when Rangers pulled out all the stops at the 11th hour to get him to Govan, even turning up at his school in a bid to persuade the talented teenager to sign on the dotted line.

MacDonald lived in Maryhill till he was five, when the family moved to the outskirts of the city to Drumchapel. There, he attended Kingsridge Secondary School, which proved something of a football scout's dream by producing talent such as Gregor Stevens, Alex Miller and Danny McGrain.

But MacDonald had something the others lacked; he was a natural born goalscorer, and soon had many teams craving his services. He joined Rangers in 1978, remaining at Ibrox for eight years, before moving on to the likes of Barnsley, Scarborough and Airdrie.

He said: "We stayed just along the road from Firhill so my dad used to take me to see Partick Thistle most weeks. We went there because it was handy, but once we moved home, and dad didn't want to go to the football anymore, I started

going to the games with my mates. They were all Rangers fans and as I was a bit older by then, I was allowed to go with them to Ibrox.”

But MacDonald will never forget the day he signed for Rangers, and insisted it was the proudest moment of his footballing life. He said: “I was just 17 at the time and when I signed my name on that contract I was delighted – but it took a while to get there.

“I had been going down to Ipswich every time we had a school holiday. Their chief scout Ron Day had come up for one of the schoolboy internationals when I was 13 and showed great interest in me so I started making the trip south regularly with a few of the other young Scottish players. Guys like Alan Brazil and I would meet up at the station and go down for the holiday weekends. I loved it, and the only thing I could see myself doing at that time was signing for Ipswich Town and playing my football at Portman Road.”

Rangers simply weren't in the frame, and even though MacDonald attended a Glasgow school, it was the Suffolk side who still seemed clear favourites to land his signature.

He said: “As a young boy, the only team that had showed an interest in me was Ipswich, but when you get older, and start taking notice of things a wee bit more, I realised there were scouts from other clubs coming to my matches. That was when Rangers came to the fore. George Runciman was a Rangers scout at the time and he started coming to watch me quite regularly, and would report back to Lawrie Cummings, who was the chief scout at Ibrox. Eventually, Mr Cummings came up to my school, and one day I found myself sitting in front of both him and my headmaster, when Mr Cummings said to me, ‘so you would love to sign for Rangers, John?’ I felt under a wee bit of pressure and said yes, but when I got home that night I spoke to my dad about it for a while. I told him the Rangers scout was coming up to the school the next day to sign me, and he asked if it was what I really wanted. To be honest, it wasn't, and I said to my dad that I wanted to go to Ipswich.

“The following day, the scout came up to the school as planned but was clearly unhappy when I told him I'd changed my mind. He reminded me that I'd said it in front of the headmaster, but my dad was with me this time so I felt a bit more confident. Mr Cummings then changed tact and started saying we could give you this for signing, and expenses etc. I was only 14 so I agreed and signed there and then!

“I suppose there was a slight regret that I didn't go to Ipswich because they had looked after me so well, and I liked it down there. After I chose Ibrox, I received a really nice letter from Bobby Robson, who was their manager at the time, and he said, ‘we're disappointed you've decided to go to Rangers but if there are any problems in the future we would love to talk to you.’ It was a really nice gesture,

especially from someone with such a high standing in the game, and I still have that letter to this day.”

MacDonald added: “The good thing about those days was that there were no pro-youth teams and I was still able to play for the school, which was great, because I really enjoyed playing for the school team and in the schoolboy internationals. I feel that’s what is lacking a bit at the moment. The pro-youth teams don’t allow their youngsters to play for their school teams, so they don’t ever get to experience the international scene, which is such a pity.”

MacDonald was called up by Rangers at 17, and it was the start of an eight-year love affair with the Light Blues – a love affair that has continued to this day. He made his league debut for Rangers against Hearts at Tynecastle in a feisty five-goal thriller in February, 1979. He made one other appearance that season in a 1-0 win over Partick Thistle in the second last game of the season – his competitive Ibrox debut.

He also played in Glasgow Cup ties against the Jags and Celtic that term – the latter coming in a 3-1 final win – and showed genuine predatory instincts by scoring in both games. He was immediately marked down as one for the future. He recalled: “I would probably have preferred to have gone to Ibrox a year earlier, because I had outgrown school. I was persuaded to stay on and take my Highers but wasn’t really interested in school and just wanted to play football. “Jock Wallace had left by that time and John Greig had taken over. In fact, I was Greig’s first signing. I signed pre-season and he took me up to Inverness for a friendly and I got on as a sub. It was a great experience and while I didn’t score, we won 6-2. Billy Urquhart scored in that game – and we signed him right after it! “I had good times under John Greig. He was there five years and we got to the Scottish Cup final every year, which was quite a feat. He could have won the treble in his first year had it not been for one game against Celtic. He never managed to win the league, which was probably his downfall.

