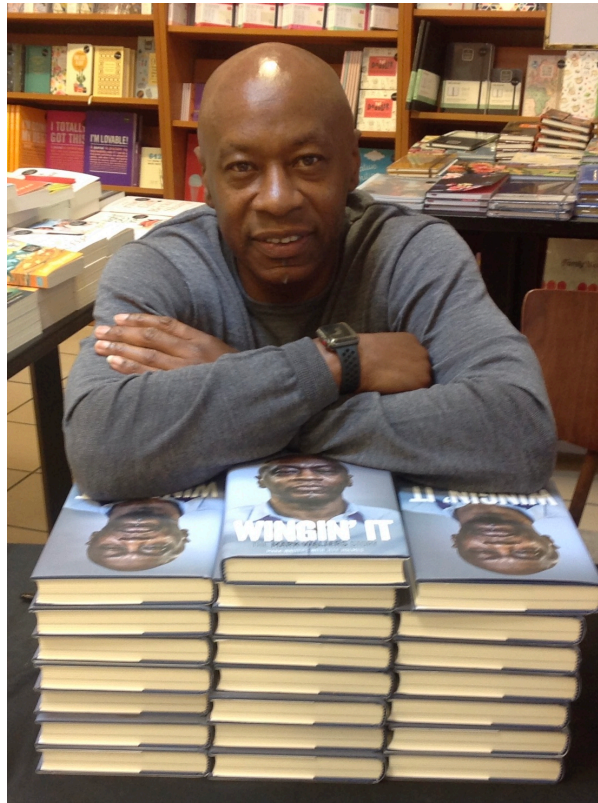


Mark Walters



Mentally, I left Aston Villa long before I actually did, but when I made it official, I had this sudden bout of fear. What will I do if no one wants me? Thankfully that wasn't the case and within twenty-four hours of publicly saying I was leaving, I had offers from the likes of Leeds United, Derby County and Watford. But while I was flattered by their attention, I wasn't really interested in any of them. At the time, Watford were heading for the Second Division, while Leeds seemed no nearer to getting out of it. Derby were in the top flight but fighting relegation. I wanted to play at the top level, for a top team, so it was a firm 'No' to all three. Otherwise, what was the point of leaving Villa?

As Christmas, 1987 approached, Everton threw their hat in the ring and that did interest me. And then Italian club Pisa registered an interest. When I sized up the options my favoured destination was Goodison Park. Colin Harvey was the manager of Everton at the time and he sold the club really well to me. It was a good option as Everton were one of the top teams in the country and had won the First Division title the season before. They had some big names, like Peter Reid, Trevor Steven and Neville Southall, and played good football, so I felt we were a good fit. But the night before I was due to head up to Goodison to meet Colin, the phone rang and on the other end was a stranger with a Scottish accent. I didn't have a mobile at the time so he had called my house, and I was quickly trying to work out who on earth it could be. When he said it was Graeme Souness I thought it was one of my mates pulling my leg with a dodgy accent, and I'm like, 'Yeah yeah, mate!' Graeme eventually convinced me it was actually him and we started to have a proper chat. He obviously had his finger on the pulse as he knew I was due at Goodison the next day. He asked if I would do him

the courtesy of coming to Ibrox the day after so we could have a chat. I am a great believer in keeping my options open, and as a big admirer of Souey from his time at Liverpool, I agreed. To be honest, I didn't know an awful lot about Rangers at that time but I had seen one of their European games on television a couple of months before and had been completely blown away by the atmosphere. They were playing Dynamo Kiev, who were a real top team, and the crowd sounded so loud. Souey had taken in the dimensions of the pitch that evening to counter Kiev's love of playing wide, and he struck me as a guy who was fully invested in what he was doing at Ibrox. That incredible atmosphere had remained with me, and with English teams banned from Europe for five years, and the European arena one that I loved, Rangers were a definite attraction. A late attraction, but a genuine one; like the horse no one has backed in the Grand National timing its run to perfection and roaring up on the rails to pip the favourite on the line.

There was a slight stumbling block, though, as Villa had already agreed a fee with Everton, and then we had Souey chucking his curved ball into the equation. Had he not called when he did, I would've agreed to join Everton. But he did call, so I flew up to Goodison as planned and met with Colin, had a look round their facilities and told him I would make a decision after I had been to Ibrox. He was very understanding. The next morning I flew from Liverpool Airport to Glasgow and was picked up at the airport by Rangers coach Phil Boersma in Graeme Souness's Daimler, and whisked off to the south side of the city. Souey did things in style.

