

Andy Little... ...talking Sam English



Winning the Sam English rose bowl was the catalyst for Andy Little to dig into the history of the former Rangers record holder – and he was stunned to learn of the parallels between the two goal-grabbing centre-forwards.

They were both born in Northern Ireland, represented their country, and both realised a long-held dream of crossing the Irish Sea to play for Rangers.

But it wasn't all good news.

There was also a real undercurrent of sadness and tragedy interlinked in both careers.

Little, who is 33, said: "Sam was involved in the incident which led to the great young Scottish keeper, John Thomson losing his life after he suffered a fractured skull. It was such a tragedy. "Of course, there was no blame attached to Sam, but that one moment seemed to define his entire career.

"Sam, of course, played on, but was eventually forced to walk away from the game he loved at just 28 as it had all taken such a heavy toll on him."

Fast forward to June, 2017, and after leaving Rangers, Andy was taking part in a routine training session with Stirling Albion when an accidental clash with a teammate's knee left him unconscious on the pitch for fully five minutes.

The sickening clash left him with a depressed skull fracture, a fractured eye socket and two cracked bones in his neck.

It was a horrendous time for both the player and his family.

Little had previously suffered a broken cheekbone and broken jaw while playing for Rangers against Dunfermline.

He said: "Obviously Sam's situation was far more serious than mine, as John Thomson lost his life, but when you suffer a really serious injury it puts everything into perspective.

"I was rushed to the Forth Valley Hospital, and then spent ten days in the Western General, in Edinburgh.

"I didn't remember a thing about the incident. My former Rangers teammate, Ross Perry spent the night at the hospital, which was great, but he must have been sick of me repeatedly asking him what happened!"

Little then headed home to Enniskillen to recuperate.

Sam English scored 44 league goals in his first season at Ibrox – still a record today. It was an astonishing return for a 22-year-old lad straight out of junior football.

In 2008, the Rangers Supporters Association commissioned a stunning rose bowl – Sam's favourite flower – from a talented Northern Irish silversmith, and Little won the award in 2013 – although it came as something of a shock to him.

He explained: "I was at the end-of-season Player of the Year dance, and as I was off on holiday soon after, I was enjoying a few rum and cokes. Then I got a tap on the shoulder, 'you're up next, Andy!'

"I thought Lee McCulloch had won the race for top scorer, as I didn't realise the award was for league goals only. You can imagine my speech!

"I went up to collect the award, which was this absolutely stunning silver rose bowl and I was as proud as punch. Ironically I scored 22 goals that season – half the total Sam managed.

"But to think that I'd won such a beautiful trophy at the club I'd loved since I was a wee boy was just such a wonderful feeling.

"Previous winners include Kris Boyd, Kenny Miller and Nikica Jelavic, and of course Alfredo Morelos and Jermain Defoe have now been added, so I'm in good company.

"If you had told me when I signed for Rangers at 17, that I would achieve and experience what I have done in professional football, I wouldn't have believed you.

"I achieved far more than I ever expected and I loved every minute of my time with Rangers and Northern Ireland. It was incredible and gave me experiences to cherish for the rest of my life.

"But I have never regretted my decision to retire. The enjoyment had gone out of football, and once you go part-time, after being at a club like Rangers, you really need to enjoy what you're doing.

"But by winning awards like the Sam English rose bowl, it means there will always be a little bit of me in the magnificent trophy room at Ibrox – and that's something special."