

John Robertson Gow



When we delve into the distant past of our great football club, we come across myriad names, stats and the occasional anecdote which links a name with a person. In many respects, the players of yesteryear are mere ghosts, despite once existing in the same form as today's stars. Some oozed personality while others were more reserved, which is why it's a joy when you get to know more about a star of yesteryear. As we unravel the scant information before us, we begin to see them as something more than just one-dimensional characters.

It's due to these characters that our club has such a rich history; ex-players, directors, committee members before them and, of course, our wonderful and passionate followers.

One such personality was John Robertson Gow, a 19th century Rangers winger of some note. It was said that he ghosted along the touchline like a sylph, tricking his way past frustrated full-backs, and onwards to goal – those he left on their backsides usually at a loss to understand why they had been breached so easily. Gifted with an almost feminine-like figure, he used a combination of stunning close control and fleet of foot to leave them trailing in his wake.

There wasn't a lot to him - much like Peter Campbell, he of the Gallant Pioneers fame - another who hogged the touchline so closely he was almost on first-name terms with those who lined the ropes! Gow was of great value to the Light Blues as he could operate effectively on both flanks, and had a first-class reputation as a creator of chances.

Born in Struan, Blair Atholl, just three years before the birth of the Rangers he was also incredibly competent on the athletics track, and by the time of his retirement from competitive sport he had earned a great reputation in both disciplines, with perhaps his achievements in athletics just shading his success in the round ball game.

At his peak he was capped by Scotland in a Home International tie against Ireland in March, 1888, at the Cliftonville Cricket Ground, in Belfast. Scotland ran out easy winners by 10-2 and Gow lived up to his reputation by claiming many assists, long before they were feted.

He signed for Rangers on January 25th, 1885, nine months before his brother, Donald, a full-back, and later a member of the greatest of all Sunderland teams. Donald was almost as speedy as John, and was himself once a winner of a Rangers handicap. Indeed, the family had a double celebration when Johnny was crowned Scotland's 100 yards champion in the year Donald was capped by the SFA. The younger Gow was a born athlete, and when just 16 he won the Rangers sprint off 4.5 yards in a fraction over 10 seconds.

As a man, he had nothing but the warmest of brotherly love for his elder sibling, and spent four years in the same Rangers team as him. While Donald would go on and play for Sunderland – arguably the best team in England at the time – Johnny's career played out north of the border. It was in 1889 that his athletics career really took off, and he was in such a rich vein of form that he was giving away big starts in almost every event. Despite the weighty handicap, he secured first prize at the prestigious West of Scotland meeting, as well as first place in the 120-yards' hurdles, and first in the 120 yards at the big Edinburgh Harriers' sports meeting. He also came out on top in the 100 yards at the Clyde Sports, the hurdle race at the Queen's Park meeting, first at the Rangers and Clydesdale Harriers' sports event in the hurdle, and third in the 100 yards at the same meeting. As a hurdler he was grace personified and skimmed over the timber like a bird.

The talented athlete also secured the main prize, a case of champagne, at the Clyde Brigade camp sports, as well as several smaller prizes. He was looked upon as the 'one to beat' in almost every Scottish meet at the time, and so one can see just how quick he was when skipping past the best defenders Scottish football had to offer.

In 1893 he became Scotland's proud hurdles champion, a distinction which also fell to another Rangers player: Alec Vallance, brother of Tom. But the following season was far less productive, as due to severe illness, from which it took quite some time to recover, he managed little time on the track, and when he did make it to the starting tapes, he was below par.

Gow was something of a regular at Rangers from 1885 to 1889, although the ensuing couple of years were spent on the fringes of the first team, and in the second team, the Rangers Swifts. When his playing career came to an end, Mr Gow was invited to join the Ibrox committee. It was his pre-ordained vocation. He was delighted to continue his love affair with the club, especially as a Kinning Park man through and through. It was said that even before he had signed for Rangers he would go and watch them play at the West Scotland Street ground. In the couple of years that he represented Rangers at said ground, he was as popular with the locals as Alec Smith would become on the new Ibrox.

When emerging from the pavilion, Gow would be met with great cheers, and moving with tremendous grace upfield, all eyes would be fixed upon the type of player who attracted crowds to the game. If he had a fault it was that he was extra careful. The words 'brute force' were alien to this individual. Johnny Gow was all beauty and no beast. He would rather have stepped over the touchline to avoid the rampaging torso of many a less cultured foe than become embroiled in a mass of human flesh and bones.

He was the thinking man's footballer, and just a year after joining the Ibrox committee he was promoted to the position of honorary secretary. Less than twelve months had elapsed when further promotion came his way. He became vice-president, and during his occupancy of that office again took up the secretarial pen, a vacancy having occurred in mid-season.