“As a player, I didn’t win the league either, but I took part in seven cup finals – four Scottish Cups and three League Cups – and won three of the seven, which wasn’t too bad. I also managed to score in a few of them. Anywhere else and it would have been seen as a success but at Rangers you’re obviously expected to win the league. The likes of Dundee United, Aberdeen and Celtic were all vying for titles at that time, so it was a tough period for us.

“I think John Greig perhaps made too many changes too soon, and got rid of a lot of the guys he had played with. Guys likes Alex MacDonald and Gordon Smith moved on, as did a few others, but I still thoroughly enjoyed my time working under John and I had a lot of great friends at the club.”

Jock Wallace left Motherwell to replace Greig, and the former Gers’ boss’s return to Ibrox didn’t exactly prove to be the best of times for the young striker. In fact,

MacDonald feels he perhaps wasn't given enough of a chance during Wallace's second coming.

He said: "I was in and out of the team under big Jock. There were a couple of occasions when he took not well and had to go into hospital, and I was brought back into the team by his assistant Alex Totten – and I think I scored in every single game. When Jock returned, I would be in and out again, so it was a really frustrating time for me.

"And then when Jock got the sack, and before Graeme Souness was available to take over, Alex Totten was once again put in temporary charge and he started playing me again.

"One thing that sticks in my mind from big Jock's days were the times we would head up to, say, Aberdeen, the night before a game. We would be staying overnight and Jock's favourite meal was a mixed grill. A load of us would tuck into a big plateful of steak, chops, chicken etc. It was excellent, although funny how you seem to remember things like that!

"Walter Smith then came in because Souness was still involved with Sampdoria till the end of the season and I played in the first game against St Mirren, which we lost 2-1. Unfortunately, I then got injured in training, a back injury, so that was it for me. I was also due to go into hospital that summer for an operation on my clavicle, which kept popping out.

"When it came to pre-season training, I was way behind and not really involved. They had just released 11 players and I was on month-to-month contracts at the time, although I was offered a one-year deal. But I was watching the calibre of player coming through the door and decided that I wasn't going to get a game. "I was then called up to Souness's office and he said, 'your contract's up in two weeks, if you want I can just release you and you can go and find another club', so that gave me a fortnight to look about and see what was out there."

MacDonald ended up at Charlton for a couple of months, and while it proved a successful spell, the timing was all wrong. His next move, though, would prove an even bigger success, and see him make more money than he had ever done at Rangers.

He explained: "It was a good time for Charlton, and their supporters, as we beat the likes of Chelsea away, and Everton at home, so we had some big scalps. I was playing in these games, but the timing wasn't great for me. My wife was going to move down to London, but she was pregnant at the time, and it was expensive.

"I then got a phone call from Allan Clarke – the old Leeds United striker. He was manager at Barnsley and I went down there and played a couple of trial games. I

did well and he wanted to sign me. I got on really well with Allan so I signed for two years and thoroughly enjoyed it there. Former Celtic player Jim Dobbin was also at the club and we became good pals.

“In fact, I even made some money, as they were paying me more than Rangers! Imagine that, they were bottom of the Second Division and my basic wage was higher than at Ibrox. I started thinking, ‘why did I stay so long at Rangers?’ I suppose it was a case of loyalty. Let’s be honest, I was a Rangers supporter as a kid, and I just loved the club – so that’s why I stayed!

“I loved Rangers so much and even when Souness told me I could go, I was walking over to the car park, head bowed, tears welling up in my eyes, thinking, ‘that’s it, it’s all over.’ It was the end of a very personal and important era for me.” But it doesn’t even take the benefit of hindsight for MacDonald to know that Rangers had to change. They weren’t even playing second fiddle to Celtic during the 1985/86 season. At one point they were closer to bottom spot than top. He said: “There is no doubt the club had to move forward, and it did so for the better. It is probably the best thing that has happened to Rangers in my lifetime. David Holmes came in and just changed everything. Souness also arrived and did a fantastic job. Not all of his signings were great but I don’t think there are any managers in the history of the game who have a 100 per cent signing success rate. But the likes of Terry Butcher, Chris Woods, Graham Roberts and Richard Gough helped transform the club.

“Even when I was down in Barnsley, I was still a Rangers supporter, but that’s something that will never change. It’s in the blood and that’s that. I still go to all the home matches to this day.

“Looking back, the first I realised that Graeme Souness was to be our new manager was when I saw it on the telly. There were a lot of names getting mentioned as potential new managers, but Souness was one of the biggest around.

