

Ladies and gentlemen, it's show trial time...



As seasons go, 1987/88 wasn't a great one for Rangers. After the highs of Graeme Souness arriving the campaign previous, and that great title win, we were expecting more of the same when the new season kicked off.

That didn't happen - and some.

We finished third in the league, behind both Celtic and Hearts, and losing 10 of our 44 games was never going to be title-winning form. We got to the quarter-finals of the European Cup, before being eased out by Steaua Bucharest (remember that?), and won the League Cup.

In terms of excitement, one afternoon stands out more than most. Saturday, October 17, at Ibrox, and Old Firm day...

It was the usual pre-match routine for yours truly. Down to the Sandbank Social Club, in Maryhill, and a few pints before the short journey over to Ibrox on the supporters' bus. It was the second of the usual four Old Firm league contests that season (we wouldn't win any!).

I was in the Govan Front as normal, and was as confident as any other Bear. We'd got off to a really poor start in the league, winning just one of our first five games, but had picked up and gone unbeaten in the next six - winning five of these. We were still playing catch-up, though, and so the two points were vital.

But our indiscipline would get the better of us on the day, and cost us so much. That said, for me, the chief instigator of the trouble was Frank McAvennie. He was constantly in the face of our goalkeeper Chris Woods, and eventually provoked him into retaliation. It wasn't like Woods to react, but coupled with the electrically-charged atmosphere of Old Firm day it was a red rag to a bull. Woods and McAvennie were both sent-off for a particular flashpoint in the 16th minute in which Terry Butcher and Graham Roberts were also involved.

In the Govan stand - and all around the ground - we were going tonto!

Roberts went in goals and before we knew it, we were 2-0 down - through goals by Grant and a Butcher OG. It was a horrific start and, if truth be told, we all expected further pain to be inflicted in the second half - as we had a central defender in goal. And if that wasn't bad enough, Butcher saw red for a challenge on the Celtic goalie, McKnight. Game over - or so you'd have thought, but Rangers showed an indomitable spirit that had been lacking in the early weeks of the campaign and an Ally McCoist goal in the second half reduced the leeway. We dared to dream.

And then with the seconds ticking away, the bold and courageous Ian Durrant - who appeared to be running on Duracell batteries - put in a cross which was cleared by a Celtic defender out to near the corner flag. But somehow wee Durranty managed to get the ball back into the Celtic six-yard area, and Richard Gough was on hand to score.

He described the goal thus: "The ball came across from the right, I think it hit Chris Morris on the chest then bounced down nicely for me and I managed to toe-poke it in."

Very modest, Goughy!

Ibrox erupted. It was bedlam. The release of sheer joy where once was disappointment and anxiety was off the scale. Grown men cried. Strangers hugged. In all my years watching Rangers I had never known happiness like it. No one likes us, we don't care.

And then we had the inimitable Graham Roberts conducting the Ibrox choir. We lapped it up for the wind-up it was and when the final whistle sounded we celebrated like we'd just won the league. We left the stadium and filed back to our supporters buses, cars, subway etc safe in the knowledge that we had just secured an unlikely Premier League point, but it was far more than that. We had just watched our team defy the odds to pull off the great escape. We were delighted. And, of course, we thought that was that.

We half expected the Monday morning mutilation in the press. 'Don't Watch Alone,' 'Pound them,' 'Crackdown' etc etc. The papers had a field day. But then the headline that changed everything - 'Police to Probe Old Firm Punch-Up!' Eh, why? But they did.

"Old Firm players involved in Saturday's punch-up at Ibrox are facing possible prosecution for assault. And they could also be charged with breach of the peace for inciting the FANS' violence.

"For police have warned for years that on-the-field incidents have a direct bearing on the conduct of spectators."

Yeah, whatever. More made-up media nonsense.

And then the one sentence that struck fear into the hearts of those involved:

"Glasgow's Procurator Fiscal has ordered police to investigate the incidents on and off the park."

So, it looked like Terry Butcher, Chris Woods and Frank McAvennie were in a spot of bother. Oh, and don't forget Graham Roberts, as he 'conducted the Ibrox choir as they sang their partisan songs!'

One paper then reported, 'There were 62 arrests, inside and immediately outside Ibrox, followed by punch-ups and stabbings in streets and in pubs. One young fan died.'

Detectives from Govan would ask STV for their film footage, while police officers on duty at Ibrox were to be questioned.

The club were also facing a rap from the SFA on charges of what were called 'delinquency!'

But then the moment time stood still. Monday, November 2, 1987. CHARGED, rang out the headline in a Scottish national newspaper. 'Old Firm shock as flare-up stars face the police.'

