

Torry Gillick ... Rangers legend



It was often said that the great Torry Gillick was faster than any other footballer of his generation; not by fleet of foot, but by speed of mind.

Gillick was no Powderhall sprinter, but the trickery embedded in those twinkling toes of his was a joy to behold.

He was first spotted by one of Bill Struth's army of scouts playing for his school team in Airdrie. In those days, the Rangers manager had a great many eyes and ears covering large swathes of the country, and like regimental drill sergeants they would report back to their CO with their many tales of talented kids. But this lad Gillick was a bit special.

He was a stand out in his school team, while simultaneously starring for crack outfit, Clarkston Juveniles. When his studies were over, Struth decided to toughen up his glowing protege by packing him off to learn his trade at Petershill Juniors, a successful side from Springburn, in the north-east of Glasgow. There, he would get used to playing in front of good crowds, and with men double his age. It was a highly successful move. Torrance Gillick was born in Gartness, near Airdrie, on May 19th, 1916 - in the middle of the First World War - to parents, Lawrence, a coal miner, and Isabella. When Gillick quit Everton in 1940 he would return to live in Gartness.

The talented teenager had a slow start to life at Petershill but he was soon on the pace and turning in eye-catching performances. So much so that he was called up by Struth in September, 1933, and made his top team debut for Rangers against Partick Thistle in a 4-3 win at Firhill. There would be only one more league appearance that season, as well as a Glasgow Cup final starting jersey against Clyde, a game Rangers won 2-0. His first two starts of the 1934/35 campaign were against Celtic - and he scored in both games. The progress he made that season was frightening, and it was no surprise when he started attracting attention from down south.

Rangers won both the league title and Scottish Cup and Gillick more than played his part with 21 goals from 34 appearances. He had also gained a reputation as a big-game player, despite being just 18 when the season started.

When the new campaign began, the name of Gillick was one of the first on Struth's team sheet, and in the first two months he had shown how remarkably versatile he was, not to mention a maturity beyond his years, by playing in all FIVE forward positions. On Saturday, December 7, 1936, Rangers travelled to Perth to oppose St Johnstone, and Gillick lit up Muirton Park like a beacon. Sitting in the stand was an agent with links to Everton and immediately after the game he was on to his paymasters to inform them of this star of the north.

Just 48 hours later, the least expected of all Scottish clubs had given in to the lure of the pound, and Gillick had joined the Merseysiders. The news left Rangers supporters flabbergasted. It was illegal to publish transfer fees in those days but the figure involved was believed to be in the region of £8,000 to £8,500, and was a record for Everton, but Rangers had lost their most promising player in a generation. He had played just 53 league and cup games but had made quite the impact.

Everton moved swiftly, and they'd had to, as Manchester City were ready to pounce, after being impressed by Gillick in a friendly fixture at Maine Road. Few youngsters at Rangers had shown such confidence, or been able to play in so many different positions, and while it was suggested that such a heavy transfer fee might prove a burden on such young shoulders, those who knew Gillick best were confident he wouldn't be overawed. And the supporters would miss him greatly.

Rangers were not a selling club in that era, but every player had his price, and even though Gillick had limited top-level experience, he had still been part of a league and cup winning Rangers side.

The move did smack a little of Everton's desperation to improve. They were struggling, their supporters becoming restless and they more or less offered a blank cheque for the teenager.

That was understandable, but the Rangers position was slightly baffling, as right from the beginning of the season they'd encountered obvious problems on the left wing. After many experiments they had found a key man in Gillick - and then chucked away the key!

But just hours after the transfer had been completed, Gillick and his fiancé, Molly Williamson, decided to visit his parents in Airdrie to tell them the good news. It was bitterly cold and the roads weren't in the greatest of condition, and while returning home, and passing through Baillieston, their vehicle skidded and hit a lamppost. Both Gillick and his fiancé were badly shaken, but the only injuries suffered by either were cuts to the hand of the footballer, who had been driving, and who had put his hands up to save himself when the windscreen caved in.

