

The 1928 American tour



Pic of Davie Meiklejohn

Rangers sail off into the sunset

The first ever World Cup was still two years off when Davie Meiklejohn & Co headed off on their maiden transatlantic adventure – destination North America. The USA would finish third at the inaugural competition in Uruguay and I like to think Rangers taught them a thing or two about the game, and set them on the road to a good showing in Montevideo.

Wishful thinking perhaps, but the official Rangers party set sail on the good ship California from Yorkhill Quay on the morning of Saturday, May 19, 1928. The travelling group comprised of 17 players, nine of whom were full internationals; the manager, Bill Struth, and directors Duncan Graham and James Bowie. Some 600 passengers were also on board the vessel.

New York would welcome the weary tourists nine days later, with the Knickerbocker Hotel, in Times Square, their headquarters. It was proposed to play nine matches in 24 days but that became 10 when an extra fixture was added to the itinerary.

The players and officials received a send-off normally only reserved for the likes of royalty when the ship slowly snaked its way down the River Clyde, where thousands of supporters and well wishers had turned out to bid farewell to the Scottish Cup holders. While the tugs were taking charge of the ship, those on the banks of the Clyde broke into song and gave a hearty rendition of an old Rangers classic, while on board the California, a band named the Three Oxford Boys, from the Hamilton Hippodrome, entertained passengers for over an hour with a less rousing form of instrumental music. When they had finished their set, they were rewarded with the presentation of Rangers badges by Mr Struth.

Passing vessels displayed the red, white and blue of Rangers, and work in the various shipyards was suspended until the men in overalls had given a loud cheerio to their favourites lining the ship's side. Rangers 6 New York 0, read a banner prominently displayed by two Fairfield workers, and a squad of riveters pointed proudly to one of their colleagues who was wearing a light blues jersey. As the ship sailed past Clydebank, the waiting crowds cheered for trainer Jimmy Kerr, while at Renfrew, a special reception awaited goalkeeper Tom Hamilton. His namesake, Bob, the left back, quipped, 'Man, I wish this boat was sailing past Belfast, then there would be a special cheer for Billy McCandless and I'.

Once the California's bow was pointing out to the open ocean, out came the deck billiards and quoits. Before Alan Morton and Sandy Archibald had proved their right to the title of billiards champions of the upper deck, the hilarity was so boisterous that the chief engineer came up to inquire if the ship had struck an iceberg! For dinner in the evening, Mr Dick McMillan, of the Anchor Line, their chaperone-in-chief, had provided a nice surprise for the travelling Gers. The tables were decked in blue and white, and there was a souvenir menu card on which was inscribed, 'Farewell Dinner in honour of Rangers Football Club: Good Luck and Bon Voyage'.

The repost over, a round of snappy speeches ensued. Mr McMillan welcomed his esteemed guests and said, 'If there is anything better in the United States, then they must be some football team'. The Rangers directors thanked Mr McMillan and his staff for their incredible hospitality and the club chairman insisted that they had a reputation to defend, because they had never before been defeated outwith the shores of Great Britain, and he predicted that envious stat would remain untarnished.

Skipper Tommy Muirhead then lived up to his reputation as a top after-dinner

orator and insisted that the players were going to America not to let the folk there see the football that won the cups, but the football that won the League Championship. There would be no kick and hustle.

The last stop for the California, before nosing out once again to the open sea, was Moville, at the northern top of Donegal, where a party of football people had congregated to say their farewells. It was here, also, that many who had accompanied the players and officials on the first stage of their voyage, departed to join the SS Cameronia for the trip back to Glasgow.

While on board, the players took part in an organised fancy dress ball and, it was said, that they were so 'made up' that their partners would not have noticed them. And one quick change later, members of the squad were entertaining fellow guests with a song or two. Looking sharp in suits and bow ties, the group called themselves the Twenty Apostles and the bo'sun's mate remarked that if they had to give up football they would do just fine in the music halls!

The party arrived safe and well in the land of Uncle Sam and were welcomed ashore in Boston by the McLean Pipe Band, where the blood thickened with the skirl of the pipes and a demonstration of Highland dancing. Mr JC Creagh, Chief of the Lindsay Clan welcomed the team to the city and invited them for dinner when they were scheduled to play against the city footballers later in their trip. Next stop, New York, and Mr McInnes, Royal Chief of the Scottish Clans, was awaiting their arrival with similar fervour. The pipes were once again in evidence and the players were treated to some traditional Scottish music before making their way to the Knickerbocker Hotel, where they would prepare for their first challenge, against Philadelphia, at which it was hoped Bill Struth would field the side that won the Scottish Cup.

