

Gary McSwegan ... Should I Stay or Should I Go?



Mention the name Gary McSwegan to Rangers supporters of a certain vintage and many will automatically rewind to his goal against Marseille, which proved pivotal in the club's extraordinary Champions League run of 1992/93. But there is much more to the talented centre-forward than 'that' goal against the French.

Of course, he is the first to admit that he didn't play as many first-team games for Rangers as he would've liked, but what he did do was play for the team he loved. And as the first ever British player to score in the Champions League, he left a legacy that can never be eclipsed.

But his story starts long before he gained superhero status against Marseille; in the back courts of Glasgow's Maryhill district, where 'Swiggy' could always be found with a ball at his feet.

He recalled, 'When I was 12, I was playing for my school team at Woodside Secondary, as well as Possil YMCA, who were a really good side from north Glasgow. I also played with a team called Rangers Young Boys, who were based in Scotstoun. One of the top scouts at that time was George Runciman, who covered the west end of Glasgow. Woodside played at Blairdardie, which is up near Drumchapel, and George watched a lot of our games. It was the early 80s and I recall him being at the side of the pitch one day, standing out like a sore thumb with the stereotypical scout's sheepskin coat and bunnet on. I have great memories of these carefree days when I played alongside all my pals, but looking back, I was naïve and not entirely sure that I was able to

appreciate exactly what was happening to me then. Nowadays, a lot of the younger kids are wiser in the ways of the world and most have an advisor. 'I was already training up at Dundee, and was there when Dundee United won the league, and beat Rangers 3-1. I had been a guest of theirs that day, but Rangers – through George Runciman – asked me to come in and train with them at the Albion. They didn't have much of a youth set up back then, and there seemed to be only three or four young boys in at training, so I ended up playing a full practice match on the red ash (which was full of puddles) alongside players such as John Greig and Tommy McLean. Hugh Burns was also taking part and it seemed to be players of all ages playing in the same match. I scored a hat-trick but it was such a surreal experience.

'My dad, who was a shipyard worker at Yarrow's, was with me, and after the game finished I walked over to ask how I had done. He had a smile on his face so I knew it had gone well, and then John Greig approached us and said, 'I'd like you to sign, son.' My immediate answer was, 'Yes, okay,' and that was that. There was nothing else involved, no long discussions, just a quick 'yes!' McSwegan, his dad and Greig walked over to Ibrox and climbed the marble stairs to the latter's iconic office, where Greig produced the forms and the youngster added his signature.

McSwegan said, 'That was that. I was an S-form Rangers signing and the wee touch of irony is that I now live close to John Greig and see him most days.

'Truth is, it was an absolute privilege to sign for Rangers, even though my granda had always urged me to support Partick Thistle. My granda was a big Rangers fan but didn't go back to Ibrox after the disaster in 1971. I think it gave him a real fright and he didn't want me getting caught up in things like that, but despite that I always knew he would be proud of me signing for Rangers.

'When I scored my first goal against Marseille I went to see my granny straight away because I knew what it meant to them. To this day I still get emotional thinking about it.'

McSwegan lived in Collina Street, in Maryhill, when he signed for Rangers, and will never forget his first 'photo shoot.' He recalled, 'I was sitting in the house when the doorbell rang. It was a couple of guys from the Rangers News who had come up to the house to interview me. After answering all sorts of questions, we went outside for some photographs and I was standing on a wall with the high flats in the background, but the thing I remember most is that I had this really mad haircut!

'At the time I was playing for four teams and had scored something like 120 goals already that season. I was right into statistics and would keep a chart of all the goals I'd scored and for which teams. I always had a target of how many I wanted to get and when I got home from a match I'd fill in the chart with my latest goals.