From 1896 to 1898, one of the most successful periods in the history of the club, Johnny Gow was at the top of the tree. He was President of the Rangers and he led by example. He maintained the honour and dignity of the club in the finest traditions of those before him.

But there was a point when Gow's sporting aspirations were confined not just to football. That was, when the keen athletic eye of Rangers trainer John Wilson noticed something in the youngster which no one else had. When he watched the player strut his stuff on a Saturday afternoon, he saw more than just a football winger; he saw someone with the potential to become a future athletic champion, and so, under his tuition, Gow graduated to become a Scottish hurdle champion, as well as a capital sprinter.

The evidence was on display in Gow's family home: most trophies having been won on the track, the stage that definitely suited him best, partly because football was too strenuous for him, and the liability to injury caused him to shirk many of its dangers. Still, he was a very useful forward, and his speed marked him down as a dangerous one.

Rangers' fortunes in his day were rather variable, for the club was in that transition stage between amateurism and professionalism, in which talents were rather unsettled, and combinations faulty. Still, in 1883, it was to him a source of great satisfaction that his brother, Donald, should be capped against England, and elected captain of the Scottish team. These honours Johnny valued even more than the one who wore them, for he was one of the most unselfish people who walked the earth. Although the cap of all caps was the one to be garnered by playing against the Auld Enemy, he was still toasted by family and friends alike when he secured the honour of representing his country against Ireland.

It was a quite brilliant performance against the Irish, and the team that day was: J. McLeod (Dumbarton), D. Stewart (Dumbarton), A. McCall (Renton), G. Dewar (Dumbarton), Allan Stewart (Queen's Park), A. Jackson (Cambuslang), McCallum (Renton), T. Brackenridge (Hearts), W. Dickson (Strathmore), John Gow (Rangers), and Ralph Aitken (Dumbarton).

During Johnny Gow's connection with Rangers as a player, the club achieved nothing of great note. Renton's polar star was then in the ascendancy, and its effulgent ray eclipsed not only the gallant Light Blues but each and every city football combination.

Gow's boardroom partnership with the great William Wilton elevated the Rangers to a different level, and they enjoyed success previously alien to the club. As club president, he was the personal recipient of the national trophies won by them as the country heralded the advent of the 20th century. As a steadfast, lifelong supporter of the old and popular colours, these successes were of the greatest pleasure to him.

Never at rest, when Rangers' work had to be done, it is not surprising that his progress to the top was of the whirlwind order. And he took a leading part in making the Ibrox sports meeting what it would eventually become – the best of its kind in Scotland.

Possessed of a highly original mind, Gow achieved success for the sports through various devices. On one occasion, some weeks before the event, a controversy was published in a Glasgow newspaper regarding the relative merits of two famous men who were to compete at Ibrox. But neither the newspaper people nor the public knew that Johnny Gow had written all the letters himself! His inventive genius shone through in the unique form the advertisements took, and the dash, enterprise, and vim he imparted to the meetings. And this was recognised by the club when, to mark their appreciation of his 'honorary services,' the club presented him with a gold watch. He was certainly worth the accolade.

Away from the football, he was extremely well read, and, not only so, but had the double gift of being able to express, both in writing and in speech, his thoughts very clearly, poetically, and forcibly.

He was a charming companion, with the little spice of egotism that distinguished him adding to a sparkling personality.

To prove how much of a sporting natural he was, he was in his 35th year before handling a golf club for the first time. Within a matter of weeks, he was playing in club competitions off a handicap of two!

After deciding to call a halt to his football endeavours, it was no surprise when one so gentle took up the gentle game of bowls. And it certainly wasn't a great shock when Millport Bowling Club elected him President. He had decided to live on the island, as his wife Isabella was a Millport lass, and her father, Dr McGowan, the island doctor. But from time to time the call of the Rangers lured him back to the mainland.

His last appearance in public, certainly in Glasgow, came in 1923, when he attended the Rangers' Jubilee Dinner in the Grosvenor. He was in chatty mood, talking of the good old days, the days when the Rangers were a youthful combination, but on the ascendancy, and the days prior to that unprecedented league title, when the team won every single league match. That was a particularly fond memory for this genuinely true Ranger; an individual who was a fund of wit and humour. And possessed of the many talents he showed in the sporting world, it's no surprise that Mr Gow attained a high degree of success in business. Before his well-earned retirement, he was the resident manager of the Ocean Accident and Guarantee Corporation.

However, in 1931, Mr Gow and his wife, Isabella, travelled to Shanghai, in China, to meet their seafaring son, Gordon. They had also decided to take in a visit to Japan, combining their family 'duties' with a trip to the delightful sights of the Far East.

Sadly it didn't end well. Mr Gow passed away while in Shanghai at the age of just 62. The King of Kinning Park was no more, and the Rangers family had lost a favourite son.