'Three Old Firm soccer stars worth around £2 million were yesterday charged by police in Glasgow. Rangers' Graham Roberts and Chris Woods, and Frank McAvennie of Celtic were accused of conduct on the pitch likely to provoke a breach of the peace.

'And today Rangers' skipper Terry Butcher is expected to be seen by police when he returns from London.'

'The charges, which make Scottish legal history, came as a result of the explosive clash between Rangers and Celtic two weeks ago.'

'Roberts, 28, and Woods and McAvennie, both 27, were charged at Govan police station, where a spokesman said: "They were asked to call in relation to incidents on the field of play during the match."

Butcher was duly charged and all four players were summoned to appear at Glasgow Sheriff Court 10 days before Christmas.

Glasgow's Procurator Fiscal, Mr Sandy Jessop, who ordered the police probe into the game, said: "Summary complaints have been served for an appearance in court on December 15."

Solicitor, Len Murray, acting for Butcher, Roberts and Woods made no comment. None of the players in question were present at their initial court date, but Mr Murray asked for the case to be continued and the Sheriff agreed, setting a new date of January 5 for the next hearing.

On that date, Mr Murray entered a plea of not guilty on behalf of all four players, collectively worth £2.5 million and Sheriff Craig Henry committed the case to trial, setting a date of February 16. The trial would eventually start on Tuesday, April 12 - and that was the day the Old Firm aired their dirty laundry in public! 'All rise!' ... and the call preceded the arrival of Sheriff Archie McKay. There wasn't an empty seat inside Glasgow Sheriff Court - but this was no run of the mill case against a couple of wayward joyriders, or a shoplifter up in court for the umpteenth time. This was the big time. Three England international footballers and a Scotland player, all up in front of the sheriff for being bad lads.

How it had ever got this far was beyond belief, but it was pure box office and the media circus which surrounded the case had to be seen to be believed.

In the light of Rangers' form that season, it was definitely something which manager Graeme Souness could've done without.

On the opening day of the trial, the court was told that 'a goalmouth fracas between four football stars had unleashed "unbridled hatred" among rival fans at an Old Firm game.'

As a supporter at the game that day, I would refute that claim. Yes, it was an emotional powderkeg, but aren't most Old Firm games? The feisty titbits were certainly welcome in my mind as it showed that both sets of players genuinely cared about their teams, and it cranked up the atmosphere beyond the norm, and when Rangers pulled back the two goals to grab a point I certainly left the ground thinking, 'what a game! Thoroughly enjoyable!' I didn't want to head straight round to the Celtic end and rip someone's head off. I headed back to Maryhill on the supporters' bus and everyone was buzzing. We had a good night. But back to the courtroom and Glasgow Sheriff Court heard that the atmosphere changed when Chris Woods took a backpass and Celtic striker Frank McAvennie collided with him. Then, in a few seconds of fury, it was alleged that; Woods retaliated, gripping McAvennie by the throat and pushing him back... McAvennie slapped Woods on the face...

Rangers captain Terry Butcher rushed into the fray to push McAvennie backwards... And Rangers defender Graham Roberts lifted McAvennie onto his tiptoes, eventually flooring him with what appeared to be a blow.

The four players denied conducting themselves in a disorderly manner and committing a breach of the peace.

But as they sat in the dock - Woods and McAvennie together - all four chatted away, looking the best of friends.

Strathclyde Assistant Chief Constable, John Dickson, was in the witness box all day. He told the court that in his experience as the man in charge of crowd safety and public order, incidents on the field of play had a direct relationship to incidents on the terraces. And he claimed that after that particular goalmouth fracas, fury erupted. Roberts, against whom no action was taken, went into goal in place of Woods and was pelted with coins by Celtic fans, said Mr Dickson.

Other Celtic fans tried to climb a new perimeter fence to invade the pitch but were pushed back by the police. The assistant chief constable said the noise of fans hurling abuse at each other was so loud he could hardly hear himself speak. Mr Dickson said Old Firm games were always played in an atmosphere of great animosity with constant jeering from opposing fans. But in this game great bitterness started as soon as they got into the ground.

He went on: "There's a look of unbridled hatred on the fans' faces when they're shouting obscenities - and it's quite different from any other game. Some fans don't even go to the game to watch (the action) but just to shout and gesticulate at each other and sing derogatory songs against the Pope and the Queen."

Mr Dickson said that about 45 minutes before the kick off eight rowdies were arrested. He insisted that this seemed to calm things down.

The court was then shown a video film taken just minutes before kick off. It showed fans waving banners and flags, and individuals giving the V-sign to rivals. Mr Dickson admitted, however, that there was a great predilection for the one-fingered gesture!

