

Dougie Gray: The Epitome of Loyalty

‘When Rangers lose Dougie Gray they’ll sag at the knees!’



It was 1934 when a journalist penned these words. Gray had already been at Ibrox nine years, but concerned fans needn't have worried as the talented Aberdonian still had another 12 to serve. When he finally hung up the boots, in 1946, he would become one of the longest-serving players in Rangers' history. And in doing so helped solve a previously thought unsolvable puzzle for legendary manager Bill Struth. Struth had two of the best centre-halves in the business: George Young and Willie Woodburn, but two into one didn't go. When Gray decided it was time to stop playing, Young was accommodated at right-back and Woodburn in the pivot's role. This was the beginning of the fabled Iron Curtain defence.

But that's not what defines Gray: the incredible service he gave to the club is. To be a near constant at a club the size of Rangers for so long isn't just a wonderful achievement, it simply defies belief.

Let's look at an example.

During the Second World War, a pamphlet called 'Prisoners of War

News' was sent out to British soldiers being held captive in a host of camps mainly in Germany. Many thousands received the wafer-thin publication and it provided up-to-date news of the Scottish sporting scene. At the beginning of 1944, PoWN reported that Gray had missed his first game in two years, and bearing in mind he was in the twilight of his career then it definitely tells you something. But he wasn't dropped for the game against Celtic. He had a leg injury.

In the opening months of the 1945/46 season, he shared right-back duties with George Young. Gray's namesake, David, was then handed the number two jersey, and Dougie, by this time just a couple of months shy of his 40th birthday, was shunted into the reserves.



In February of 1946, he was appointed the coach of Rangers' second team, a responsibility he thrived on. It may have looked to some on the outside that Struth was desperately trying to find something for him to do, but he enjoyed passing on his vast back catalogue of knowledge to the younger players; all the tricks and turns he'd learned in two decades of playing alongside some of Rangers' greatest ever players.

In the run up to the festive season of that year, one of the main attractions on the Scottish football calendar was the Christmas Day

friendly between an Inverness Select and a Polish Army team from Helensburgh - in Inverness! The coach of the latter was Dougie Gray. He still loved his football as much as the day he made his debut for Aberdeen junior side, Mugiemoss FC. The man who succeeded Gray in the number two jersey at Bucksburn all those years ago, Willie Cooper, would go on to play for Aberdeen for 21 years. Loyalty was clearly something they majored in at Mugiemoss. Willie Menzies was another incredible one-club man who served Leeds United at left-back for 21 years. His junior club: Mugiemoss.

Gray, who joined the Aberdeen junior side as a 16-year-old, played in the same team as Menzies, but as an inside-right. And a braw inside man he was too.

It wasn't until 1924 that he took over the right-back in an emergency. He was an immediate success, so much so that he won three junior caps that year.

Menzies himself had only found the left-back position after starting out as a winger.

Mugiemoss FC was something of an Aberdeen institution, being one of the oldest clubs in the region, and started by two Glasgow men up in Aberdeen on business and who took to kicking a ball around in their spare time. The earliest incarnation of the club carried their goalposts around with them and used tape as a crossbar.

Gray was born in Alford, 25 miles west of Aberdeen, in 1905, and would join Rangers 20 years later. But his capture by the Light Blues was anything but straightforward. They had to work damned hard to get his name on a contract, and the manner in which they achieved it wouldn't have looked out of place in a James Bond movie.

The story goes something like this...

Jimmy Logan, manager of Raith Rovers and former sergeant-major of the famed McCrae's Battalion in World War I, was first to spot the potential in young Gray. He had received the nod from a friend in the north-east about this exciting young prospect. Logan said, 'Quite often when a manager gets a tip about an exciting prospect, it's from someone who knows the player and is trying to engineer a move, but this was from someone I knew well.'

Gray had been selected to play for Junior Scotland in Wales, so Logan went to Wales. The youngster played a fine game. One week later, the

Raith manager travelled up to Aberdeen and tracked down the player, but Gray knew his worth and didn't jump at the offer. He asked many questions and when all were suitably answered, he shook hands with Logan and said, 'I'll sign for Raith.'

Logan was delighted. He had got his man. It had been a hard slog, lots of travelling, talking, but the reward would be worth it.

The Raith manager was asked many years later why he didn't 'officially' sign Gray on the spot, get his signature on a piece of paper there and then, but he said, 'He had been chosen to represent Junior Scotland in the big one, against England at Birmingham, and had he signed officially for Raith he would've been ineligible.'

But knowing that other club managers would be chasing Gray at Birmingham, Logan decided to make the trip south by train. And he would be proved 100 per cent correct.

