

Finlay Speedie - one half of a great partnership



For six years, Rangers had the benefit of the great Finlay Speedie. Dumbarton born and bred, Speedie teamed up with the Darvel magician, Alec Smith, to form one of football's most potent left wings.

He was 20 when he joined up at Ibrox under William Wilton's tutelage, and was almost instantly thrust into the first team, where he would go on to make well over 100 appearances for the Light Blues.

When he left Ibrox, following a well-attended benefit match against Celtic, he took with him two league title medals and a Scottish Cup winners' gong. He was headed south, to St James's Park, Newcastle, where he proved his versatility by becoming one of the finest centre-halves in English football, and he was a valued member of Newcastle's league-winning team of 1906/07. He also had short spells with Oldham Athletic and Bradford Park Avenue, before the lure of his hometown team tempted him home.

It was 1909, and he was back in Scottish football, starring in the Sons' half-back line, as well as working as an engineer in Denny's Yard, Dumbarton. He had six good years at Boghead, which was disrupted only by the start of the First World War. Speedie signed up to serve and joined the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders as a Private. He was posted to France and fought vigorously for his country. He was badly wounded and moved to Bangour Hospital, in West Lothian, (which had been requisitioned as a war hospital) where he remained as a patient for some time. On his release he was awarded the Military Medal for bravery in the field.

But being of a somewhat modest disposition, once Speedie was back on his feet, and the war had ended, he slipped quietly into his 9-5 job and resumed playing for Dumbarton, eventually calling time on his football career as he approached his 40th birthday.

He won three caps for Scotland - against England, Ireland and Wales, in 1903 - and also represented the Scottish League in a match against the English League two years

later.

After he finished playing, he retained his close links with Dumbarton, and acted as trainer for several years.

As a person, Speedie was self-effacing, but there was no such modesty on the park as he was one of the greatest inside forwards to play the game in this country: a real master of his craft.

Below, I reproduce an article in full from March, 1905, which appeared in *The Scottish Referee*, a football newspaper from the late 19th, and early 20th centuries, and which proves the noble status in which Speedie was held. It is also a fine example of contemporary writing.

Sir – Born and bred in a county that borders the famous Rob Roy country, I fancy had you been living in the noble reiver's day that you are just the very lad who would have been selected to speed through the clachans and set the heather, if not the Heather Avenue, on fire with the slogan of 'The Macgregor'.

Born and living in times, however, when the claymores have been turned into pruning hooks, and the skean dhus serve as fruit knives you have a more peaceful mission and a more pleasant one to boot.

In selecting you as a player, Rangers' directorate showed more skill than they have done recently, for you have more than answered to their expectations as regards the estimate they formed of your ability. Not only so, but you will, given health, answer more and more to those expectations, for you are young and ambitious, and I cannot forget that whilst others may tire and slow down, you will still be Speedie.

Born within reach of the famous Common of Dumbarton, where so many of Scotland's brightest and best players learned the rudiments you have now mastered, you were no uncommon lad, and would have pleased the eye there had they seen you of Dumbarton FC old-time selectors, not to mention Colonel Denny MP, whose house and family I deeply regret to notice is presently shadowed by a great grief in the loss to them of the noblest of mothers, and to the town of the most lovable and charitable of ladies.

You were, I believe, in Dumbarton a member of a young team known as the Corinthians (I presume First Corinthians), and amateurs, as all bearing the name should be. Brains follow trade, however, and so you sped to that rising suburb of Clydebank, and there from goal to goal footed it for the burgh club bearing the name. It was whilst there that you were spotted by the Rangers' talent selectors, and they are to be complimented on their judgement in esteeming you then what you have turned out to be for them and for Scotland.

In succession to such great Dumbartonshire inside left forwards, James McDougall of the Vale of Leven, and James McCall of Renton; and to John McPherson, of your present club, you have proven a most worthy successor, doing honour in the position to all the Leven Valley heroes, and to all in other districts of Scotland who have played in this place.

I do not esteem, or regard, you such a close, finished, artistic, or sustained dribbler, as either of these three, and least of all as able as James McCall, Scotland's – if not Britain's – best in the place since 1872 to date. You are not so selfish as either, and least so like your old club mate 'Ta Pherson,' who had need to have the injunction to Malise rung in his ear to speed him to the goals of his and your ambition. You can't afford in these co-operative days to be selfish, nor do I apprehend it to be in your nature, for you are too versatile. You can play forward, half back, and back, and if not with equal success, at least with so much as never to be a failure.

Scotland is we know, hard up – very hard up – for backs, and you might, if called upon, for her last line of defence, stand her there as solidly and surely as you do right speedily and effective in her front line.

It is rather singular that, like Alex Bennett for Celts, you made your debut for Rangers v Dundee at Ibrox in a league match, the date being October 20, 1900. It may interest your comrades on the field on that memorable day in your history, if I give the team, and so here it is: Dickie, Nicol Smith, Drummond, Gibson, J Stark, J Robertson, J Campbell, J McPherson, RC Hamilton, Finlay Speedie and Alec Smith. Result: Rangers 4 Dundee 2.

I need not recall what must be patent to you that but a few of your new-found comrades in these short five years are now playing for Rangers; that one who you know right well will play no more. Matthew Dickie, John Drummond, Nicol Smith, John McPherson, J. Campbell and even RC Hamilton are all missed by you and by others now, the present team being but a shadow of its former greatness.

You are, however, left with that faithful friend and staunch ally, Alec Smith, and you two partner each other in the League international V England tomorrow for the first time. I do not forget, nor can you either, that in 1903, and at Bramall Lane, Sheffield, you were Scotland's left (and shall I add in compliment also her right wing), on that glorious day when you scored the equalising goal for your country. And Bobbie Walker a few minutes afterwards, came walking and waltzing through with the second and winning effort. The hilarious scenes that followed the victory on the grand enclosure you cannot help but remember. The hilarity even reaching and effecting the 'Scottish Knights of the Fourth Estate,' who, fortified by President Kirkwood and vice president Captain RM Christie (the latter in full Highland costume), could not restrain their joy, and on fixing for their photos, the pose actually gave way under their rib-tickling laughter.

And then the return home, what songs and how the air rang with 'Hey, Bobby Walker.' Well, I only hope, for Scotland's and your own sake, on colossal Hampden tomorrow, we may have a repeat of such enjoyable scenes, so that our English friends may see we unspeakable Scots on our native heath in our true colours, and learn what manner of men we are when not subdued.

I think it due to your personal play, and to that of 1903 in the Cutlery Metropolis that I should repeat the team which did so famously: JE Doig, McCombie, Watson, Aitken, Raisbeck, Robertson, Templeton, Walker, RC Hamilton, Speedie and Smith. Your exceptional versatility and readiness to help in any field emergency proves you to be a willing worker, and no 'while you wait,' like some I could name nowadays.

As a sample of your working powers, I note that in season 1893/94 you played 48 matches and scored 27 goals. Of these, 23 were first league matches. These facts may be taken as proof that you work with a will and also with a purpose when afield. In 1903, you had all the honours three for Scotland, and you add now to these by securing your first League cap v England.

Interpreting your style, you are a unique combine of forward, half back and back. With the happy and useful knack of doing service in all three during games, you are not unlike DS Allan, formerly of Queen's Park, in your sort of plugging, slogging method, although as a shot at goal you are far deadlier.

You are, in fact, a stealer of goals, for your efforts come so unexpectedly as to deceive the cutest keepers.