'They were good days, but I eventually moved further down Maryhill to the Round Toll, and the high flats at St George's Cross. I had left Woodside School at 15 and went straight to being full time at Ibrox. From the group of lads that signed for Rangers at that time, John Spencer and I were the youngest at 15, so we couldn't get paid. We were given expenses and as soon as we reached 16, everything was backdated: it was as though we had won the lottery! Rangers were really good to me and it was a great place to learn my trade as I was constantly learning off the best professionals.'

The talented youngster also played for Glasgow Schools and a Glasgow West representative side, often turning out in a wide role, or in midfield, and said, 'I think when you play in a number of positions, you gain a better appreciation of the game. One week I would be playing left midfield and maybe right mid the next, but I don't ever recall playing up front. I was still scoring goals from midfield, mind you. Back then, nobody paid too much attention to positions, not like now when kids can be over coached.'

Despite having moved to within a free-kick of Partick Thistle's Firhill ground, McSwegan can't recall the Jags ever showing an interest in him. He might have been living virtually on their doorstep, but he said, 'They never made any moves to sign me, but Thistle didn't really have a youth set-up back then. I would play for my school team on a Saturday morning, and if I didn't have another game in the afternoon, I would go over to Firhill and skip in if I couldn't get lifted over, which you could do in those days. There was a plank of wood at the back wall which helped kids get over and into the ground. The 'hot' plank would move around from game to game, as we didn't want it to be discovered, but it was always there. I remember being about an hour early one Saturday and once in, we had to hide in bushes behind the goal until the crowd came in, so we wouldn't stand out like a sore thumb. That was the days when Alan Rough was in goals and you could run onto the park at half-time and have a kickabout!'

Despite John Greig signing McSwegan initially, it was Graeme Souness who offered the teenager his first professional contract. 'We both signed in 1986,' said McSwegan. 'When he and Walter Smith arrived at Rangers, Peter McCloy was already a coach and was kept on as reserve team manager. Donald MacKay came in as well and you had the likes of Jimmy Nicholl and John McGregor helping out with the kids. It was a good set-up.'

'At the time, Souness would occasionally train with the reserves, especially if he had missed a game through one reason or another. He wasn't taking the sessions but on one occasion he absolutely caned me for receiving the ball, flicking it over someone's head and moving off with it. He started screaming, 'That's schoolboy stuff, get the ball on the ground and make a pass!' From that point onwards I don't think I ever took anyone on again. I got the ball and passed it, just like the gaffer said! At the time I thought he was knocking the natural ability out of us although I soon realised you can't keep playing the way you did at schoolboy level; you just wouldn't get away with it. It was a massive learning curve for me. Let's be honest, if someone like Graeme Souness is telling you to keep the ball on the deck and pass and move, then you listen. I don't know better than him, so you take it on board.'

‘From time to time he would get some of the first-team squad to train with us and that was how we learned. When I was running at these boys in practice matches it was a hell of a lot different than coming up against someone my own age. Little things like that really helped us improve.’

McSwegan started to make the breakthrough into the first-team squad during season 1991/92. He made five appearances for the first team from the bench – so did he see the following campaign as one to carry on the progress? ‘I think I would have been daft to set any unrealistic goals. The first team were bang in the middle of ‘9-in-a-row’ and we had Hateley and McCoist up front. There wasn’t another striker in the league – let alone at Rangers – who would’ve played ahead of those two, so my mind-set was to learn as much as possible from them, and be ready to back them up whenever the need arose. ‘To be honest, I wasn’t alone. There were others champing at the bit for a top team start. I had a good goalscoring ratio with the reserves and my immediate aim was to keep that going. Plus, a couple of years earlier I had broken my leg and been out for nine months so it was a case of getting going again; that’s why I wasn’t too disappointed not to be playing for the first team at that time. I was more concerned with re-establishing myself and getting rid of any injuries or psychological barriers as a result of the injury.’