“Training was fantastic under him as he introduced a lot of the stuff he had learned in Italy. It was new to us so it helped freshen things up. We also had double sessions throughout pre-season, and would have pasta between them for lunch.

“Pasta was fine by me, but I couldn’t eat it before matches. I was always really nervous before games and would usually just have soup, as it was easier to get up. I remember before one cup final and we were lining up to meet the dignitaries. They were about three players away from me when all of a sudden I was sick, and there wasn’t a thing I could do about it.

“Even after my goal in the Drybrough Cup final I was as sick as a dog. I was sitting behind the goal and Alex MacDonald was saying to me, ‘that’s the way

wee man, get it all up.' Mind you, once the games started I was usually fine. "Most of the changes Graeme Souness introduced were subtle, and they worked, but I think one of the few mistakes he made was bringing Phil Boersma in as the new physio. That said, he didn't make many mistakes.

"One thing I didn't enjoy, though, was the way many of the older players who weren't in Souness's plans were banished to the away dressing room. We had to change in there for training and I don't think it did anything to help morale at the club.

"Personally, I used to mix with a lot of the younger players anyway, so it wasn't a big issue for me. The likes of myself, Derek Ferguson, Ian Durrant and Robert Fleck would enjoy going for a businessman's lunch to a Chinese restaurant every Friday."

MacDonald had more or less resigned himself to the fact he was leaving Rangers – although he admits to being pleased that they allowed him to go on a free transfer, as he recalled that hadn't always been the plan.

He explained: "I was pleased that if I was leaving, I was getting a free. When Jock was the manager, the club wanted £70,000 for me, so getting a free made it easier to find a new team. When I was leaving, our coach Donald Mackay talked me into going down to Leicester City but they had a player that was very similar, and I thought it a bit strange I had even been asked to go down there.

"When I eventually signed for Barnsley, I was given a decent signing-on fee. The exact figure shall remain a secret but let's just say it was a bit more than the £250 I got when I signed for Rangers! In all the years I was at Ibrox that was the only signing-on fee I ever received from the club.

"But I had a ball at Ibrox and it makes me very proud that I managed to score more than 100 goals for Rangers. Okay, so a few of them were in friendlies, but I managed 106 goals in 270 games, which isn't too bad a return all things considered."

Down the years, we've read of players saying that once they leave Rangers, everything else seems like an anti-climax. MacDonald agrees, and said: "Once you walk out that magnificent front door at Ibrox everything else does seem like a step down the ladder, wherever you go, unless it's somewhere like Manchester United. Mind you, even when Archie Knox left Man United to go up to Rangers, Alex Ferguson said Rangers were paying him more than the Old Trafford side had been. But when I was at Rangers, we were all on the same basic wage. It was £300 across the board till Souness came.

"But it wasn't just the extra money I enjoyed at Barnsley. I really loved my time at the club. Barnsley is a great wee town with great people, and most of the players

lived on the outskirts, in a small village called Ardsley. I stayed near Paul McGugan and Owen Archdeacon, the two former Celtic players. In fact big Paul stayed with me for a few months until he got his own place sorted. We were away from the heat of the Old Firm and got on really well – but we still managed to fit in some great Glasgow banter.

“Our house was built on an old mine, and any time there were any structural faults, due to the mines, we just called someone up and they came and fixed it, or decorated for us. It was a fantastic arrangement!

“When I left Barnsley, I went to Scarborough, which was a big mistake on my part. Allan Clarke had just been sacked and I had just signed a new contract with Barnsley, but Scarborough got in touch and told me they wanted to sign me. I told them what I wanted and, to be fair, they came up with it. I decided to head up the east coast to Scarborough’s McCain Stadium. They were in the Fourth Division at that time. I stayed there for a year but they told me they couldn’t afford me after that.

“I remember my wife phoning Barnsley to get a hold of me one day, and someone at the club saying, ‘Oh, John’s away for signing talks to Scarborough.’ There were no mobile phones in those days so I didn’t get a chance to tell her. “But for all I enjoyed my whole career, when I was playing down in England I was still always interested to see how things were going back up the road at Ibrox. Graeme Souness seemed to be doing a fine job. His introduction to Scottish football completely changed the game up here but even then he didn’t really crack it in Europe.

“He changed Scottish football, though, as it meant Celtic had to step up to the plate, which they did. And in a way that was a pity because it prevented us from doing 10 in a row! That was a great shame, because it would have taken a bit of beating.

“From a personal point of view, I still enjoy going to the football and get that special feeling every time I walk through the front door at Ibrox – even to this day!”

*The interview with John took place in the latter months of 2015