It was only around a 20-minute drive from the airport to Ibrox, but one look at the stadium and I was smitten. Goodison quickly became a fading memory. I'm sure Souey knew exactly what he was doing by meeting me at Ibrox. That incredible façade, those huge blue gates, and then there was the front entrance which leads through to the marble staircase, which just tops everything off nicely. The stadium oozed class. I was sold. I remember Andy Gray saying a lot of folk in English football had been shocked to see me choose Rangers over Everton, the English champions, but quite frankly I didn't think there was anything to be shocked about. And I know Andy was delighted.

I signed for Rangers – for a fee of £500,000 – and while that meant letting Everton down, I was convinced I had made the right decision. One thing that many people have assumed over the years is that Rangers must have offered me a king's ransom to sign on, to trump the English champions, but that wasn't the case at all. The main reasons for choosing Rangers were my admiration for Souey, and the great job he was doing at Rangers, the fact Ibrox looked an incredible place to play your football, and the opportunity to play in Europe. Those were genuinely more important than the money. If Souey had turned round and offered me three or four thousand pounds a week more than Everton then it would definitely have been about the money, but the difference was a couple of hundred quid. Don't get me wrong, it was a lot of money, but it wasn't the deciding factor.

Playing European football excited me. The highlight of my career at Villa was the win over Barcelona in the European Super Cup, but the challenge of playing in the Scottish Premier League – at fresh stadiums and against fresh players – also appealed. Anyway, it had been three years since I last played in the UEFA Cup with Aston Villa and the experience had been an enjoyable one.

The idea of performing in front of 40,000+ crowds also excited me. At Villa the usual audience was around 20,000 at that time, so it was a big leap. Of course it helped massively that Rangers already had players on their books such as Terry Butcher and Chris Woods, both established England internationals. Rangers really were bucking the trend of the best Scottish players heading south by bringing these guys up from England. The likes of Terry and Chris had gone up to Scotland and carved out a really good career for themselves. I was also a big admirer of Trevor Francis from his days at Birmingham City, and then you had the late Ray Wilkins, who was also doing well at Rangers. These guys were all big names and it helped make the club a more attractive proposition. I had played against all four before and was well aware of their quality.

I was only 23 when I signed for Rangers, which was quite young, but I knew even back then that a footballer's career can be a short one so I was keen not to waste any time. I wanted to get into a position where I could pique the interest of England manager, Bobby Robson. There was no doubt I had become stale at Villa, and although I admired what Graham Taylor was doing at my club, the time was right to leave. Lots of folk in England had been talking about Souey and his Rangers revolution, and while the Premier League had been regarded as a joke by many down south, it was a league they would soon come to respect. It was the place to be and as soon as I walked into Ibrox, I knew I would become a Rangers player. To be honest, it didn't take Souey long to talk me round, and once the formalities had been completed, I had an interesting chat with Walter Smith. He said he was present the day I played for England schoolboys against Scotland, the first time I had played north of the border, but a match I had almost forgotten all about. I was delighted Walter had remembered me, so I guess I must have made quite an impression.

But while I didn't know a lot about the Scottish game in general, the changes made by the new management team were big news all over the UK so I had a good idea of what had been going on at the club. Anything I knew about the Scottish game had come from Neale Cooper, a team-mate at Villa, who had spoken a lot about playing at Ibrox when he was with Aberdeen. And when I told him I was signing for Rangers, he filled me in about the Rangers-Celtic matches and the atmosphere I could expect. I had obviously played in a few Villa-City derbies in my time, but I was prepared for something quite different at Parkhead. I must admit I was surprised to see Rangers sitting fourth in the table – behind Celtic, Aberdeen and Hearts – although the manager convinced me it wouldn't be that way for too long.

As for Glasgow, the perception down south was that everyone liked a good drink, which was soon knocked on the head when I discovered that half the first team didn't touch alcohol! I grew to really love Glasgow although at first I was advised on which areas of the city I should avoid, and which were safe to visit. In that respect it was just like Birmingham, which is another city with its good and bad parts. I suppose if you want trouble in any big metropolis you will find it easily enough. It's more about being sensible than anything else.

So, how about a nice quiet match for starters? Perhaps a mid-table team in a league fixture at Ibrox, or one of the lower league clubs in the cup. Nope. The fates decided I should make my debut in an Old Firm game – away from home, and at the New Year! There were mixed views on whether or not it was the best fixture in which to play my first game for Rangers. The arguments were sink or swim, or ease him in. Celtic were playing well at the time and then there was all the carry on that we knew would happen with the racism. Looking back, it was probably a good start for me personally because I had a fair idea of what to expect, and I think Souey was smart enough to say, 'Let's not put him on the bench. Let's throw him in at the deep end and see how he handles it.'