McSwegan suffered a double leg break while playing for Rangers Reserves against Celtic. He was clattered by keeper Ian Andrews at the start of the season and ended up missing almost the entire campaign. He said, ‘To this day, I sometimes think about that afternoon. I remember being taken to the Victoria Infirmary and I still had my strip on, and one of the porters asked if he could have my shorts! The first team was playing at Parkhead that day and we got a 1-1 draw, and Graeme Souness and Walter Smith came up to see me straight after the game. Souness seemed really concerned and asked how I was. He could see I was in agony and asked when I would be taken. When I told him I was in a queue to go into theatre, he walked straight off – and I was taken 10 minutes later! He had made a few phone calls, talked to a few people and a surgeon from Ross Hall, a private hospital, turned up and I was operated on straight away. I will never forget that. I was so relieved because the ward I was in wasn’t the best. It had ripped curtains, cobwebs and the likes, and there were old men just sitting staring out of the window. I was never so happy to get out of there.

‘Souness wanted me in at training as soon as possible – so I was back at Ibrox three days after the op! I had something which resembled a big door handle sticking out of my leg with four pins holding it in place. At that time we had a guy in the backroom team who had worked as a rehab specialist at Lillieshall. I reported to him and later that day he had me on a trampoline! I was in regularly for double sessions and it was great. Mind you, I was scared stiff to jump on the trampoline but he said, “It’s okay, I’ll catch you if you fall.” To be honest, it was exactly what I needed. Souness told him to be tough on me as he knew I was prone to putting on a wee bit of weight, so he wanted me working hard. I felt quite small, but also knew he was doing it for my benefit. And it’s at the back of your mind that had I been at another club, who knows how I would’ve been looked after, but I was at Rangers and I got the

best treatment possible.'

He added, 'I had four or five games in the reserves at the end of the season but got a kick on it again. The boy leathered me from the back and I knew something wasn't right as soon as I put any weight on it. It was like a hairline fracture again, so that was me out till the summer. I was gutted but amazed to discover I had finished top goalscorer that season. The 17 goals I had scored in nine pre-season games definitely helped!

'Everything was sorted in the close season and I was ready to go again when the new campaign started. At the time we played in the Scottish Reserve League and Reserve League West, so I was usually playing two games a week. There were only two substitutes allowed for the top team at the time, and we had a great first-team squad. We also had the three-foreigner rule in Europe, which was good for the young Scottish boys, although not so good for players like Dale Gordon and Alexei Mikhailichenko, who quite often missed out.

'I did a lot of rehab with Ian Durrant, as I broke my leg while he was out injured. He was a brilliant player. I remember his first game back was a reserve match against Hibs and there was 14,000 there, which shows just how much the supporters thought of him.

'At the start of the 1992/93 campaign, I played a few pre-season games which included most of the first team, but when the squad was announced for the training camp at Il Ciocco, I wasn't part of it. It was disappointing but it was mainly the first-team squad that went, with maybe one or two youngsters thrown in, so I didn't read too much into missing out. One thing I wasn't great at was long distance running. There were guys in the squad who would run all day, but I was more about short, sharp bursts of speed, over say 10 or 15 yards.'

But with the season barely a few weeks old, McSwegan was sad to see the boy he had grown up with at Ibrox, John Spencer, decide to move on. He said, 'John and I were good pals, so from that point of view I was sorry to see him leave. But he was far more driven than me, and was desperate to play first team football, while I was happy to keep learning at Rangers and wait for my chance. Spenny had been over to Hong Kong to play, and been out on loan at Morton, so he was keen to go.

'Looking back, perhaps I was frightened to leave such a big club as any other would have been viewed as a step down, although as the seasons went by, and my first team opportunities and prospects failed to improve, I became really fed up, and would start to resent playing alongside boys just out of school. When I eventually took the plunge and left, I was about 22 but had very little regular first team football behind me.'