After the accident, Gillick said, 'It was very, very slight. The windscreen caused a cut or two on my hands but it is nothing.'

It was a few hours before he was able to let Everton know of the accident, and there

was initial panic from officials at Goodison Park. Gillick was soon able to allay any fears of serious injury.

Gillick and his fiancé had planned to marry on Christmas Day, as there were no Scottish fixtures scheduled that day, but the move south forced a re-think as Gillick was required to play for Everton at Sheffield Wednesday - only for the game to eventually be postponed!

Before the transfer, newspapers in the Merseyside area had been rife with speculation that Everton were set to sign a new striker - but offered only wild guesses as to the identity of the player. One suggested that Grosvenor of Birmingham City was the man. Others believed it to be Westwood or Eastham. Gillick took them all by surprise. The Scot made an impressive debut for the Toffees, alongside his old Rangers teammate, Alex Stevenson, and was the only Everton forward to trouble the Leeds United goalkeeper that day. 'He'll do okay,' was the general reaction.

Just 24 hours after his move to Everton, Gillick was back in the news north of the border when he formally set plans in motion to sue his previous employers for wages he claimed he was owed. His solicitor, Mr A. Cruikshank lodged the action against Rangers FC in Glasgow Sheriff Court in the name of Torrance Gillick, of Hillneuk Drive, Bearsden, for the sum of £70. Gillick claimed the Light owed him back wages. But the player didn't allow this action to affect his on-field form and he had quickly won over any doubting Toffees' supporters. By the end of his debut season he had played 33 times for his new club and scored nine goals. He was hailed a success.

He scored his first Everton goal against Birmingham City at St Andrew's - and what a goal it was too. The players had been late in arriving at the ground due to their train being held up for two hours in thick fog. They'd had to run from the station to the ground but had seemed unaffected and played some pretty football. Five minutes from time, Gillick darted into the centre of the box, fastened on to a loose ball and fairly thumped it into the roof of the net.

Gillick and his fiancé had rearranged their wedding for Monday, December 30, and planned to marry at her family home in Glasgow's Park Circus Lane. It was a bittersweet affair as the bride's father had passed away just a fortnight beforehand. Romance had blossomed a year earlier when Gillick visited the car showroom owned by Molly's father. He was looking for a car, and 21-year old Molly had taken the time to show him round and offer her opinions on the various vehicles.

Once he had chosen his car, he confessed that he couldn't drive and so the pretty auburn-haired employee offered to teach him. They started with the basics, and she showed him how to reverse, brake and to negotiate the tricky corners around Lanarkshire.

However, the wedding was almost cancelled for a second time. Gillick had been playing for Everton at Derby County on the Saturday afternoon and had been 'kicked from pillar to post,' according to a match report. The aggression had mainly taken place in the first half, with the home side having marked Gillick down as the danger man, and were determined to stop him at all costs.

But while club mates insisted he should've gone off at the break, the young Scotsman had demanded to remain on the field, and had all but gone through the motions in the second half. He was in quite a state but insisted on travelling north for his big day. He was determined to say 'I will' to Molly.

And to make sure he wasn't late for the service, the bride's family came up with a unique way of summoning the bridegroom. It was a quiet ceremony, with just a dozen guests in attendance - and these were all family members.

Gillick dressed for the ceremony at a house adjoining that of his bride, and a member of her family 'blew a whistle' to summon him!

The wedding ceremony was conducted by the Rev Alexander Gillon, of Kilmun, in Argyllshire. The bride, in her childhood, had promised Mr Gillon that if she was ever married then he would perform the ceremony.

In the room where the ceremony took place there were many beautiful presents including a chiming clock from Rangers Football Club. After the ceremony, Mr and Mrs Gillick left for the south of England for a few days, before returning to Liverpool on the Saturday in time for Everton's next game.