Let's just say I will never forget that game, for a number of reasons, but mainly the atmosphere, which was unbelievable. Oh, and also because of some of the outrageous objects that were thrown at me. I expected the bananas, but there was also a pig's foot, darts and golf balls. They absolutely crossed the line when they started throwing objects like that at me.

Throughout my career I didn't read an awful lot of newspapers, but on the morning of the game I picked up a paper and was mulling over a preview of the game. One of Celtic's Lisbon Lions, Jim Craig, had been asked to rate that afternoon's combatants. On yours truly, he said, 'I haven't seen him play but from all accounts he is a winger in the same class as Davie Cooper. Celtic will have to watch this new boy very carefully.' No pressure then. He had only gone and compared me to arguably one of the most skilful players ever to pull on the Rangers jersey!

So what kind of game did I have? Well, not the greatest, but I did give it my best shot although I suppose the occasion got to me. Perhaps the 60,000 crowd, and most of them giving me a hard time as it was an away game, was all a bit too much and I know I didn't perform to anywhere near my

capability. That alone disappointed me. I think the four out of ten I received in one of the Sunday newspapers was about right. As far as the team was concerned, we slipped seven points behind Celtic and they had a game in hand. This was in the days of two points for a win, so while we were never going to throw in the towel, we knew we had the proverbial mountain to climb. We didn't play well collectively, and it was well into the second-half before we had our first shot at goal. And then we lost Chris Woods to injury with around twenty minutes remaining and Graham Roberts had to go in goals.

If I was to take anything positive from the game it would be that I was sat in our dressing room and looking around at guys like Wilkins and McCoist, these fantastic players, and I realised it was a great opportunity to play in a great team, despite losing that game. I remember going back down to Birmingham that night and telling my mates, and even guys that had played for Villa, all about the game and the atmosphere and they were all keen to know as much about the afternoon as possible. I was explaining to them how I had literally blinked and the game was over. It absolutely flew in. I remember at one point getting the ball and just wellying it. I can't recall where it ended up, but Ian Durrant came running over to me and said, 'For f***'s sake Mark, just calm down.'

That first season was a bit hit and miss but it would soon herald the beginning of our dominance over Celtic and I was glad to be a part of it. And it didn't take me long to discover just how much Old Firm matches meant to Rangers supporters. In fact, a lot less than ninety minutes. In that respect, my debut had set me up for life. The atmosphere was electric and no matter how close you were to someone on the park you could hardly hear a word they were saying. I had never experienced anything like it in my life. I've spoken to guys who played in the Milan or Madrid derbies – and many others around the world – and nothing sounds quite the same as an Old Firm match. At times, though, the atmosphere was bordering on the poisonous. I'll be honest, I used to leave town and head straight back to Birmingham after the game had finished; I always made plans to come back home after an Old Firm match, and even if we didn't have the Monday off I'd drive back up the road on the Sunday night. It was all a precaution because you would read the papers on the Monday and there would be assaults and lots of trouble, and maybe even a murder, so I always felt it was better to get out of the way. But it was still an extra special fixture and I loved playing in them. When I played in the Merseyside derby you would hear of Liverpool and Everton fans heading off to the game together, going for a pre-match pint and even sitting together. That would never happen at Ibrox or Parkhead!

Anyway, I was feeling a bit down the day after my debut, but when I read some of the comments about me in particular, rather than my performance, I was given a lift. Souey said, 'Mark is a player I've admired for a while and he will be a big asset to Rangers. He has a lot of passion and enthusiasm for his football and in the Premier League he will need it. He's an entertaining player and on his day a devastating one.'

Graham Roberts, our stand-in skipper at Parkhead, added, 'I thought Mark had an especially good first 45 minutes and he will be a big player for Rangers. I've played against him a lot of times in England. He's flown past me on many an occasion, although I did stop him in his tracks a few times! He is very quick, has good close control, and knows the way to goal. I was pleased with the reception he got from our fans and I know it meant a lot to him. Mind you, I was disappointed to see bananas thrown onto the pitch, but Mark is bigger than that and has made it clear that racist taunts won't worry him. Having played with so many great coloured players at Spurs, I still find it sad that some spectators in different parts of Britain find it necessary to abuse them. Mark had as tough a debut as he could have possibly got and he will have another hectic 90 minutes when we play Hearts at Tynecastle.'