Back to season 92/93, and the flip side of Spencer moving on was that McSwegan moved up in the pecking order, although the previous season hadn't quite worked out that way. He explained, 'When you're training hard, doing well in the reserves, and hoping to make the breakthrough, there's

nothing worse than hearing the manager has just signed a new striker! During the 1991/92 season, one of the first team players was injured and I was training like a demon in anticipation of a call-up – and then the club announced the signing of Paul Rideout, an England international. I couldn't believe it. Paul was a fantastic guy and we got on very well but personally it was a downer. Mind you, not even Paul, with his pedigree and experience of playing in Italy, was going to displace Hateley and McCoist. That's how tough it was.'

McSwegan added, 'Rangers is the best club in the world, especially if you're playing regularly, but if you're not it can be a tough place. Perhaps Spenny wasn't more driven than me, but just decided it was time to leave because game time was always going to be limited. When he left, it definitely made me think, but I was at one of the top clubs in the U.K., learning from the best, with a great manager, and we were winning everything, so why would I want to move? I was convinced my chance would come.'

McSwegan was a regular scorer in reserve games, and also proved adept at finding the net for the first team when given a chance, but revealed how there was one reserve fixture he was happy to play in, and which offered him the best of both worlds.

'Old Firm reserve games were a sort of middle ground for me. It wasn't first team football, but equally we had to raise our game from run-of-the-mill second string matches. At the start of the season I played in an Old Firm reserve game at Parkhead and we won 2-0. I scored and it was a cracking game. Once you'd played in a few of these games you got the hang of them quite quickly. We were getting fantastic crowds, sometimes between 15 and 20,000, so there was always a great atmosphere. It was quite a step up from your normal reserve game and everyone was pumped up.

When people asked my favourite away ground, I would say Easter Road or Parkhead – because I used to score all the time! Each time we went there I wondered if I would score two or three. I was always very confident.

'My first team debut was against Hibs at Ibrox. We drew 1-1 and I came on for Davie Cooper. I was just 17 and was standing at the side of the park waiting to run on and when I saw who was coming off, I thought, "It doesn't get any better than this. I'm replacing Davie Cooper – what's happening here?"

'I made my first start in the League Cup quarter final at Tannadice against Dundee United. At the time, there wasn't any way of finding out if you were in the team, but you could often gauge it by how training had gone. On this occasion, a squad of 16 was pinned up on the wall, which included three goalkeepers. Then it was a process of elimination. I noticed there were only two forwards and thought I had a chance, and found out for sure when the team was read out in the dressing room. It was horses for courses and everyone was different in the way they took the news. Some didn't bother when they found out about their debut, whereas others wouldn't sleep if they knew the day before, so it was all about man management.

'I was then on the bench for our European Cup match against Lyngby in Copenhagen and it felt good to be involved in such a big night, so there was no real frustration at not getting on. Back then, younger players like myself, Steven Presley, Neil Murray and David Hagen were warmly accepted by the recognised first team players. Our dressing room was inclusive (even though we got changed in a separate room). The first team players would pop in and ask if we were coming out to train etc. Nowadays, it's perhaps a wee bit more of a 'them and us' mentality. If anything was happening, the senior players always made sure we were part of it. That season, we perhaps only contributed 10 per cent to the games, but when we came on we were always treated as equals.'



When McSwegan looks back on his career, he will always have a special place in his heart for that season's European run. Ten games undefeated and a whole heap of great memories made. He said, 'To go through the whole European campaign undefeated was something special, and we all played our part. There were many twists and turns but no one ever let the side down. No stars, no big-time Charlie's; everybody was an equal. Back then, the carry on with Joey Barton would never have been allowed to happen. It would have been sorted out on day one. I won't name the names of those who would've sorted it, but I'm sure you can imagine. If truth be told, I was disappointed to see the Barton episode drag on for so long.'

'There was a fantastic atmosphere inside Ibrox on the night of the match against Leeds United. Gary McAllister, a good bluenose, scored the opener early on for Leeds and silenced the stadium, but it wasn't too long before it was bouncing again and when you have McCoist and Hateley in your side you always have a chance. In the return leg, they both scored and we got through, and while there were a few times I thought I would never get a game because

they were both so good, that night wasn't one of them. We were all caught up in the euphoria of twice beating the English champions, so it wasn't the time to curse my luck.