Before the match, the Rangers party was introduced to Captain Pomfrey, British Consul at Baltimore, who had travelled quite a distance with his wife to see the match.

And what a grand opening to the tour, for Rangers thumped their hosts 8-1. The ground was hard but the players soon mastered the conditions and went on to produce a first-class display of football. Their passing game offered little hope to the home side, and Rangers were 5-1 ahead at half time. Local spectators appeared to enjoy a fine display of football, even if their favourites were being somewhat overrun.

The match did throw up one topic of real conversation, and that was the use of the 'substitute' by the host team. Mr Struth said, 'The Philadelphia team used some 14 players during the game by means of substitution. We are having some lively arguments over this. On the subject of Prohibition, let's just say we can get 'one' before bed if we wish!'

The team that took part in Rangers first historic game on the other side of the pond was: T. Hamilton, Gray, R. Hamilton, Buchanan, Meiklejohn, Craig, Archibald, Cunningham, Fleming, McPhail and Morton. Scorers in Philadelphia were McPhail 2, Fleming 2, Buchanan, Cunningham, Craig and Morton.

Next to fall were the Brooklyn Wanderers. 20,000 spectators turned up to watch the same Rangers side win 4-0, with Jamie Fleming getting a hat trick and Bob McPhail a single, but the American fans were left to drool over a superb performance by Andra Cunningham, who teased and tormented the home players throughout a one-sided encounter. But when the Brooklyn forwards did break free from midfield, they found Meiklejohn & Co a hurdle too far and never seriously tested Tom Hamilton in the Rangers goal. At times the Yankee crowds marvelled at the clever combination play of the Light Blue forwards.

The players had a couple of days rest before their next match, at Fall River, a Canadian suburb in Nova Scotia – and there was a shock in store for Rangers, when they fought out a scoreless draw with the local side. Manager Struth made just a single change, Tommy Muirhead replacing Bob McPhail. But for the brilliance, however, of the Fall River goalkeeper, Douglas, the tourists would certainly have made it three wins from three games. Each of the five forwards, as well as Meiklejohn, Craig and Buchanan, had great attempts on goal but simply couldn't get past the young man between the posts.

Next on the touring Scots' itinerary was a 2,000+km trek to Pittsburgh, where the players and directors received a welcome fit for royalty. Rangers were received officially in the local municipal building where Mr Struth, ex-Bailie Graham and James Bowie were presented with a golden key to the city by the mayor, the highest honour visitors could possibly have bestowed upon them. In the evening, they were guests of the Clan Grant, all 150 of them, and were wined and dined until the 'wee sma' hours'.

In return for their superb hospitality, Rangers hammered the locals 9-0, and produced a display of scintillating football which impressed the 8,000 crowd. Bob McPhail scored a hat trick, there were a couple for Jamie Marshall and Alan

Morton, with Tommy Craig and Jamie Fleming completing the scoring. The party were soon on the move again, this time heading north to Detroit, via the picturesque trail around Lake Erie. In all, the journey took around seven hours, and Meiklejohn, Alec Archibald and Dougie Gray were given a further rest, sitting out the game to allow Billy McCandless, Jamie Simpson and Willie Hair to make their first appearances on the tour. And it was the second Sunday in succession that the Rangers would be held to a draw. And this was again down to the spectacular form shown by the Yankee goalkeeper, Sprott, the Detroit number one. In fact, his display was so good that he was 'chaired' from the field at the end of the game. 15,000 people watched the action on a firm, but rather small, pitch, and saw Jock Buchanan turn the ball past his own keeper before Hair scored the equaliser. A Glasgow man, Mr D. Evans, was referee, and he presided over a game that was played in 80 degree heat.

After an overnight stay in what had just become the 'motor city', the players were on the move again, this time to Toronto, where their reception outdone even that of Pittsburgh, and that's saying something. In an emotional ceremony, the players were accompanied to the town hall by the Pipe Band of the 48th Highlanders. On the way to the building a stop was made at the Cenotaph, where the players laid a wreath for the fallen of the Great War. A speech by Mayor McBride finished with each and every player being awarded the Freedom of Toronto.

Then it was time to take to the football field, and in front of 19,000 fervent supporters, Rangers produced a sparkling display of football to beat Ulster United 7-0. Before the match, though, yet another honour was bestowed upon the visitors, when a representative of the Scottish Citizens Group presented Bailie Duncan Graham with a handsome illuminated address, a scroll framed in beautiful oak. At the ground, scores of ex-pat Scots had awaited the arrival of Rangers with great enthusiasm. People originally from Govan, Partick and all over Caledonia had turned up to see The Rangers in action. And they weren't disappointed, as Bob McPhail slammed in four goals to add to strikes by Andy Cunningham and a Jamie Fleming double.