Graham was spot on. Well, almost, because it was actually a whole lot worse at Tynecastle, but before that I had my home debut to think about – and it was against the team at the bottom of the

league. We thumped Morton 5-0 and after the game I walked into the dressing room and realised I had made the right decision to stay on at Ibrox after all the nonsense of the Old Firm match. Don't get me wrong, the first hour of the match against Morton had been pretty dismal, until we shook off the lethargy and clicked into gear. Morton, despite being bottom markers, were a plucky lot, and had put up a defensive barrier that we struggled to break down. But when we did, we did so with devastating effect. Ally McCoist scored three times, and as home debuts go, I was delighted with the way the game eventually panned out. It was afterwards I realised I was part of something special at Rangers. We had some cracking players, and Souey was trying to build something special, and lasting, at the club, and I was so glad I was a part of it.

I reckon that night was the first time the Rangers fans got a glimpse of the real Mark Walters. I was pleased to be involved in the goals, but what pleased me most after two difficult games was the way the fans got behind me – and began chanting my name. It was all a bit different from what I had experienced at Celtic Park, and it was very welcome.

But I felt sorry for Terry Butcher, who was still recovering from his broken leg, because he was quite clearly missing his football. As a result of his frustration, he banned himself from watching the team. He had given himself a target of being back for the second leg of our European Cup quarter-final tie against Steaua Bucharest, ironically a match I would be watching from the stand as I hadn't signed in time to be eligible to take part. It was certainly a big miss not having Terry around the dressing room before games.

Next up was a trip to Edinburgh to play Hearts. I was pre-warned about the Tynecastle atmosphere, the close proximity of the fans to the pitch, and the rivalry between Glasgow and Edinburgh, but nothing could have prepared me for that match: absolutely nothing, and it will remain for the rest of my life the worst abuse I ever experienced on a football field, but more about that later on. During the match I went to take a corner and I was getting hit with coins and all sorts of things from the terracing. It was an absolute nightmare, but I remember getting back into the dressing room at half time and the lads absolutely taking the piss out of me because I had slipped just as I was about to take the corner and made a complete mess of it. One of the guys shouted, 'Oi Mark, half-a-million quid and you can't even take a corner properly? It's not as if you were getting stick or anything!' Without doubt the boys taking the piss definitely helped me get over the nonsense that had been going on with many of the Hearts supporters.

The game itself was incredibly tough. There were boots flying in and quite a few players were booked. In fact, when I looked at the stats after the game, and noticed we had four players booked to Hearts' one, I couldn't help but think the figures were disproportionate, as Hearts had committed the greater number of fouls. Please explain that one Mr Referee! I'd had a number of bad fouls committed against me and yet they'd only had one player booked, Hugh Burns, who at times looked as if he might want to see what I looked like halved in two! Rather inevitably, he later fouled me inside the box and we were awarded a penalty from which Ian Durrant scored, so we didn't leave Edinburgh empty handed.

When I signed for Rangers it was the perfect move for me at that stage of my career, but after the match at Tynecastle I would be lying if I said I didn't have second thoughts. Rangers are a massive institution but were they worth losing an eye for? When I look back and recall seeing darts lying at the side of the park, it still scares me. At the time I was thinking, 'Will it be like this every week,' but then I read in one of the papers that it would soon be illegal to throw objects and I felt mighty relieved. Let's be honest, should it ever have been legal? At that point I was able to knuckle down and get on with concentrating on the football. Graham Roberts had taken over as captain from Terry, and just like he had done at White Hart Lane, when I was with Villa, he came out and condemned the thugs who had thrown objects at me and hurled racist abuse, which was a big comfort.

One guy with blue blood coursing through his veins was John 'Bomber' Brown. He signed midway through January from Dundee and was a great addition to the squad. Bomber was a guy I took to right away and we remain friends to this day. We also brought in a Danish lad, Jan Bartram, but he wouldn't be around too long after crossing Souey via the Danish press.

As you will already have gathered, Souey set incredibly high standards for everyone at the club – but those high standards also included him, as we witnessed when he criticised himself publicly for a sub-standard performance in the 1-1 draw at Hearts. He admitted he had underperformed in his last couple of matches, and said he wouldn't hesitate to drop himself if those standards continued to decline. That was the type of thing players liked to hear. The last thing you want is to be working under a player/manager who thinks he's beyond reproach because he has the stripes. Thankfully Souey was never like that.