'I made some fantastic memories in my time at Ibrox, including that goal against Marseille – my first for Rangers. When I was told I was going on that night, the instructions were simple: Archie Knox just said to me, "Go and get us a goal, son." In the days leading up to the match, my finishing had been excellent in training so I felt confident. I had been picking my spot in the goals all week and they had been flying in from all angles, so I thought that if I got on, and got a chance, I was confident I would score. Strikers can be like that. Fortunately I got a decent chance and stuck it away, and I genuinely believe that another five minutes and we would have won that game. Just after that, Neil Murray got the ball and I was set up to let fly as soon as it came to me but he didn't lay it off. It was just outside the box and the way I was feeling I was confident I would've scored.

'I was just 22 when we played Marseille but I wasn't in the slightest bit overawed or nervous. Every time I played for Rangers it was always about the team; there was no time to worry about yourself. We were all in it together, and that was something I tried to take with me to other clubs when I moved on, but it's not until you leave Rangers you realise other clubs are different. 'The goal against Marseille was, I believe, the first one scored by a British player in the Champions League. And the one slight advantage I had was that even though I wasn't playing for the first team every Saturday, I was still playing regularly at Ibrox as the reserves played their home games there at that time. You always knew exactly where you were on the pitch. For that goal, the ball came from the left and the goalkeeper, Fabian Barthez, was moving from left to right so I tried to put it back across him. My first thought was that I'd caught it pretty good. It was a wet night so the ball could easily have gone the opposite way from which I intended. When it came over, I had to check my run, so I got my footing, balance and angles all ready and thankfully it was a good cross. I realised pretty quickly that it was crossbar height and had a good chance of dropping in – and I was delighted when it did.

'We were down to the bare bones that night. Both Neil (Murray) and Stephen (Pressley) came on, so the three of us were involved, which might not have been the case had the three-foreigner rule not been in force. 'After the game I swapped tops with Marcel Desailly. What a player he was. In the second game I swapped with full back De Meco, but Desailly's was a good top to get as he went to AC Milan and Chelsea after Marseille, and won the World Cup with France.

'As we were walking back to the dressing room, my first thought was for my grandad. He used to come and watch me all the time, from the school team right up to Rangers. I'm sure he used to think, "I hope my boy plays for Rangers one day," although he never actually said it. He loved his football. I went home to my granny's house that night to get changed and my girlfriend Pauline, who is now my wife, and I went back out to the city centre for a few

drinks. When I got home, I couldn't get to sleep, which wasn't really a surprise.

'I remember the game against CSKA Moscow over in Bochum. The number of chances they had was ridiculous but we won 1-0. We had some great characters in that team, and the likes of Andy Goram, Richard Gough, Davie McPherson and Ian Ferguson threw themselves in front of everything that night.

'When we played Bruges in the Champions League at Ibrox, I was out warming up when Scott Nisbet scored his famous goal. I always remember thinking their goalkeeper looked tiny, and I thought a taller keeper might have got to it, but it was just a freak of nature. The same night, Marseille beat CSKA 6-0 and there were whispers in the dressing room about what was going on behind closed doors.

'In Marseille there was a great atmosphere in the stadium, but it kicked off a wee bit in the tunnel at half-time. If memory serves me right, I think Bernard Tapie, the Marseille chairman, was trying to get a word with the referee and some of our lads weren't too happy and started giving him a bit of abuse, but overall I thoroughly enjoyed that European campaign.'

The first disappointment of a long and arduous season for McSwegan arrived in the shape of a Skol Cup final snub – even though the youngster still had a part to play on the day. He said, 'I ended up 14th man. The day before the final, we played Aberdeen in a reserve league game at Ibrox and I scored a really good hat-trick. Walter Smith was at the game. He spoke to me afterwards and told me to get my stuff together as someone had pulled out of the original 14-man squad, and that I was going to the team hotel.

