

Should I stay or should I go...



Eric Caldow was a Rangers legend. In fourteen years at Ibrox he made more than 400 appearances for the club, and while as a full back he could be tigerish in the tackle, it was far from what defined him. He used a fine soccer brain to such good effect that it's said he never received a single booking in his entire career.

Perhaps because he was one of the first to perfect the art of the slide tackle. Bill Struth signed the Cumnock-born starlet from Muirkirk Juniors in May 1951, but left him with the Ayrshire side for another year, and he made his first-team debut the following season in a 4-2 win over Ayr United in a League Cup tie at Ibrox in front of 30,000. He had quit his job as an apprentice painter with the council to join the biggest club in Scotland - and what a great decision that would prove to be.

He was handed a regular berth in the first team when the great Willie Woodburn was suspended sine die and George Young moved to centre half to replace Big Ben. Caldow slotted in seamlessly and over the next six years became a firm favourite with supporters, making his international debut for Scotland in the toughest game of them all - against England at Wembley. The Scots lost 2-1 but Caldow enhanced his already excellent reputation by turning in a performance that was described as 'calm and collected.'

It was April, 1957, and Scot Symon's men had just won the club's 30th league championship. Rangers had cemented their position as the top team in the country and the players had also made a slice of history by being the first to represent the club in official European competition, with home and away - and play-off - games against Nice.

From season 1955/56, Caldow won three league titles in the next four years, but the last of those, secured in May 1959, proved the start of a rocky period for the defender. He played fifty times during the 1958/59 season, and was almost ever-present as Rangers wrestled back their league title. In contrast, stand-by left back Johnnie Little had made just one league appearance from a possible 34.

The new season began with a thumping 6-1 win over Hibs at Easter Road - the perfect way to start the League Cup campaign. Shearer and Caldwell were off to a flying start. Caldwell played the next four games alongside his regular partner, as Motherwell - thanks to home and away wins over the Light Blues - progressed to the quarter finals from a tough League Cup section.

But Caldwell played just one league match before losing his place to Little. Despite having picked up a knock, he still wasn't best pleased. Every player goes through a rough patch but the Ayrshireman believed his form hadn't dipped as dramatically as was being made out.

He missed both European Cup ties against the 'Butchers of Belgium,' Anderlecht, with Little wearing the number three jersey home and away. In between those games, Rangers lost 3-0 at home to Ayr United. It was just their fourth league game of the season, but as reigning league champions it was an unmitigated disaster. Caldwell had sat in the stand clicking his heels in frustration, and the very next morning there was sensational news coming out of Ibrox.

'Eric Caldwell has submitted a transfer request!'

Eric Caldwell, the loyal Ranger, wanted away. As you can imagine, the Monday morning papers had a field day. The man they thought would never leave Ibrox was doing just that. Surely it was up to Caldwell to man up and fight for his place in the team!

Manager Scot Symon had made it abundantly clear that Johnnie Little would be his number one pick for left back, and it was up to Caldwell to fight it out with Shearer for the remaining defensive jersey. The situation was far from perfect.

Such an improbable scenario had been simmering for a few weeks and Caldwell had clearly talked things over with his wife, Laura. Perhaps the heavy home loss to Ayr United had hastened things along.

In those days, Rangers players didn't submit written transfer requests on a whim; this was a well thought out request and it soon became clear that there was a more personal motivating factor behind the player's decision.

Strangely, Manchester United manager Matt Busby appeared to know about the request before almost everyone else. On the Monday morning it was reported that he was waiting for the okay from Rangers to make his move.

One report suggested that Rangers' 24-year-old full back Caldwell could be up for grabs. And a couple of lines below it was noted that Manchester United could do with a full back like Caldwell. A little bit of insider trading, perhaps?

Caldow was under pressure from journalists to give his reasons for the request. The supporters were desperate to know why a player who had appeared so settled, and so happy at Ibrox, had chosen the course he had.

The reason was soon in the public domain as the talented full back dropped the biggest bombshell yet. If he didn't get a move to a club in the north east of England there was every chance his marriage would be over. Supporters held their breath. This was difficult news to digest.