There was a lot of frustration around in my first season at Rangers. We were always playing catch up with Celtic, and it was difficult as they had a good squad. We had a lot of injuries and new players but I think Celtic deserved to win the league. I don't think our strength in depth was as good, but when you get injuries to key players it definitely affects you. So we didn't have a lot of luck but it was never going to continue like that because luck has to change at some point, and thankfully it did.

When we played Steaua in the European Cup, naturally I was hoping we would get through, but of course there was an ulterior motive. I wasn't eligible to play in the quarter-finals but if we progressed I would be available to play in the semis. We lost 2-0 in Bucharest and I knew it would be an uphill struggle in the return leg. I didn't travel over to Bucharest because I was ineligible to play, but apparently there was a bust-up between Souey and a journalist on the return flight, which was quite embarrassing to say the least. Apparently this guy – and most of his colleagues – had been under the impression that Ally McCoist wouldn't play in Romania, while Souey is supposed to have told just a single journalist that he would play. It all kicked off on the plane and it even looked as though Souey was going to flatten the guy at one point. It was one of the main topics of conversation the following week at training, although we did all have sympathy with the gaffer as the pressure he was under from certain journalists was horrendous.

The second leg was eventful, to say the least. We knew we had a mountain to climb as Steaua were well organised, but it was up to us to open them up. Sadly, we lost an early goal and while we ended up winning the match 2-1, we crashed out of the competition on the finest of margins. That was my chances of playing in Europe that season over. That said, we were more or less guaranteed a spot in Europe every season so it wasn't as if it had gone for ever. Oh, and who could forget Souey making 'that' challenge? The gaffer is lucky VAR wasn't around at the time or he might've been facing quite a ban. But I could see from watching that game that we were geared towards playing regularly in Europe.

The day after the game, Souey challenged us to mount a Custer-style last stand in a desperate bid to hold on to our league title. He asked for the same determination we had shown against Steaua, saying that it was an injustice we were out of Europe, but we had eight games left in the title race and he wanted everyone to give it their best shot. He also said that with myself and Terry Butcher in the team, we could've won the European Cup. It was quite a comment, and one I appreciated.

I had only been at Ibrox a short time when the club decided to 'throw a protective shield around me,' and told me not to speak to the press, from either side of the border. No interviews. That was fine by me. I had been under a fair bit of pressure and the last thing I needed was putting my foot in it or being misquoted, probably more by the English press. It had been a stressful period and no matter how brave a face you try to put on things, I knew I didn't need any more emotional turmoil in my life. The club wanted me to concentrate on my football and I agreed.

Near the end of my first full month at Rangers, we welcomed Falkirk to Ibrox on league business. They weren't one of the bigger clubs in the league but I was astonished to see more than 41,000

inside Ibrox for a game against one of the so-called minnows. We moved up to second in the table as a result of winning the game, and once again Ian Durrant converted a penalty after I had been pulled down in the box. I remember Souey bringing on Davie Cooper as a sub and asking me to switch to the right wing to accommodate Coop on the left. Anything for Coop!

A few days after that game, Rangers were making a different type of headline when Souey refused to let Ally McCoist join up with the Scotland party at Gleneagles after he had turned up late for training with Rangers. Ally was a notoriously bad time keeper but the manager had decided enough was enough and slammed him in the press. It was the main topic of conversation in the dressing room for a little while as Souey had spoken about there being so much unemployment in Scotland, and here we had a young man doing a highly-paid job who couldn't be bothered turning up for training which didn't start until 10am. The manager's words, not mine! It was quite a verbal attack, but perhaps he was just frustrated at Coisty's timekeeping, and with the benefit of hindsight it must have been frustrating for the management team. But everyone at the club got a huge boost when Ally's mate, Durranty signed a new four-year contract. Durranty was a great lad and a top player. We were a few points behind Celtic in the league but I still felt we were capable of winning it. There had been a lot of doom and gloom around when we lost at Parkhead but we soon picked up and started winning matches again. Despite being a little inconsistent, it was still a good title race and I felt we might just prevail.

The spirit in our dressing room was a real eye opener for me and my teammates made me feel like I had been a Rangers player for years, which I really appreciated. But it wasn't just us and Celtic vying for the title. Aberdeen and Hearts were also involved. After losing to Celtic on my debut, we went nine league games unbeaten, which put us back in the frame. At the time I believed any club from the top four was capable of becoming champions and I was enjoying being with a side who were involved at the right end of the table for a change. Certain elements of the Premier League might have had its problems with this black player, but I loved being a part of it.