'I was already scheduled to be at Hampden to compete in the Skol Cup Sprint, a sponsors' event to find the fastest player in Scottish football. I had taken part in the qualifier and made it to the final – and there was a £1,000 prize on offer for the winner, which was a pretty decent incentive. 'But I was now 14th man, which meant if anything went wrong overnight I was in. On the morning of the game, a roll call confirmed the 13 (11 and two subs) were all present and correct so I missed out on the game, but was still able to take part in the sprint. Sadly, I didn't win that either so it wasn't exactly the greatest weekend of my career!'

A couple of days after scoring that memorable goal against Marseille, McSwegan played his first full 90 minutes of the season. He relished the opportunity, and said, 'I was still on a high and hoping for a run of games. It was unfortunate that Ally McCoist had picked up an injury but it gave me a chink of light. The only problem was we had quite a few injuries and the gaffer had drafted in three or four youngsters, which makes it that bit more difficult than if you were going into a team with 10 regular first team players. I won't knock it, because it was a great experience and opportunity, but we weren't as strong as we could've been.

'I was back in the reserves for the New Year match against Celtic and scored both goals in a 2-0 win. I didn't see it as a massive drop down, as Old Firm games were always guaranteed to motivate you. I worked under John McGregor and he was very good. When he first arrived at the club, he didn't go to the Italian training camp, so he came on a pre-season tour of the Highlands with us. I came off in one game and sat down on the bench. One of the other guys said to me, "Why do they call John McGregor Mad Dog?" Ten minutes later he answered by scything a boy across the chest. He was a hardy lad but also a really good player.'

McSwegan proved how much of a natural goalscorer he was in a reserve match at Dundee when he scored all five goals in an emphatic win. Each goal was different and the fact he had scored them against such an experienced goalkeeper as Jim Leighton spoke volumes.

He said, 'I was really pleased with my performance that day. Ian Durrant was in the midfield and we had Pieter Huistra out wide. Three days later, I scored a hat-trick in a reserve match against Hibs. The following weekend I thought I had a really good chance of making the first team, but when I looked at the team sheet, both Durrant and Huistra were there and my name was absent. That was a defining moment in my Rangers career. I thought that if I've scored eight goals in four days and can't get a game, what's the point? I was still considered one of the younger boys but I was gutted.'

And there was further heartache to follow, as McSwegan explained, 'A game against Aberdeen was called off, and we were all sitting in the dressing room and the coach, Davie Dodds, said, "The gaffer has decided to take the first team squad away to St Andrews for the weekend," and I immediately asked if it included me. He went off to ask Walter and when he returned he said, "Aye, you can come if you want!" To be honest I was a bit pissed off at that response and I just got my gear together and left. Maybe they were testing me, I don't know, but I didn't go anyway.'

'After that, I started to think, "It's not going to happen for me here, there isn't much more I can do." My contract was up at the end of the season so I decided to stay until then and see what kind of move I could get. 'An agency got in touch, obviously knowing that I wasn't playing regularly, and asked if I would consider going down south. It wasn't the right time, but I asked them to keep me in mind at the end of the season. Former Ranger Davie Wilson was one of the agents I spoke to. Agents weren't that big back then, and I didn't really know him too well, so part of me was wondering if he was perhaps working for the club!'

McSwegan's Ibrox swansong saw him included in the first team for a run of matches after Ally McCoist suffered a broken leg while playing for Scotland in Portugal. It was a bittersweet moment for Swiggie, as he knew exactly what it was like to be laid low with a plaster cast on his leg. He said, 'My first match was at Tynecastle, when we beat Hearts, and we then beat Partick Thistle, but Aberdeen also won that day so the championship was put on hold. We went to Airdrie the following week knowing

a win would give us the title. I was fortunate enough to score the only goal of the afternoon which meant we were champions, and that's something no one can ever take away from me. I have a great picture of me, Goughie and Bomber after the game, which brings back so many great memories.