Willie Allison was the journalist who broke the story, and he wrote, 'Eric has written to the Ibrox directors explaining that he must get a move to an English club because his English wife, Laura, is unhappy in Glasgow. Eric fears a break-up of his marriage if he doesn't get to the north east of England. It is as serious as that.'



He added, 'Mrs Caldow, who comes from the Durham area of England, has never settled in Scotland. She feels she can be happy only if she returns south.'

There was a mixed reaction to the news, and to how the situation could play out. Allison believed that Rangers directors could tell Caldow to sort out his personal affairs and forget about a transfer, but the scribe admitted he had never known of any Rangers directors to take such a firm position against one of their own.

Allison, who had the ear of those inside Ibrox, revealed how Caldow had told him that he wanted to finish his career at Rangers, but was simply putting his wife's happiness first.

But while there is little doubt that Caldow's wife was unhappy in Glasgow, the case remained that Eric was being frozen out of the first team. A fit and healthy Eric Caldow playing for Rangers Reserves didn't make a lot of sense.

And then there was the utterly bizarre situation whereby Caldow was still a regular starter for Scotland! At that time, international team places were at a premium, so Caldow lining up for the Scots in Belfast - while being unable to command a place at his beloved Rangers - was just crazy.

And it didn't help that a few days before Caldow played against the Irish, his Rangers teammate, Harold Davis came out with warm praise for Johnnie Little's performance in Brussels, saying, 'in all my years of watching and playing football I reckon that Johnnie Little, in that first half against Anderlecht, gave the finest display of full-back football I have ever seen.'

Kind praise for one colleague, and a dagger to the heart of another. So while Little continued to impress, perhaps Caldow felt there was no alternative but to move on.

Meanwhile, any decision by the Rangers board to agree or disagree to the transfer

request was put on hold as director Alan Morton was holidaying in Turnberry. And Turnberry was soon to play another role in the Caldwell transfer drama as both player and manager agreed to meet in the small Ayrshire town to discuss Caldwell's immediate future.

It was an enlightening experience for the player as he learned a few facts about the move. These were; that he would be due just the £25 signing-on fee were he to move south. From Rangers, he would be entitled to an accrued benefit payment of £450. The truth was, the player could be much worse off by taking his talents south of the border.

In the background, Manchester United awaited the decision, knowing they desperately needed a class defender to halt their alarming fall from grace. So, the truth was out. Caldwell was seeking an English club because his Durham-born wife Laura wanted to return south. And Matt Busby, the former Scottish team manager who had picked Caldwell for several of his 17 caps, had a complete dossier on the player.

More importantly, the Old Trafford cash was there - as soon as Rangers said the word.

And then a further complication. While speculation mounted over Caldwell's future, Birmingham City threw their hat into the ring. They had just slumped to the bottom of the First Division after losing 4-3 at St Andrew's to Leicester City.

'It's impossible to find another back like Jeff Hall,' said chairman Harry Morris.

'We've searched everywhere and now we're looking at Caldwell.

Noting City's interest, Manchester United upped the ante. They slapped in an official £25,000 bid for Caldwell, a record fee for a full back, and awaited the response from Rangers. They had cast their fishing rod far into the water and the aim was to reel in a big one.

The press speculated that a deal would be done as early as the following week, but Rangers could be notoriously difficult to deal with. In order to push ahead with the transfer, United manager Matt Busby dashed to Glasgow the moment he heard Rangers were perhaps open to letting the player leave. It was a cold and wet Tuesday night, but Busby only had one thing on his mind. He had a meeting with the player and agreed to telephone Caldwell two days later, when the Ranger would be in Newcastle, County Down, as part of the Scottish international team to play Ireland on the Saturday.

After the big game, instead of travelling back to Glasgow on the Saturday night, Caldwell would set sail for Liverpool and then carry on to Manchester.

Caldow was asked for his thoughts on the proposed move before travelling to Ireland, and said, 'I am pleased that Rangers are willing to let me go. It will be with regret that I'll leave Ibrox, but my wife has never really settled in Scotland.

'Laura will be staying with her people in Durham while I am away in Ireland.'