When we went up to Pittodrie and beat Aberdeen for the first time in six years, positive vibes returned to the dressing room. Ally McCoist was back in the gaffer's good books and scored his first ever goal at Aberdeen's ground, and that goal came hot on the heels of the Italian club Pisa reportedly showing an interest in signing Coisty.

Things were definitely moving in the right direction for both me and the club and I was thrilled to get my first Rangers goal when we hosted Raith Rovers in a midweek Scottish Cup replay. It was another one of those games where we didn't really come alive until late on but we scored three times in the last twelve minutes to book our place in the next round – and the icing on the cake for me was a neat chip from just inside the box when I spotted the keeper off his line, which Graham Roberts called 'extra special.'

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The next morning I was reading one of the papers at breakfast and a journalist described my goal against Raith as 'the type to light up Scotland's TV screens.' Out of all the plaudits I'd received in my short time in Scotland, that pleased me, because throughout my career I was always aware that I was part of the entertainment industry. Supporters worked hard all week and wanted to relax at the weekend. They wanted to be entertained, whether that was by going to the cinema, the football or whatever, so I always had that in mind. Souey said I was one of the most exciting players not just in Scotland, but in Britain, and that was also nice, but I was aware that I was being well paid for doing something I loved. The goal against Raith was obviously special because I laughed when I read that the Rovers boss said, 'I'm never too happy at losing a goal, but I just felt like standing up and applauding with the rest of the crowd.'

But it was only my first goal for Rangers and I was aiming to score as many as possible before the season was out. I had only managed four for Villa the season previous, although I had spent a large

part of that – three months, to be exact – on the sidelines with a pretty nasty shoulder injury. Just before the game against Raith, Walter Smith spoke to me about my lack of goals. Not that he was worried, but because he could see it was bothering me. Not once did Rangers ever put pressure on me to score, and for that I was grateful. I always liked to score around ten a season, anything less and I was disappointed, but when I got my first one I could say I had scored for Rangers and that was important to me.

Another reason it was important to get off the mark was because with Ally McCoist injured, we needed the others chipping in with goals, and I wanted to do my bit. And we did that against St Mirren by scoring four times. The goals were shared between Davie Cooper, who was celebrating his 600th appearance for the club, Ray Wilkins, Richard Gough and myself. You know what they say about waiting ages for a bus, and then two come along at the same time. In fact, the goal against St Mirren is one I will never forget, because I still don't know how I managed it. I remember jinking along the by-line – virtually running parallel with the white line – and it looked as though the only avenue open was the cut-back, but I went for goal and somehow it squeezed past the goalkeeper and his near post.

A few days after the win over St Mirren, Souey dipped into the transfer market again and paid around £1 million for Saints midfielder Ian Ferguson. It was yet another statement of intent by the club and gave the midfield an injection of steel. But Fergie could also play, and his forward raiding and passing was second to none. Oh, and he didn't drink either!

When we faced Dunfermline Athletic in March, I scored for the third game in a row, but while the home side's Dutch keeper, Guido van de Kamp, praised me after the game, saying that whenever he had played against me when I was at Villa, I was devastating on the ball, he also had a pop at the team, which I felt was completely wrong. He reportedly said, 'For a team with so many star names they really disappointed me.' I don't know what more we could have done. We won the match very comfortably, 3-0, and I thought we played well.

One of the Sunday papers opened a can of worms when they looked into what the top players in Scotland were supposedly earning at the time, and their expose claimed Rangers had the five top earners in the country, with Souey heading the list allegedly on £2,500 a week. Terry Butcher, Graham Roberts, Chris Woods and Richard Gough were the others involved. I don't know if an article like this was in the public interest, or if they just wanted to stir things up in the dressing room, but it had no effect on the other players and we just got on with our jobs.

One team we always seemed to struggle against was Motherwell, especially at Ibrox, where it seemed like they had sneaked into the ground the night before and built a brick wall in front of their goal – and this was long before the term 'parking the bus' became trendy. Late on in the season, they arrived at our place and it took an Ian Durrant goal to break their resistance. That particular game has stuck in my memory for one particular reason, and that was the moment Souey played the ball back to our goalkeeper from the halfway line and was roundly booed by our own fans!