Gillick enjoyed a good relationship with Everton supporters, and many loved his cavalier approach to the game. One long-time supporter later wrote of Gillick, 'He was a wonderful winger, and I rated him on a par with the great Stanley Matthews. 'He played in front of two of the greatest wing-halves in the game, Cliff Britton and the great Joe Mercer. He was a very clever player and could also score goals.

'He was a stockily-built winger, a natural, and he loved to entertain the crowds. We enjoyed watching him in full flight down both wings - he was an exhilarating sight.' And then in the early evening of Wednesday November 15, 1939, everything changed. All was normal at the Gillick family home in Aintree, on the outskirts of Liverpool. Molly was inside the house preparing dinner while her husband was outside in the garage making some adjustments to his car.

The vehicle was his pride and joy and he often spent time inside the small brick building where the car was parked up. He had developed a decent mechanical knowledge and would potter about on his vehicle, but on this occasion he was working away quietly when sparks and then flames suddenly shot up from the engine.

Fire quickly took hold and instead of rushing straight out of the garage, his first thought was to save his car from the blazing inferno. The temperature in the garage, which had a timber frame and double wooden doors with glass panels on the top third, was soon dangerously high, and Gillick was in grave danger of being overcome, not only by flames, but with smoke inhalation.

The only way to save the car was to reverse it out, but part of the wooden roof had fallen in, which had blocked the way and hampered any rescue mission. He tried to open the car door, but the metal was red hot, and he jumped back. As he

did, a further section of the roof came in and the star footballer himself was set ablaze. His wife heard his terrifying screams from inside the house and stopped what she was doing and rushed outside. She was met by the most horrific of scenes as her husband was by this point a human fireball. She clicked into fight mode and pushed Torry to the ground before rolling him on the grass, which obviously put herself in danger - but her plan worked perfectly and within moments she had extinguished all the flames.

Panic then set in as she realised her husband had been badly burned. She left him for a few moments while she called an ambulance and the fire brigade.

When she returned to the garden, to comfort her husband, the fire had really taken hold in the garage, but she was only interested in Torry. She comforted him in her arms until the ambulance arrived and from there he was conveyed to Walton Hospital with horrific burns to mainly his hands and arms, but also his face.

Bootle Fire Brigade arrived just after the ambulance had left, and it took them around half an hour to extinguish the blaze. The fire had spread to the garage next door, which was part of the property owned by Walter Boyes, an Everton teammate of Gillick's, but the damage to his garage was minimal, and firefighters managed to get his car out. Both Mr and Mrs Gillick were treated at the infirmary for burns, and while the latter was discharged later that evening, her husband was kept in hospital for a week.

Mrs Gillick was praised for her quick thinking and her bravery, and told by a doctor at the hospital that her quick actions had almost certainly saved her husband's life. Torry's injuries were described by one medic as 'serious,' but nowhere near as bad as they would have been had his wife not heard his screams as he emerged from the garage fully ablaze.



The following day, Gillick's condition was described as rather poorly, although he'd had

a fair night in hospital. It took him roughly six weeks to recover from the trauma, but he was soon back playing for Everton.

But with the advent of the Second World War, the English League was terminated, and Gillick asked to be transferred to Rangers under the terms of an agreement drawn up by the Football League Management Committee.

He made his second debut for the Light Blues on the opening day of the new Southern League campaign and scored the goal of the game as Rangers beat Falkirk 3-1 at Brockville. It was August, 1940, and Gillick once again showed just how intelligent a player he was by ghosting into space and being so difficult to mark.

It would be a busy season for the 24-year old as he would play 40 times for Rangers and score 19 goals. He ended the campaign with three winners medals as Rangers won the league, league cup and Glasgow Cup.

The following season Rangers were once again dominant, and Gillick was at the forefront of everything they achieved. They won all five competitions - league, league cup, Glasgow Cup, Charity Cup and the Summer Cup. Gillick scored 35 goals in 41 games, and was said to be at the peak of his powers.