Before the game, while everyone was in the hotel, Gray walked into the lobby to meet a friend. Several conspicuous gentlemen sat reading newspapers in an attempt to 'blend in.' Logan watched as a couple of Scottish League managers made their approach, one by one, but the young player fended off each one with dignity and respect.

Logan, looking on, started to relax, believing that Gray had clearly remembered that handshake.

An English manager was next to try his luck. He hemmed the youngster in, blocking any escape path, but still the answer was the same. Logan relaxed even more.

Gray played a poor game in Birmingham. Clearly the pantomime surrounding his future had taken its toll, but if anything it would all explode on the train journey home.

Most members of the international party were relaxing in the bar carriage and once again the men with the newspapers were present. Gray had many suitors and one by one they again tried their luck. They would sidle up, sit down beside him, give their pitch, there would be nodding, the shaking of heads and they would leave.

Hearts, Cowdenbeath, Partick Thistle, they all had a pop. Nothing doing, and Logan was feeling very pleased with himself. The cat who got the cream in the face of such competition.

But then, the Raith manager's face dropped. Jimmy Bowie, chairman of Rangers, accompanied by another representative of the Ibrox club, approached the player. Logan's face showed genuine concern. Gray got up from his seat and the three men left the saloon carriage. They moved through to a private carriage and there they settled down to have a conversation. Logan clung to the hope that the handshake in Mugiemoss had meant something tangible.

Some of the other managers, noticing what had just taken place, got up and followed Bowie and the others out of the bar. They weren't prepared to let Rangers have this their own way. One of them peered into the small carriage where the party sat, but received the infamous 'Bowie frozen eye,' and promptly turned around. Not to be outdone, this manager hovered around until Gray left the meeting, walked back through to the saloon and into the toilet. Before he had a chance to lock the door, the manager had joined him in the cubicle! He was promptly removed.

When the train eventually arrived in Glasgow, Logan looked on forlornly as Gray was bundled into a taxicab. Destination: Ibrox. A few hours later, Gray was announced as a Rangers player and Logan was left to rue the one that got away.

He would later say, 'Given the circumstances I think I was entitled to believe that I'd got my man. I had played the game because I knew how much the player wanted his junior cap against England.'

Gray didn't look back. He would play a mammoth 948 times for Rangers; a colossal number of games which, to be frank, will most likely never be eclipsed.

To describe what he meant to Rangers - and to the wider Scottish football public - in April 1941, Rangers sent a team up to Aberdeen to play a junior select side in a match designed to raise funds for the local Junior Association. After the game, and while chatting to his Aberdeen counterpart, the Rangers representative said that the message from Bill Struth was that Rangers wouldn't take their expected share of the large gate.

The following morning, Struth called the Aberdeen Junior FA and explained that this was his chance to 'give something back.' The man on the other end of the line, while very grateful, asked Struth why he was doing it. Struth replied, 'Your region gave us the great Dougie Gray.'

This is payback. We've had the pleasure of Gray for 16 years. We don't forget. A great player and a gentleman off the field.'

Struth once called Gray 'his greatest ever signing.'

Gray played his final game for Rangers against Hibs on December the 1st, 1945, 20 years and 105 days after making his debut. In between he played 10 times for Scotland - on the losing side just twice - and half a dozen games for the Scottish Football League. He was part of 10 league winning sides at Ibrox, with another six wartime titles in the bag as well. No other player in Scotland has won more league titles, and that tally may just be 17 as he played nine league games in season 1946/47, but it's not known if he was awarded a medal.

But he would be remembered by Rangers supporters as a brilliant one-club defender. A player who made a living out of stylish kicking and an uncanny knack of popping up on the goal line to clear after his goalkeeper had been beaten. The coolest, calmest player afield.

Of course, there was far more to Gray's game, but the fact that he scored just two goals - and both from the penalty spot in 1930 - in almost 1,000 games tells you he was a defender first and foremost. His job was to prevent the opposition scoring goals. That was the bottom line. And he succeeded far more often than he failed.

During his time at Ibrox, Scottish international Jimmy Simpson was his best friend, and Gray's daughter even acted as babysitter for Simpson's young son Ronnie, who would claim legendary status across the city by keeping goal in the 1967 European Cup final for Celtic.

But Dougie Gray was a Ranger through and through. An ever dependable and talented full back who made the right-back position his own for two decades.

He is rightly ensconced in the Rangers Hall of Fame, but for some reason has been omitted from its national equivalent. His 16 representative honours might not be as great a haul as some others, but his contribution to football in Scotland is immeasurable.

Perhaps it is time to put this right...