The final Old Firm game of the season was upon us and this time it was John Colquhoun giving his opinion on the Rangers team. About myself, he said: "Most exciting player in the Scottish game, and I think Rangers' best buy. Great entertainer and never scores ordinary goals – they are all exceptional. 10 out of 10!" Wow, great words, but nigh on impossible to live up to. I did manage to play well enough in the game but it was Celtic who left with a 2-1 win. I'm sure we all thought that was that, and there was further bad news after the game when Trevor Francis announced he was leaving to sign for QPR. To be fair to Trev, he was being used more and more sparingly by Souey and I think frustration was getting the better of him. I was really sorry to see him go as we had struck up quite a bond.

But I received the perfect pick-me-up in the shape of the Scottish Brewers Player of the Month award, and the accompanying cheque for £250 and a trophy, which I received from the ex-Scotland rugby star John Rutherford, who was apparently a big Rangers fan.

And then the shit really hit the fan.

At the end of March, Souey was savaged by Jan Bartram through the pages of a Danish newspaper. Under the headline of, 'My boss is a bastard,' the biggest selling Copenhagen daily – Ekstra Bladet – quoted Bartram's explosive outburst extensively. Jan allegedly told the newspaper that he had been instructed to kick opponents, and that Souey should have been red carded for a vicious tackle in the game against Steaua Bucharest. The report also claimed Bartram once saw Souness kicking a TV set after a game. Big deal!

At the time, the player was in Italy with the Danish Olympic team preparing to face West Germany in a Seoul Olympics qualifying match. Bartram was quoted as saying, 'I didn't go to Scotland to risk breaking other players' legs. I'm very much against this style. Souness wants us to be hard when we're in trouble. He is a bastard. I will not follow orders and deliberately kick people. He should have been shown the red card against Steaua. He likes to get the ball and slaughter other players and I don't think I can learn this type of play. I like to see the beautiful things in the game so I am prepared to be fired. There will always be another club for me, and at the moment I am glad to be back among my Danish countrymen so that I can play real football again.'

You can imagine this was the main topic of conversation in the Ibrox dressing room before, during and after training. Of course, we were all used to being misquoted but this was pretty explosive stuff and, if the truth be told, I'm not sure we were looking forward to Jan returning from international duty. You must also be thinking by now that we were a bunch of gossips in that dressing room! Meanwhile, we had a match to win at Dens Park in Dundee, a ground we never had it easy at, and this occasion was no different. Perhaps the frenzied nature of the contest – and five goals in a match that had everything – took a little of the heat off Bartram. That particular game was played at 90 miles per hour and it eventually took Ray Wilkins to calm things down by putting his foot on the ball and slowing down the tempo. Ray was great at having a look around him and picking out a pass. He really stamped his authority on the game that day and we were soon playing on his terms. Oh, and normality was restored late on when I was brought down in the box and Durranty slammed home the penalty. There was a pattern emerging. For a little while at least, Bartram wasn't centre of attention.

Mind you, a spotlight was quite rightly shone in our faces when we lost to Morton at their place. It was a huge embarrassment for everyone, especially as the papers put it, 'the millionaires of Rangers were humbled by the team at the bottom of the league, and with the worst scoring record in the country.' Freak results happen in football but for them to get their first win in thirty-one games, and against us, was awful. After the match, we were quite rightly booed all the way back to the dressing room by our supporters.

The following midweek, the focus shifted from a pretty awful performance on the park, to an even worse one off it. Terry Butcher, Chris Woods and Graham Roberts had been involved in a fracas during an Old Firm game before I had arrived at the club, but they were due at court for sentencing and I thought it was a wind up when Terry and Chris ended up with a criminal record because of a handbags incident during a match. What were the Scottish authorities thinking about? Our lads were accused of conducting themselves in a disorderly manner and committing a breach of the peace for a 30-second nothing incident in a red-hot Old Firm match. Big deal. Sadly, Terry and Chris were found guilty, and fined £250 and £500 respectively, while Robbo's case was deemed Not Proven. The Celtic player involved, Frank McAvennie, was found Not Guilty. I had witnessed far worse in games where players hadn't even been booked. Honestly. I wouldn't say it was a laughing matter but the mentality around the dressing room was to treat it like a joke. I think the lads knew nothing terrible

was going to happen to them, like being thrown in jail, so they were relatively comfortable about it, but I can't believe they ended up with a criminal record.

Terry Butcher had fully recovered from his broken leg, but had been out of the side for five months and been a big miss. Who wouldn't miss a guy with his pedigree? During his absence, Robbo had been a superb deputy, but he then picked up a knee injury and was ruled out for the remainder of the season. I had only arrived halfway through the campaign, but as title defences went, it had been a bit of a damp squib.