His numbers were once again phenomenal in his third campaign back at Ibrox - 35 games, 31 goals and a further three winners medals - but the piece de resistance, at least for supporters, was the 8-1 thrashing of Celtic. 30,000 spectators were at Ibrox to see the Light Blues positively toy with their old foes to such an extent that had they really gone for the jugular it could easily have been double figures. Gillick notched a stunning hat-trick that day. Rangers led 2-1 at the break, but shortly after the re-start, Gillick showed brilliance and bravery in equal measure to score a third. In doing so, he fell head first into the post and was completely dazed. The referee 'advised' him to leave the field but he stubbornly insisted on playing on. Late on, he scored the seventh and eighth goals to cap a memorable performance.

Fast forward to November, 1945, and the most keenly-anticipated game in the history of Scottish football. Moscow Dynamo were on a tour of Great Britain and had already faced Chelsea, Cardiff City and Arsenal before arriving at Ibrox for the big match on the afternoon of Thursday, November 29. They rolled into Glasgow unbeaten from their three games.

The Russians were the talk of the steamie and 90,000 packed into Ibrox eager to see what all the fuss was about. When the players took to the field, Light Blues' skipper Jock Shaw was presented with a bouquet of flowers, and then the action got underway. Rangers wore their old colours of blue and white hoops, and Dynamo's shorts had a distinctive white band at the bottom, which many believed was to allow their players to find a teammate without looking up.

It was a thrilling, fast-paced game and the visitors scored in just three minutes, and were 2-0 up midway through the first half. Rangers had a fight on their hands, but inspired by the hard-working Scot Symon, and the promptings of Waddell and Gillick, they fought their way back into the game.

In the second half, the game was stopped to allow substitutions - something new in the Scottish game - and then play continued. But eagle-eyed Gillick was perturbed, and was running around counting the visitors, and he counted twelve. Approaching the referee, he told him that Dynamo had failed to take anyone off when they brought on a substitute. He was spot on and the ref made them withdraw a player.

Rangers rallied and big Jimmy Smith reduced the leeway, before George Young levelled from a controversial penalty kick. Gillick might not have scored, but he played a pivotal role in Rangers securing a draw.

Earlier in the year, however, April, to be exact, Gillick helped Rangers beat Clyde 3-0 in the final league match of the season, and the players were presented with their championship medals in a function that night.

Four days later, Gillick was up in front of the beak at Airdrie Sheriff Court on a charge of resetting stolen hens!

It was revealed that the Rangers player was caught bang to rights when he was found in possession of the stolen birds. 'The hens knew their owner,' said the Fiscal. 'Immediately they saw him, they ran straight towards him.'

Gillick appeared in the dock with fellow Gartness man, David Jack, and the pair pleaded guilty to resetting the hens. They were each fined £5.

The Procurator Fiscal said that the two accused owned a hen run between them. Some hens had been going astray from another yard in the district, and the police took the owner to look for them. The police and the owner together entered the accused's run and as soon as the hens saw the owner they knew him and ran towards him.

The solicitor on behalf of the accused said they had no explanation as to how the hens came to be in their run. When the police arrived they were easily able to pick out the two hens as they were a different type altogether from the others.

Where the two men had made a mistake was in not informing the police when they noticed the stray hens in their run.

After finishing up with Rangers, Gillick was tempted out of retirement by the great Davie Meiklejohn, who was by this time managing Partick Thistle, but it was to be a brief swansong.

Gillick also represented his country on a dozen occasions, scoring six times in the process.

But let's remember Gillick as the great player he was: a man who played 400 games for Rangers, and scored 210 goals. A player who was among the craftiest of his generation, and who was ahead of his time in many other respects.

A player whose middle name was versatility, and who was so confident in his own

ability that he was a star for Rangers at the age of 18, and who didn't look out of place in the English top flight while still a teenager.

Torry Gillick was a wonderfully talented footballer, and Torry Gillick is a bona fide Rangers legend.