'I played up front with Mark Hateley and he was brilliant with me. Obviously he was used to playing alongside experienced players but he took the time and trouble to talk me through the game and I'll always appreciate that. It was a new experience for me as well as I had been used to playing with someone like John Spencer in the reserves every week. Mark was different class and would win all the flick-ons. But for me to score a goal of such importance was just the stuff of dreams. It was my fifth goal of the season and it was Rangers fifth successive title.

'After the match, I had a few thoughts for Coisty because he had missed out due to the broken leg. I had scored the goal which had clinched the league, but Coisty had been doing that week in, week out. I love him to bits, and it was just unfortunate that he missed out.'

McSwegan's goal at Broomfield paved the way for the small matter of a title party at Ibrox the following Saturday – with Dundee United the visitors, and once again Swiggy was involved.

He explained, 'I set up the only goal of the game for Pieter Huistra but one of the things I remember most about that afternoon was being wiped out by big John Clark. He took me from behind and I was up in the air for what seemed like an eternity. I didn't have a clue when I would come down! Defenders got away with things like that in those days. I liked Clarky, but he was rock solid.' McSwegan added, 'A lot of the boys who were at the club at that time were Rangers supporters and knew the significance of becoming only the fifth team in the history of the club to win the treble. But when you look back at it now you appreciate it even more. It's such a difficult thing to achieve so we were rightly proud.

'We put so much into that season, and some of the lads were playing when they were only perhaps 75 or 80 per cent fit. When you look at guys like Bomber, we could certainly do with his type of character at the moment. Perhaps the only current player who would've fitted in with our ethos at that time would've been Andy Halliday. You can see how much it means to him. He reminds me of a mixture of Barry and Ian Ferguson. He's good on the ball but has the club in his heart.'

McSwegan admitted it was incredibly sweet to clinch the treble at Celtic Park in the Scottish Cup final against Aberdeen. He said, 'I didn't play that day. I was on the bench, which was frustrating as I'd played loads of games in the run up to the final, but I had to swallow the disappointment.

'With about five minutes to go, the boys seemed to be running on empty and Archie Knox said to me and Steven Pressley, "Right lads, karaoke time," and that meant we had to go out and get warmed up at the Rangers end and get the fans going to give the players a boost, and lift them for the last few

minutes. It worked and we won the Scottish Cup.'

Rangers may have won the Scottish Cup – and clinched an historic treble – but McSwegan knew deep down he had taken part in his last match for the club. 'If I'm being honest, I knew I would have to move if I wanted to improve. You can only learn so much on the training ground. You have to play first team football, and can't be playing for the reserves at 23 or 24. But at the back of your mind, you know you have a chance of winning medals, or playing in Europe. There was a lot to weigh up, but then you hear rumours that Gordon Durie and Duncan Ferguson are about to sign, and that helps make your mind up.

'Near the end of the 92/93 season, Walter Smith told me there would be another contract there for me to sign, as I was out of contract, but I was straight with him and said that I would be moving on.

'Rangers had to offer me a contract if they wanted a fee. Ally McCoist had broken his leg and I had played a good number of games, and scored a few goals, but my mind was made up, so I told Walter I wanted to leave because I needed regular first team football, and he didn't argue.

'I looked at boys I'd grown up with, like Eoin Jess, who were playing first team football and that's what I wanted. I might've been at the best club but I was getting left behind by my peers as they were developing more than me. 'I went to Notts County the following season and scored 17 goals in what was effectively the Championship. They had initially shown an interest in me without even seeing me play. County are a small club, and we finished seventh, so it was a good season. We had a lot of big games against teams who were geographically close. The matches against Forest were obviously the Nottingham Derby, but games against Leicester City and Derby County were also huge. The Derby match, especially, meant a great deal to both sets of supporters, and was the bigger of the East Midlands games. 'I stayed in Nottingham for two years with the missus. We had already stayed in a flat in Glasgow but to move so far away was quite something for us, away from family etc, but we enjoyed it, although we moved back up to Glasgow and got married, and I joined Dundee United.