We had just three league games left and, as if to prove the Jekyll & Hyde mantle we had acquired, easily won the first 3-0 at St Mirren. I was pleased to score again, but there was a pre-match shock in store when Souey announced he was dropping Ian Durrant due to a 'lack of professionalism.' He told the media, "If a footballer chooses to do things away from training in his social life which prevent him from giving 100 per cent on a Saturday then he is in the wrong business."

Our final home game was against Aberdeen, and we lost. Everyone was as flat as a pancake. In his programme notes, Souey said: "Frankly, I hope I never have to go through another season like it." It certainly wasn't what the gaffer had been used to during his playing career, and I had a feeling he wouldn't have to suffer another like it while at Ibrox, although that was just a hunch.

With the season petering out, and Souey no doubt already involved in planning for the new campaign, there was one final bombshell for Rangers supporters (and players). Sadly, Graham Roberts' time at Rangers came to an abrupt halt as he had fallen foul of Souey and left the club. It all happened so quickly. Just a few weeks before the incident that led to his departure, we were all out for a meal, Graham included, and he had just signed a new five-year contract. It looked to all intents and purposes that he would finish his career at Ibrox, but something was said between Graham and the gaffer and I literally never saw my teammate again. He was banished to the Highlands with the kids' team and that was that. End of story. What was said sounded pretty trivial to me but if it had disrespected the gaffer then it wouldn't end well for Graham. To go from the highs of signing a five-year deal to leaving the club under a cloud literally a few weeks later, I'm just wondering if there was something else to it, and perhaps something was said behind the scenes which we weren't party to. Without doubt, that decision sent out a big message to the rest of the players. I remember thinking that if any of the others had a gripe they would be keeping it to themselves, unless of course they wanted to leave. If Souey had been looking to enhance his reputation as a disciplinarian at that time he definitely went about it the right way. As for Graham, the gaffer obviously felt he was replaceable, and that proved the case when Richard Gough signed and settled in very quickly. There's no question it was Souey's way or the highway and he had stamped his authority on the dressing room. I'm not sure he would get away with it nowadays as players have so much more power than we ever did. There were a lot of big personalities in that Rangers dressing room, but Souey was the boss. The lads also loved playing for Rangers so much they weren't going to risk their future. The likes of Ian Durrant was Rangers through and through and would've pulled on that jersey for nothing.

Roberts was put up for sale. The guy who had been interim club captain was out, and wouldn't be given an opportunity to say goodbye to supporters in our final match of the season at Falkirk. It was a tough one for me to take, because Robbo had backed me during turbulent times and it was sad to see him go.

From the moment we ran out onto the park at Falkirk, all we could hear was the massive Rangers support chanting for Robbo. It was as though the game itself was a sideshow. We won 5-0 and I was delighted to score twice – as did Coisty – but the game was played out to a backdrop of 'Robbo must stay' chants and banners being unfurled in support of the popular defender. The supporters were trying to send a message to Souey, but we all knew he wasn't the sort to back down. I recall scoring our opening goal after just a couple of minutes, and as I made my way back to our own half, all I

could hear was 'Robbo Robbo give us a wave.' I thought it was brilliant of the fans to show their support for him in this way. Rangers fans have always been loyal and passionate, and that is two qualities you like to see your supporters show.

After the game, I believe Souey only wanted to answer questions about the game to waiting reporters, but even they only had one name on their lips, and the gaffer eventually decided he would try and put the subject to bed by saying, "Due to the reaction of the supporters, it is necessary for me to make the situation clear. After a game it is every manager's right to express his opinion and every player's duty to accept what the manager has to say. Graham Roberts took exception to the remarks I made after the recent 1-0 defeat by Aberdeen at Ibrox. His response to my remarks was, among other comments, that he asked for a transfer. This took place in front of all the players, Walter Smith and Phil Boersma. When done in this way, there is no alternative for me but to put that player on the transfer list. In the end, I'm not doing what's best for Graeme Souness but what I believe to be the best for Rangers. That's why Graham Roberts has played his last game for the club."

That certainly put the matter to rest for the majority of us; especially when the news came through that Davie Cooper had been offered – and accepted – a new one-year contract. As the guy that was allegedly brought in to replace Coop, I couldn't have been happier. When Souey handed out the extension, he reckoned Coop could play in the top league for at least another three years. I was inclined to agree.

And the final word went to the gaffer. He had decided to play less games the following season and distance himself more from the players. Souey would leave training to Walter Smith and Phil Boersma. He was willing to do anything to ensure Rangers would be back at the top of the league.