At the close of play, the team received some rousing cheers for another great exhibition of delightful football. Mr Struth said, 'This was the best team we had come up against so far on the tour, so it says much for the standard of our performance. Although the margin was so big, the Ulster combine showed real ability – they were quite a clever side'.

And Mr Struth revealed how the tour of the US and Canada had captured the imagination of so many people. He said, 'From the moment we get up in the morning till 12 o'clock midnight we are kept busy with callers at our hotel. Everybody who is Scotch wants to drop in and talk about the old country and football. Very nice, too, but it is an extra job we did not have on the itinerary. 'Our game against Brooklyn Wanderers was a pleasant affair. Their goalkeeper, Smith, who is an old Aberdeen player, put up a magnificent game and was responsible for making the match something of a contest. It was only in the second half that our boys wore him down. The Wanderers showed a good conception of the game. Their team work was excellent.

'You will see from the New York Times that Brooklyn are regarded as the equal of any team in America. Though we won 4-0, they came out of the match with great credit.

'The conditions we are experiencing are more like cricket weather, and are exhausting to the players. We found ourselves up against it when we met Fall River the day after Brooklyn. We boarded a train on the Saturday night in Brooklyn at 11.30, and arrived at Fall River at 7.30 the next morning, feeling very tired. It was a case of making for the field almost straight away. There was a great gathering of Scots and Yanks and we received a wonderful reception.

'We received another when the game began. The Fall River team were not long in letting us know what was what. They slipped it across Tom Hamilton in the first few minutes, and when he was knocked out the crowd thought it was great fun. Naturally, our fellows did not take it all lying down, but the effect was that the game was spoiled as an exhibition. We were glad to get away with a few skinned legs and no fractures. I don't think there will be any Fall River in our next – if there is a next – American programme. There was just one thing we regretted and that was our inability to accept the proffered hospitality of the Caledonian Scots of Fall River.

'Back to New York, the boys got a fine pick-me-up at the Turkish Baths. They are all in good fettle now. The New York Nationals club are chasing us for a game at the finish of our tour. Up till the present, nothing has been settled, but I expect we shall play them before we sail on the 27th. I am now switching off for an ice-cream soda. Say, guy, what do you think of that?'

When the party landed in Montreal, they found a large assembly of Scots awaiting their arrival with real interest. Mr Struth said, 'There is just the danger

should we strike a city or a town where the inhabitants don't fall over the top of one another to extend the glad hand we will feel badly done by. Never surely was such hospitality extended to a touring 'soccer' party.

'After lunch with the St George's Snowshoe Club, we spent the afternoon on the bowling green, and – we played bowls! Also, we thoroughly enjoyed the 'old man's game'. Following a sad parting, Morton and Fleming need to go home. We don't want to lose them but Alan and Jamie simply had to go, and we showed our grief at their departure by giving them a rousing send-off. Bon voyage, boys. 'We have fixed up an extra game. We play at Chicago on June 20 – that's a Wednesday, isn't it? We are all well and enjoying every minute – the players are in the pink!'

Rangers played Montreal on the Saturday night and came away with a resounding 5-1 victory, despite the playing field resembling Glasgow Green in many respects! Billy McCandless replaced his fellow Irishman Bob Hamilton while Jamie Marshall and Tommy Muirhead deputised for the departed Morton and Fleming. Doubles from Cunningham and Marshall were supplemented with a single from McPhail. Rangers were three ahead at the break and in manager Struth's mind, 'Montreal emerged after the break looking as if they meant business!' Apparently they showed lots of dash and swarmed around the Light Blues' goal, and looked very like scoring – but didn't.

After McPhail had notched the fifth, and final, goal, Rangers displayed their brilliant brand of fast and free-flowing football and gave an exhibition of the stuff that had made them champions of the Scottish League three years running. All kinds of shots rained down on Noseworthy, but the Canadian goalkeeper was equal to the task. A breakaway gave Duguid, the former Queen's Park centre forward, his chance and he took it with aplomb.

Next on Rangers' Yankee itinerary was a trip to Boston to take on the city's first eleven. The home side didn't let down their supporters in the 12,000 crowd and earned a 2-2 draw, the Gers' third 'check' of the tour. Boston took the lead in the 10th minute when forward John Ballantyne shot past Hamilton. Goals either side of the break, by Marshall and Cunningham, gave Rangers the lead but with just five minutes remaining Ballantyne fired home a fine equaliser. Tom Hamilton, Andy Cunningham and Jamie Marshall were best for Rangers while the brothers Ballantyne, both of whom were former Partick Thistle players, stood out for Boston.

