

Alex McLeish - the one that got away!



Alex McLeish was only nine or 10-years-old when he got his first glimpse of top-flight football - and in the blink of an eye his world changed from black and white to glorious technicolour.

Rangers v Morton in the early 70s might not sound like the most glamorous fixture to captivate a youngster, but when your week consists of lessons at a Barrhead primary school and the odd television programme in grayscale, then the sight which greeted this football mad youngster was 'music' to his eyes!

He recalled, 'Yes, it was my first time in a big football ground but what really pulled me in was the colour, because we were watching things in black and white at the time. Rangers that day were wearing a new strip with red and white socks. It was so colourful. Morton were wearing a yellow top with blue shorts, and I remember seeing this big pitch with these teams on it for the first time and just standing there staring at it. I was completely mesmerised by the sight before me and I thought it was fairy tale stuff. I was only a kid at the time.

'When I got to the age of 13 I was playing football all the time, either with the school, Boys Brigade or the boy's club. But that game against Morton was my introduction to the wonderful world of live football, and it made me want to experience that one day.'

When McLeish first appeared in the public consciousness - as a teenage central defender with that distinctive mop of red hair - many football fans simply assumed that here was a lad reared in the north-east of Scotland, and playing for his local club, Aberdeen.

The player himself often wonders why, given what he would go on to achieve, he was never picked up by a club nearer home.

He said, 'It's a strange one because I was at Glasgow United Boys Club, and we often played against Rangers and Celtic Boys Clubs and a lot of other well known boys clubs at the time. Some of my mates were getting S forms at 13 and 14, and even 15, but even though I was getting recognition, and being told that the likes of Luton Town were coming to watch me, nothing ever came of it.

'But between the ages of 15 and 17, I took quite a stretch. I grew about four or five inches and that was probably when things started to happen for me, although I still wasn't getting linked with Rangers, or even any other Scottish teams. I had trained with St Mirren a few times while Alex Ferguson was there, and I was at Hamilton Accies for a while. Getting to Hamilton from Barrhead on the bus was quite difficult in those days, but I was dedicated to my football even back then. I was desperate to get started with a club, and for a while I thought it might be at Hamilton but I eventually left when there was no sign of an S form, and I decided to go back and concentrate 100 per cent on the boys club.'

And then...the frustrated teenager was invited down to London for a trial ... with Chelsea. The Stamford Bridge side had a good reputation, and while they weren't the club they are today, they were still a huge draw.

And then...young Alex was just about to pack his bags and head south when the dulcet tones of his mother emanated from behind her Evening Times. He explained, 'My mum said, "look at this Alex," and there was a small paragraph, which read, 'Aberdeen are watching Glasgow United's young centre half Alex McLeish.' You know what, I had that wee bit of paper for years!

'So the Chelsea trial was put on the back burner, and I waited for the call from the Dons. And I waited. But I didn't hear anything for the biggest part of that season, and I continued to play with the boys club. But I was coming up for 17, and again I'm thinking to myself, "have I missed the boat, should I have gone to Chelsea for the trial," and all these things go through your mind.

'And then all of a sudden we play in this cup final at the Racecourse in Paisley and we win the game. It was a fantastic day and for that 90 minutes I was only interested in Glasgow United Boys Club. It was a great day.'

And not long after Alex had received his winner's medal, there was another surprise in store for him. 'It transpired that Aberdeen manager Ally McLeod, and Bobby Calder, the club's chief scout, had been sending representatives from Pittodrie to watch me throughout the season, but that day both came to the game unannounced. And get this, someone had told Bobby Calder that they were looking at the centre half with red hair, but unfortunately the centre half in the other team also had red hair. Ally, when being told this, said, 'I actually really like the centre half in the OTHER team, which was me, thank god!

'After the game, our coach took me aside and told me that Aberdeen wanted to come and see my parents on the Monday. So, Bobby came to our house in Auchenback, in Barrhead, as promised and he really did look the part, dapper, dressed to the nines and wearing this extravagant hat etc.

'When he walked into the house the first thing he did was give my mum a box of chocolates, which I thought was really nice. He spoke to my parents and told them he wanted me to become an apprentice professional with Aberdeen.

'The only thing I wanted to be was a professional footballer, and this was the only

offer I had, but I was really impressed because Aberdeen were a top side in the top division, so if you're only going to get one offer then it was great to get one from a team like this. I was well up to speed with Scottish football at the time, and just before signing I had watched Willie Miller score a screamer of a goal in a Scottish Cup tie. So that was the start of my journey.'

Alex recalls Bobby Calder asking him if he'd ever been approached by either of the Old Firm clubs - and being pleased by the answer.

'One of the first things Bobby asked me was if I'd had any interest from either Rangers or Celtic. I said I hadn't, but he told me he'd heard that both Old Firm clubs had started circling, and that was why he wanted to move fast, and also why he'd brought Ally McLeod to the game. Bobby was based in the west of Scotland, so he had his finger on the pulse down here. In those days Aberdeen had taken a lot of boys from the central belt up north.

'When I headed up to Aberdeen for my first day at my new club, there were TEN boys from the west of Scotland on the same train all heading up to the Granite City to begin their journey as well.

'The only other one who made the grade alongside me was Jim Leighton. Jim was from Johnstone and he was also a Rangers fan. It was very unusual in those days to meet a catholic who was a Rangers fan, but he would go on to have an outstanding career.'