Caldow added, 'I am willing to go anywhere, but Manchester United would suit me. I formed a high impression of Mr Busby when he was our Scottish team manager.' And it looked like his final appearance for Rangers would be a Glasgow Cup final victory over Partick Thistle at Hampden - after Johnnie Little had been ruled through injury. Caldwell and his mates won 2-1 thanks to goals from Sammy Baird and Alex Scott.

On Saturday, October 3, Rangers were in fine form at Ibrox, defeating Dunfermline 4-1. Supporters' views on Caldwell asking away were mixed. Many felt let down by his actions, while others were sympathetic to his personal situation. Of course, Caldwell was nowhere to be seen as he was across the Irish Sea, starring as Scotland thumped Ireland 4-0. The man of the moment was outstanding in the right back position and, it was said, played his best game of the season, despite being carried off with a knee injury ten minutes before half time - but re-appearing moments later with the injured area heavily strapped. Ireland, unbeaten in two years, had been taught a footballing lesson.

Back in Blighty, Manchester United were keen to get the transfer tied up as soon as possible. They were due to meet Real Madrid in a friendly match at Old Trafford, and Matt Busby admitted that it would be nice for Caldwell to face the Spanish giants.

In their previous three league games, United had picked up just a single point - and shipped ten goals in the process. Busby was desperate. His team were in the bottom half of the table and their £23,000 goalkeeper, Harry Gregg had shipped twenty goals in all.

Busby said, 'I've made enquiries for seven players this season, but in every case I've been told they're not for sale. It isn't a question of money, I've never got as far as making an offer.'

After missing out on his top two targets, the Scot had turned his attention to Caldwell, who had missed just one Scotland game in the last 32.

But he wasn't alone. The earlier interest from Birmingham City quickly became an official bid. The Brummie Blues had high hopes of signing Caldwell and a £20,000 bid for the player landed on the desk of Rangers manager Scot Symon. It's said the bid was received so early in the morning that the always-punctual Symon hadn't yet arrived for work.

On Tuesday, October 6, Eric Caldwell and his wife left her parents' home in the north east of England to return to Scotland for crunch talks with Scot Symon. The topic - Caldwell's proposed move to Manchester United, especially as the clubs had agreed a fee in the Ibrox boardroom during a visit by Busby.



Twenty-four hours earlier, Caldwell and his wife had been in Manchester to talk with United. After another meeting with Rangers, Caldwell was expected to telephone the United manager to tell him of his decision.

But if an anxious Busby had been expecting his office phone - number TRAfford Park 1661 - to ring around teatime, he was in for a shock, because Caldwell asked for another day to make up his mind.

If truth be told, Busby had expected the transfer to be completed by now, with little or no hitches. Caldwell and his wife Laura had been at Old Trafford for FIVE hours, but Caldwell admitted, 'I simply cannot make up my mind!'

The Caldows had been met at Exchange Station, in Manchester, by Busby and his captain, Dennis Violet, before being entertained to a five-course lunch in the city's leading hotel, inspected the Old Trafford ground, and were shown over a pleasant semi-detached house in the quiet suburb of Davyhulme which the club owned, before catching the evening express back to County Durham, where Mrs Caldwell's relatives lived.

Caldow said, 'It's just that I want to talk things over from every angle with my wife. Since arriving back from Ireland with the Scottish team on Sunday I have hardly had a spare minute to think about this move - and it is such an important decision, at such an important point in my career.'

Meanwhile, back in Manchester, Matt Busby was still confident that Caldwell would be joining his fellow Scot at United - and he needed him. A 4-0 defeat to Preston led to furious supporters criticising their team for being too soft. Busby reckoned Caldwell could toughen them up. He would have to, as a solitary league point from their last four games was relegation fodder. Three goals scored and fourteen lost was simply not Manchester United class. Something had to give.

But then another fly in the ointment.

While Busby waited patiently on his telephone to ring, in stepped Middlesbrough with a £20,000 offer, knowing full well that they played within the catchment area of Mrs Caldwell's family, a mere 25 miles from Willington. Boro manager Bob Dennison was playing a wily game. He, too, knew Scot Symon personally and the Rangers boss told him - during a long telephone conversation - that the board would discuss the matter that night. Symon promised to ring his friend in the morning with a decision.