Sheriff A.C. McKay also saw a video of the fracas in the 16th or 17th minute of the game and, following it, Mr Dickson said he had never experienced such a bad atmosphere at an Old Firm game.
The trial continues

The following day the court heard of how vicious songs of sectarian hatred were chanted before the Old Firm game. While Rangers supporters screamed: "Away, away, away, f*** the Pope and the IRA," the Celtic fans screamed: "Away, away, away, F*** the Queen and the UDA!"

Players later clashed in a vicious fracas, a jury was told.
And a police officer said that had the punch-up happened in the street, the four Old Firm stars involved would have been arrested immediately.

But because the incident was on the field, nothing happened, Inspector James Moir admitted at Glasgow Sheriff Court. "If it had been on the street, all four would have been in Govan police office," said Mr Moir."

The four international stars are accused of committing a breach of the peace, but all four men denied the charge.

The man responsible for policing the game, Chief Superintendent William Marshall, told the court of how Old Firm games were like 'tribal confrontations' and as he was shown a video of fans taken before the game, he pointed out a typical 'native.' It was a chanting young Celtic supporter with, said Mr Marshall, "a horrible look of hatred on his face."

He also pointed out Rangers fans gesticulating at their rivals and waving flags. And he revealed how both sets of supporters chanted twin versions of the bigoted sectarian song.

Mr Marshall added that last year a plastic tunnel had been put up at Ibrox - to stop fans throwing coins at players as they ran on to the pitch. He disclosed that other missiles had been thrown, including golf balls spiked with nails!

Describing the incident Mr Marshall said keeper Woods and McAvennie squared up after a collision. He got the impression the striker was trying to 'box' Woods's ears! "It was just a mess," he said, with players confronting each other. And although he could not see if blows were being landed, they were certainly being exchanged, he said.

The trial continues

On day three of the trial, referee, Jim Duncan was in the witness box and he stated right away that he was against the law intervening in football matches. He said: "My personal view is that you would be going backwards if this were to happen. Football has been going on for hundreds of years with no interference from the law, and I would like to see it continue that way."

The referee's doubts about the value of the police taking a hand were revealed as he gave evidence for the prosecution at Glasgow Sheriff Court. He agreed with Roberts' counsel that if police charged players with breach of the peace every time they were red-carded, the logical extension was that the game would be played with no spectators.

Mr Duncan said he had never expected to have to give evidence in court after sending the players off. And he said: "If that happened every time I gave someone a red card I would have to get a lawyer first."
He added that the day police intervention became a habit "I would seriously consider packing it in as a referee."

The trial continues

Sheriff McKay used the final day of the trial to issue his summing-up of what had been a complex case. He said: "Scotland enjoys in general an international reputation for sportsmanship and fair play, and conduct such as this puts that reputation at risk.

"But I am not concerned with that. Equally I am not concerned with the game of football. What does concern me very much indeed is the prevention of public disorder in connection with sporting events."

The sheriff said that it was fortunate that the fans didn't invade the pitch or wreck the ground.

He added: "Some supporters are readily converted by breach of the peace on the field into two rival mobs. That they were not so transformed is no credit to you."
The incident occurred when Woods was charged by McAvennie. During the trial it was alleged that seconds later the two were literally at each others' throats and were joined by Butcher, who gave McAvennie a two-handed push, and Roberts, who it was claimed, floored the Celtic forward.

But Sheriff McKay said he couldn't accept the evidence against McAvennie, who had been accused of boxing Woods' ears.

He said the Celtic player had tried to stop himself colliding with Woods and was using his arms to brace himself.

Dealing with Roberts, he said he might have been restraining McAvennie and he could not establish his guilt.

But Butcher, he said, was guilty of violence for which there was no excuse. The sheriff said Woods' involvement was much more serious. "The video the court has seen clearly established that you jabbed McAvennie sharply on the chin with your forearm," he said.

In the final analysis, two Rangers players were convicted of breach of the peace as the law handed out a warning to soccer personalities. 'No matter how big or small you are, if you stir up crowd trouble by your actions on the field, you'll be brought to book.'

Terry Butcher was fined £250, while Woods was hit with a whopping £500 fine.

Graham Roberts had the charge against him not proven, while McAvennie was found not guilty.

After the verdicts, Woods and Butcher walked from the court shaking their heads in disbelief. Jim Arnott, Rangers' solicitor, said: "They are very, very disappointed. Now we will have to consider an appeal."

Celtic chairman, Jack McGinn, said: "I'm very happy from our own player's point of view that he was found not guilty, however I'm disappointed that any of the players were found guilty at all."

