

Leaning to the Left - David Robertson



When we reminisce about quality left-sided former Rangers', David Robertson is up there with the very best. Skilful, tenacious, athletic; the nine-in-a-row defender had the lot. Mind you, Robertson was familiar with flying up and down the left flank long before starting his six-year spell at Ibrox; a six-year tenure which would bring honours beyond his wildest dreams, including six league titles, three Scottish Cups, and a similar number of League Cup medals.

Robertson recalled, 'As a youngster, my first position was on the left wing, and I enjoyed playing there. I was fast and could use my pace to get past defenders, but at that time I was still developing and hadn't really settled on a permanent position.

'When I eventually switched to playing left-back, it came as a complete accident. I was 14 and had been invited to a pre-season tournament in Rothes with the Aberdeen reserve team. After the first game we were left with just 11 fit players and as I was the only naturally left-footed player there, the manager Teddy Scott asked me to fill in at left-back. I won the man of the match award and ever since that day my fate was sealed – I was a left back. To be honest, I was struggling as

a left winger at the time as I relied too much on my pace, so I was happy enough to drop back.'

And it was as a defender that Robertson eventually put pen to paper on a contract with the Pittodrie side, a day, he insists, that was very special. He said, 'It was great to sign for Aberdeen as they were my home town club, and at that point they were very successful. I was just 13 at the time and, if the truth be told, the offer to sign schoolboy forms came completely out of the blue. It was something I simply hadn't been expecting.'

Robbo added, 'It was Sir Alex Ferguson who signed me and he was a remarkable man. I was just 13-years-old but he came to all the youth games – even on a cold Monday night when we trained in the car park – and he knew every single player. His son Mark had played for the same Deeside team as me. 'Sir Alex was a perfectionist and one thing I really admired about him was even though we might just have won a game 5-0, he would still point out our mistakes. I was playing for the first team at 17, and I would walk off the pitch at half-time or full-time knowing he would have a go at me if I had made a mistake. But the next day he would always take you aside and calmly tell you what you did wrong. He was an amazing manager to play for.

'When I made my first-team debut, I didn't know until an hour before kick-off. I was fully expecting to be in the stand that afternoon as the manager was only allowed to name two substitutes then. Looking back, it was good that he handled it the way he did as I didn't have any time to think about what was just about to happen and, as a consequence, I played well that day.'

After five years at Pittodrie, Robertson joined Rangers, and insisted it was tough to leave his north-east base. 'It was hard to leave but I got the impression the club wanted to cash in on me and didn't really try all that hard to keep me. So in one way I had to leave. Like all players, you are ambitious and at that time a few English teams had been showing an interest in me. A couple of seasons beforehand, Sir Alex had tried to take me to Manchester United, and Liverpool manager Kenny Dalglish wanted me at Anfield, but Aberdeen turned both clubs down. I knew the size of these clubs, and that helped me set my sights on moving on.'

With Robertson eventually plumping for a move down the A90 to Glasgow, he was in for a bit of a culture shock when he arrived at Ibrox for his first day's work. He explained, 'I think the biggest differences between Aberdeen and Rangers are the fan base and the size of the stadiums. On my first day at Ibrox I was met at the front door by a commissionaire (Stan) and shown into the dressing room. I took one look at all the big names sitting there and that showed me just how big a club Rangers actually were.

‘On the pitch, there was also a big difference as the supporters more or less demanded you win every game. The expectations are so high at a club like Rangers, but it didn’t take me too long to settle in, and I think that was because I was soon playing regularly. I was just 22, which is quite young to be at such a big club, and as I was also still quite immature I suppose I didn't really take it all in. Mind you, I started to receive death threats in the mail, but being young I didn't take any notice of them. I realise now that I should have told someone at the club, but when you’re just 22...’

One of the most celebrated fixtures at Ibrox Stadium, and which still stands as a testament to the traditions of the famous old club, is the marble staircase, which has witnessed many an eminent footprint. Robertson recalled the first time he ever walked up it, and said, ‘The day I signed for Rangers was unforgettable, although my first memory of the marble staircase was when I played for Aberdeen and Ray Wilkins was coming down the staircase just as I was going up. He stopped me, said hello and told me I had played well that day. That meant so much to me coming from a guy like Wilkins.’

Robertson was part of a title-winning team in his first season at Ibrox, 1991/92, and reckons it was the perfect start to a new chapter in his career. He said, ‘It was a great feeling, although I missed the game the day we won the title as I was suspended, but it was still a great feeling. The league championships that followed were fantastic, but more of a relief than anything else.’

Season 1992/93 was the talented defender’s second term at Ibrox, but one wonders if there were any early indications of just how good a campaign the team was going to have, and how good the squad was? He said, ‘That season was incredible and I think I played in almost all of our games. It was also fantastic to win the treble against Aberdeen. We were strong all over the field and that must have been hard for the teams that came up against us.’

‘We also had a real desire to win and even when we were a goal or two down we knew we could still come back and win games. Having guys like Richard Gough, John Brown, Stuart McCall and The Goalie (Andy Goram) was massive as they were all real winners and leaders on the park. On a personal level, I was never really fully fit, but I kept playing because I knew that if I missed a game or two I might not get back into the team!’