Players and management were able to sample some fine Boston hospitality before catching a train for Chicago, where they would play their next match against Illinois. On arrival in the city, the players were entertained to lunch by the St Andrew's Society before being given the freedom of the city in a ceremony performed by the Mayor, Big Bill Thompson. The Mayor, who expressed himself as being keenly interested in the Rangers tour, demonstrated that he could say nice things – even to the Scots! The party spent a pleasant few hours with the Mayor and other civic leaders.

The players then visited an old folk's home before getting to the Illinois football stadium in time for a 6.45pm kick off in very wet weather. In the circumstances it wasn't surprising that only a moderate attendance was present, but those who turned out were witness to a most frenetic opening five minutes when, first of all, Cunningham scored for Rangers, a goal which was equalised soon after by Cuthbert, Chicago's inside left. Bob McPhail edged Rangers in front minutes before the interval, but the hosts made a real game of it in the second period and it was only the brilliance of Rangers' play, and further goals by Marshall and McPhail, with a superb solo effort, which gave Rangers the win.

It was a terrific performance and result, considering Rangers had travelled more than 1,000 miles to get there, and had only arrived in the 'canning city' a little over three hours before kick-off. Hjulian, the former Celtic goalkeeper, was a stand out for Chicago's all-star side, but Cuthbert was their star turn. Alan Morton and Jamie Fleming arrived home aboard the good ship Athenia just as their colleagues were preparing to play their final game in Brooklyn. Morton said, 'It was a wonderful trip and we thoroughly enjoyed it, but we're glad to be home.'

'Football was taken seriously in the States, but the conditions were difficult, especially on the bare grounds, and with the humid atmosphere, and only in the palatial baseball enclosures did they have any grass pitches to play upon'. Regarding the 'roughing up' at Fall River, Fleming smiled and said, 'I'm saying nothing to anybody about that match', before Morton chipped in, 'It was tough!' When told that many in Montreal were saddened by the early departure of the duo, Morton insisted that he couldn't have played anyway, having been injured in the draw at Detroit, but he said his injury had healed during the crossing, and added, 'I proved my fitness by challenging for the deck tennis championships!' He added, 'On both sides of the border (Canada and the USA), the crowds were exceptionally well behaved, and of course a big percentage were Scots. I think our appearance excited a lot of people, but also made them homesick to a

certain degree’.

On the other side of the Atlantic, Rangers brought a most satisfactory tour of North America to a close with a resounding victory over an American Select in Brooklyn. 18,000 spectators watched Rangers win 6-0, with goals from Archibald, Buchanan, Marshall and McPhail, supplemented by a double from Cunningham. Everyone had been keener than ever to see how the Scottish champions would fare against the best the Americans had to offer and the answer was clear – they were simply the best, despite travelling the best part of three thousand miles in just eight days to show off their soccer skills in as many different cities as was humanly possible.

The final match in Brooklyn was an ‘afternoon affair’, getting started at 4.10pm, and in the middle of a thunderous downpour, but despite a terrific first-half performance, only an Alec Archibald goal separated the teams.

The teams turned round almost immediately, and that was when the Rangers produced their magic wand. Goals galore rained down on the Brooklyn stadium and locals gasped at the sparkling skills of the tourists. When Bob McPhail walked number six into the net, someone was heard to say, ‘This is the finest exhibition of football we have ever witnessed in these parts’. Uncle Sam’s best had been no match for the famous Light Blues.

After the match, Mr Struth said, ‘We are finished and remain unbeaten outwith the British Isles. The ovation we received before returning to the dressing rooms was so incredible that I cannot find the true words to describe it, but let me say that some of the more enthusiastic carried Cunningham shoulder high.

‘And so a most successful American tour may be said to have entered its final stage. We board the SS Berengaria in New York on Wednesday, and touch Southampton on the Monday of the following week, and Glasgow a day later. And so on a tour which brought 46 goals and nine different scorers - Davie Meiklejohn was one of the few who didn’t manage to find the net on Yankee soil, but still played a massive part in making Rangers’ inaugural transatlantic trip a huge success - the Ibrox boys bid farewell to the United States, with a simple message ringing in their ears. Haste ye back!

*As a footnote, Austrian player, Ernie Schwartz, had turned out against Rangers for the Nationals side in New York and spoke with Bill Struth after the game about the possibility of joining Rangers at some point during the season, a

prospect that the talented player was more than keen on – providing immigration difficulties could be overcome.