It's understood that Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was waiting for the verdict with great interest.

The sentences were slammed by Players' Union boss Tony Higgins, who said: "This case has opened a trap door. The sentences have serious implications for sport in general and football in particular. Now any flashpoint involving players may be subject to prosecution.

"It seems strange that only two of the players would appear to have been singled out in this case. There were four players involved in the overall incident." Both Woods and Butcher wasted no time in appealing against their convictions. Their lawyer, Len Murray said: "The first steps have been taken and the appeals lodged. We will now await a draft of a stated case from the sheriff before pursuing the matter further.

"The appeals are on several fronts and will be based on various grounds. Normal procedure means it will be several months before the case is heard at the High Court in Edinburgh."

In January, 1989, it was reported that 'three Appeal Court judges had decided to take extra time to consider the appeals made by Woods and Butcher.' It was the following month before the appeals were heard - and it wasn't good news for the Rangers duo as they lost the vote by two to one. Two appeal judges, Lord Ross, the Lord Justice Clerk, and Lord Allenbridge voted that their appeals should be refused. Lord Murray disagreed with his fellow judges and said the sheriff was not entitled to find the players guilty of breach of the peace during an on-field incident at a Rangers v Celtic game.

It was the first prosecution in the UK as a result of an incident during the heat of a game when the ball was in play.

Lord Ross disagreed and said the sheriff was clearly entitled to find the players guilty of a breach of the peace, and added: "The sheriff was clearly entitled to conclude that what was done by Butcher might reasonably be expected to lead to spectators being alarmed or upset or resorting to violent behaviour." Lord Allenbridge agreed that the sheriff was entitled to find the players guilty, but Lord Murray, in his opinion in favour of the players, said that once it was accepted violent physical contact could be legitimate under the rules of a particular sport - subject no doubt to further rules which limited the legitimacy of that violence - he considered that a radically different context was set up from the ordinary public place. Unless one had specific regard to that special context a proper assessment of the nature and quality of any act of violence could not properly be determined.

Lord Murray said a punch which knocked out a boxer could be assault were it not a fair blow in the boxing ring, so there were factors within the laws of a sport such as football which might excuse or mitigate an illegitimate act of violence.

A referee might judge that an apparently blatant late tackle was in fact accidental, or that a blow in the heat of a legitimate confrontation, though it was a foul, did not merit a sending-off.

Lord Murray said: "To my mind it is essential, for a properly judicial determination of whether a football foul amounts to assault, for this characteristic of a sport to be explicitly considered by the judge."

Lord Murray also said there was no express finding of fact to that effect by the sheriff in this case. He said the appeal should be upheld, but Lord Ross said the appeals would be refused by a majority vote of the judges.

A couple of days after initially being found guilty of breach of the peace, it was reported in the media that Woods, Butcher and Roberts had spoken about quitting Scottish football. It stated that Manchester United, who had at one time been ready to pay £1 million to take Butcher south to Old Trafford, could renew their interest in England's central defender.

But, as usual, when you scraped just below the surface there didn't seem to be an awful lot of substance to the story - even though it made the front page. One of the most sensational stories of the modern era had come to an end, so what could we learn from it? What lessons could we take from a situation in which four footballers had been hauled up in front of the courts and been so publicly berated for becoming embroiled in an incident which had started as 'handbags?' Not much, I'm afraid. It was a one-off. Someone appears to have got their knickers in a twist over a scuffle on the football park - something which happened every Saturday afternoon the length and breadth of the country. I completely get that the implications of this particular fracas were different, as there were 45,000 people inside Ibrox, and so the propensity for trouble was greater than, say, at a Third Division ground where the crowd was 342.

But you have to treat everyone equally, and by the end of the Procurator Fiscal's show trial, only two men were convicted - and those two men now had a criminal record. And those two men were Rangers players.

Seven years later, Duncan Ferguson was sent off for head butting a Raith Rovers player at Ibrox. Ferguson would later serve time in prison for the offence, although two previous assaults were 'taken into consideration.' Ferguson was a Rangers player. And to my knowledge, these are the only two instances where players have ever ended up at court, despite there being many, many similar incidents, or worse, on football pitches in the modern era.

It's significant that in the ensuing years this sort of activity by the PF has never been repeated. For one, it was unsustainable, and no doubt cost the public purse a fair amount of money, but if the PF was attempting to make a point, then it failed miserably, because all it achieved was to make Scotland look like a bitter, parochial backwater.

In the season in which the Old Firm players ended up in court, Celtic went on to win the league title, but the following season Rangers wrestled back the championship, the first of nine successive league flags.