It was then reported that Spurs and Newcastle were also interested. Caldwell had been placed on the transfer list at his own request a week ago - so the matter was surely drawing to a conclusion.

Just a week or so after playing against Ireland in the Home International, the Scottish League side were due to meet their Irish counterparts at Ibrox, and Caldwell, who many folk believed would captain the Scots, was left out of the squad as the selectors believed he would be ineligible as he was certain to be playing for Manchester United by then!

But the day after the Scottish League squad announcement, the Caldwell saga was

finally over, and it was revealed that the player was going nowhere.

Caldow decided Manchester United weren't the club for him, and in some ways that appeared to infuriate the Rangers board of directors. At an after-hours board meeting, in which the matter was the only topic of conversation, Scot Symon issued the following statement:

"We have reconsidered Caldow's request for a transfer and it has been refused. He will stay at Ibrox. We will review the position at a later date. IN THE MEANTIME THERE WILL BE NO FURTHER TRANSFER NEGOTIATIONS."

That was the end of the matter. With the great benefit of hindsight, it would appear that one of two things had proved the straw that broke the camel's back.

One - that the board came to the conclusion that Caldow was taking too long to make up his mind, and made it for him.

Two - they were furious at the player for refusing to move to Old Trafford, perhaps as a deal had already been done, and when Caldow decided against Manchester as his favoured destination, they pulled the plug.

Symon immediately informed Middlesbrough of the situation. They had offered £20,000, £5,000 less than Manchester United were prepared to pay, but any deal was now off.

Caldow - nor his wife, Laura - had no initial comment to make on the board's decision.

Sources close to the player suggested his wife was still anxious to return home to County Durham. She had felt Manchester was too far from home, about the same distance as Glasgow.

It later emerged that Rangers had agreed to pay Caldow a full benefit had he agreed to sign for United, despite Symon earlier stating that the player wouldn't be entitled to it. That was £750, which was £300 more than originally offered.

An interested onlooker might think the club were desperate for the £25,000 cheque Matt Busby was prepared to write out, but Rangers' bank book appeared healthy enough.

Caldow's week-long search for both marital and soccer happiness had ended with the player being slightly worse off than when he started.

The previous Saturday, he had played for Scotland. Three days later, he refused a £25,000 move to Manchester United, and now, as Rangers prepared for their next First Division match, a get-tough Ibrox board relegated him to the reserves.

As the Rangers first team travelled to Dens Park - where they beat Bob Shankly's Dundee 3-1 - Caldow was with the stiff at Ibrox. He was being spoon-fed a dose of medicine by the board, and he took it firmly on the chin. He knew his time would come.

And it did. Fourteen days later, he was onboard a train to the Granite City, where the Rangers gave Aberdeen a footballing lesson. Caldow, back in his familiar beat on

the left-hand touchline, was imperious as the visitors romped to a 5-0 victory. From the first whistle to the last, the Cumnock man looked like he'd never been away. And 48 hours after the game, he gave his version of the move that never was - in an effort to clear things up once and for all. He revealed that he had been anything but happy during the on-off negotiations with Manchester United but, more importantly, he said his wife had backed him fully in his decision to remain at Ibrox.

He added: "All I want to do now is fully win back my place in the first team. Everyone at Ibrox has been wonderful. I could not have received greater sympathy and understanding anywhere else. I think it was that which finally convinced us that I could not be anything other than a Ranger.

"It was a tremendous relief when I finally decided to ask the club to forget all about my wanting away. I sincerely trust that when they get my letter they will show the same kindness and sympathy I have had recently."

Caldow's letter was indeed received with warmth and he was soon back fighting battle after battle as Rangers cemented their place as the best team in the country. The Ayrshireman would remain on Edmiston Drive for another seven years, and when he finally left his second home, his star was beginning to wane and he joined Stirling Albion. He left Rangers with a dozen winners' medals in his pocket, while he proudly represented his country forty times - as well as accruing a further twenty representative honours.

But more than the caps and the medals, he walked out of Ibrox a genuine Rangers legend, truly loved by fellow players and supporters alike. Caldow was talented, tough, scrupulously fair, and popular among his peers.

There's really no more to say other than - Eric Caldow: Rangers legend!