Just a fortnight before flying out to the Italian training camp at Il Coccio – on the eve of the 92/93 season – Robertson became a dad for the first time, which meant he travelled to Italy on a real high. It was a fantastic time for the player and his wife, and he said, ‘It was unbelievable, although it was touch and go whether or not Chelsea would be born in time, although thankfully she was. It was a great feeling to have your first born and to actually be present too, which really added to it. Throw in the fact I was playing for a big club like Rangers and I really was so fortunate.

‘Mind you, I almost fainted at the birth! I'm not great with those things but I'm still glad I

was there.’

Robertson made 58 appearances during the record-breaking season – bettered only by John Brown (57 plus two subs appearances) – but insisted he was happy with the number of games he played. ‘I was delighted to be playing regular and I soon got into a routine. Walter Smith was fantastic with me and gave me plenty of time to recover after games. I had quite a few fitness tests on the day of a game, but always played. It was frustrating because I was constantly fighting hamstring problems, which caused a lot of pain, but I would play on regardless.’

Robertson added, ‘Old Firm games were very special, but there was so much noise you couldn't hear anything even from your own teammates, so you were basically on your own out there. My best memory, albeit a funny one, happened during a game at Ibrox, when the Celtic physio had just treated one of his players and ran off the field without his medical kit bag. Next minute, John Brown ran over and gave it an almighty kick and it burst open. The physio spent the next few minutes running around the pitch picking up bandages and tape while the crowd gave him pelters!’

Robertson also enjoyed what would ultimately turn out to be a most impressive European campaign – and lapped up the matches against Leeds United, the side he would eventually move on to from Rangers. He said, ‘It was a tremendous experience, particularly at Elland Road. For the best part of both legs we were under real pressure, but scored goals at exactly the right times. I'll never forget walking off the pitch at the end of the second leg and the Leeds fans applauding us. The stadium was really noisy, especially as Leeds attacked us a fair bit even after we got the early goal. Leeds fans are passionate so there was a great atmosphere inside the ground, but when we scored there was a deathly silence. After that, they ramped up the noise again.’

‘I must admit it was frustrating to get so far in the first ever Champions League and not win it, but we still enjoyed a great run and a great season. If we didn't have the treble to go for it may have been different, but it was still a great achievement to go so close. We did hear stories about Marseille after they had beaten AC Milan in the final, but at the time it wasn't a big issue for us.’

Robertson cemented his name in the Rangers' history books by becoming part of just the fifth squad to win a treble. He explained, ‘It was amazing, particularly for me as we beat Aberdeen to each of the three trophies, and to clinch the treble by winning the Scottish Cup at Parkhead made it even more special.’

‘We beat Aberdeen in both cup finals that season – and for the title – but there were no mixed feelings for me. I am a winner and wanted to win every single game I played in. It probably spurred me on even more because it was my old club. In fact, just imagine how I would have felt had my old club stopped us from winning the treble!’

‘If I'm being completely honest, it was quite tough to walk the streets of my home town after we won the league. I'm pretty sure my popularity dropped in Aberdeen after that.’

Robertson was part of a 1990s 'Iron Curtain' type defence at Rangers, and played alongside the likes of Richard Gough, Dave McPherson and Bomber Brown regularly in defence. He admitted he found it easy to strike up a bond with these guys.

He said, 'They were great to play with and made my job a lot easier. They were all top level players and we developed a good understanding with one another. I genuinely feel that when you sign for Rangers, it's a club like no other. You instantly become a supporter and feel what the supporters are feeling and, in turn, give even more as you don't want to let them down.'

'And I feel we did exactly that as Rangers had the best defensive record in the league during season 1992/93. We were hard to score against, but I think a lot of that was down to Andy Goram. He was without doubt the best goalkeeper I have played with. He was loud but we always knew if a team got in behind us he would save the day: Andy was an incredible keeper.'

Robertson won six league titles in his six seasons at Ibrox, which was beyond even his wildest dreams. He said, 'I went to Rangers to win honours, but six titles was unbelievable and was far more than even I expected. At the time you don't fully appreciate it, and it wasn't until I was moving home and started to pack up all my medals that I realised just how fortunate I was and what I had achieved during my time at Ibrox. 'Throughout my career I have accumulated six championships, four Scottish Cups and four League Cups. I also have a few runners-up medals, although I don't really count them!'

In his time at Ibrox, Robbo admitted he never once fell foul of the much-respected management team. He admitted, 'Walter Smith was first class and looked after me really well. He even made me feel I was better than I actually was. Mind you, he once had a go at me when we lost to Hibs in the League Cup, but I suppose once in six years wasn't too bad.'

'I look back on my time at Rangers and realise how lucky I was to be a part of such a great era, and something so special. Like I said, at the time you don't take it all in, but when you look back it's hard to believe that a lad from Aberdeen was part of something so special.'

Following his success at Rangers and Leeds United, the Scotland international had a short spell at Montrose before taking over the managerial reigns at Elgin City. He returned to Links Park to manage the Gable Endies in 2006 before moving to the US, where he ran a youth soccer club for a number of years and was also Technical Academy Director at a club in Austin, Texas called Lonestar.

In January, 2017, he took over as manager of Indian Second Division side, Real Kashmir.

*Interview with David took place at the start of 2017