'There are times when I look back and think that maybe I should've stayed down south a bit longer, perhaps even moved to another side. At the time, I scored home and away against Birmingham City and there was talk that they were interested, while there were others looking. Stevie Nicol was my manager and at one point he quizzed me about the press speculation linking me to Birmingham.

'If I had already been married, we would probably have stayed down there because the money had consistently gone up in England, while going down in Scotland! Financially we would have been better off, but for family reasons we came back to Scotland. My wife was an only child and was close to her mum, so that was the overriding factor.

'I had some good times at Dundee United, but strangely one of the things I remember most is a match against Rangers at Ibrox, which I missed due to injury. I watched the game from the stand, but next day I'm reading the match report in a paper, and it said, "McSwegan missed a good chance in 54 minutes!" And I thought, "Seriously?" Another part of the report insisted I'd set up an opportunity for one of my teammates, which just proved to me you can't always believe what you read in the papers. The thing that bothers me about that is someone who wasn't at the game reading it and thinking I've missed a couple of sitters and had a shocker.'

Despite scoring goals for Notts County, Dundee United and then Hearts and Kilmarnock, McSwegan will always be remembered for his time at Ibrox, but insists when he left, the time was definitely right. He said, 'Perhaps I should have gone sooner, but no one can ever take away from me what we achieved in 1992/93. Once I left Rangers I grew as a person, but it's always going to be a step down when you go elsewhere, so you have to deal with that. When you leave, it's also easier to appreciate what you had, and you even think that you might like to go back at some point.'

'While at Hearts, I was called into the Scotland squad and scored on my debut. Some of the papers gave me man of the match and I thought I would win a few more caps, but it didn't happen. It was frustrating because we played England home and away after that, and while I was injured for the home game, I was on the bench for the match at Wembley and I thought I would get the last 10 or 15 minutes as we needed a goal, but the manager, Craig Brown, threw on Mark Burchhill, a midfielder. It was frustrating for me because at that time I was scoring goals for Hearts, and Mark was only sporadically getting a run out with Celtic. I always found Craig Brown very diplomatic. He would say and do the right things and shy clear of controversy. It was as though he just tried to appease everyone.'

'I played for about 23 years and the biggest disappointment for me was injuries, I think most players would say that. I had trouble with my hamstrings but not too many regrets. I looked after myself and played till I was 38. I enjoyed a night out, especially at Rangers, where the old motto 'the team that drinks together wins together' was spot on.'

'In fact, I was scouting for the first team when Ally McCoist was the manager and I've coached the youth team as well. My son has also been training with them so hopefully there is always going to be some sort of connection with the club. I also do some charity nights and bump into old teammates, which is great, because you don't get that anywhere else. Rangers is an institution. 'Mind you, it must have been a joy for Walter and Archie to have had such an amazing dressing room. No egos, no in-fighting, hard-working boys who would fight all day for each other. Nobody would cross Walter or Archie because we had too much respect for them.'

'The team spirit was second to none. If you look round your dressing room and say, 'he will fight all day for you, he will get you a goal, he will create

something, he runs all day, he never gives up,' then you have all the bases covered. We had a lot going for us that season. I'm sure many teams turned up at Ibrox thinking they couldn't win and that would help us psychologically. We could mix it, we could play; we had the lot. It's a rare thing and doesn't come along too often. After I left, the Italians and the Dutch came, but I don't think they achieved what we did in 92/93.

‘And as a Rangers supporter, I was privileged to be involved in that.’

*Gary was talking to Jeff Holmes for the book A Season to be Cheerful, on Rangers’ fantastic 1992/93 campaign