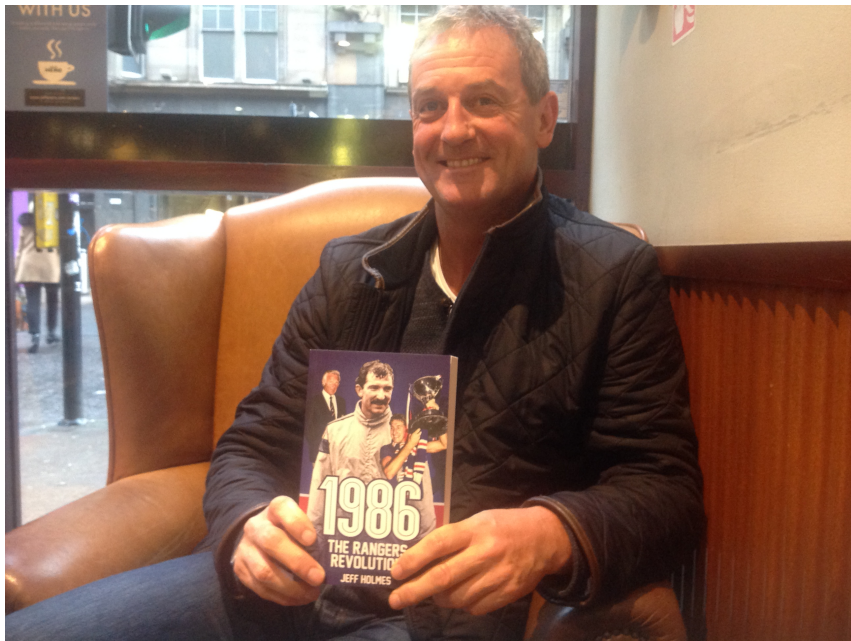


Dave McPherson



Dave McPherson would have been at Ibrox most weeks even if he hadn't been fortunate enough to sign for the team he supported as a kid: that was never in doubt, but perhaps he has former teammate Billy Davies to thank for saving him the admission money each week.

The duo turned out for youth side Pollok United – where politician Tommy Sheridan was also a teammate – and when a Rangers scout came along to watch Davies in action, he quite liked the look of big 'Slim' and the rest, as they say, is history.

McPherson said, 'I was a Rangers fan as a boy and was born and brought up in Pollok, which wasn't too far from Ibrox. I signed a schoolboy form at 14, and was fortunate enough to join the club two years later, 1980, on a professional contract. I made my debut during the 1982/83 season while still a teenager and consider myself very lucky to have done so at such a young age.

'Rangers didn't have a boys' club at the time, and it was pre-academy. Basically you got picked up from school or while playing youth football. Billy and I played for Pollok United, and also played for the same school team. When he got picked up by Rangers, the scout must also have noticed me and he invited me along to Ibrox. So from those early days I was always connected to Rangers.'

However, despite the interest from Rangers, McPherson revealed how the move was almost derailed at the 11th hour. He explained, 'Around that time, I was contacted by a few clubs from England who wanted me to go down for trials, but being a Rangers supporter I decided to stick with what I had. In those days, you would have headed down south during the school holidays for trials, but with Rangers on my door step I could train on a Tuesday and Thursday night at Ibrox. Rangers had decided long before the summer holidays they wanted me, and that was when they offered a schoolboy contract, which I was delighted to sign.'

He added, 'John Greig was the manager at the time but I didn't have too much contact with him. Willie Thornton was responsible for overseeing the youth side of the club. I looked upon Willie Thornton and Willie Waddell as the two key figures at Rangers – and you certainly wouldn't mess with them. They seldom smiled, always stern, but they were always immaculately dressed. I had real respect for both gentlemen and they just oozed Rangers; the class and dignity you expected from men like that.

'Willie Thornton would come on the trips to France with the youth team but would remain in the background and not say much, just offering little bits of advice here and there. I wouldn't say he was a big influence on my career, but I did have a lot of respect for him.'

The Rangers youth side were invited to participate in the prestigious Croix youth football festival every year, and scouts from the top European club sides used the event to spy on the continent's top talent.

McPherson said, 'Rangers had a great record at Croix, although I'll never forget being there and being scouted by Ajax, and one of their representatives actually asking Willie Thornton if they could sign me when I was 16!

'I suppose I was one of the early football-playing centre-backs, which was probably why Ajax recognised me and picked me out. I wasn't just lumping the ball up the park, I loved to play football. 'I remember breaking into the Rangers first team and the first-choice centre backs were Tom Forsyth and Colin Jackson, who were both great players, but older style defenders, and any time I tried to pass the ball out from the back I would get a row! They would say, "What do you think you're doing?" But that was just how I played, and I had been heavily influenced by the Dutch side, and players like Ruud Krol, and even the German captain Franz Beckenbauer. They both played football from the back and that was the way I wanted to play. It was kind of unknown in Scotland at that time, and I suppose it wasn't until Alan Hansen moved to Liverpool that he developed into more of that kind of player, as well as Gary Gillespie to a certain extent.'

McPherson managed to score on his Rangers debut, in a Scottish Cup tie against Albion Rovers, and said, 'I don't remember too much about that day, but I scored a penalty. I think we were winning quite easily and when we got the spot kick, the players decided the 'young boy' should take it! I was a bit nervous but was definitely glad to get the goal.'

McPherson enjoyed seven good years at Rangers, and played for a season under new boss Graeme Souness, but was shocked when his phone rang just after arriving back from holiday. He takes up the story, 'I played for a season under Souness and we won the league. In fact, he played me in every game apart from when I was suspended, and I chipped in with quite a few goals, but Graeme was adamant he wanted to build his own team and it didn't really matter who he had inherited because he had his own ideas.

'But I was still shocked when he called me during the close season to say Hearts had put an offer in for me – and that he thought I should go! I had just been on holiday with Chris Woods and Terry Butcher in Spain and the call came completely out of the blue. My first thought was, "My God, what's this all about?" I went over to Ibrox to try and find out a wee bit more and I met Walter Smith. I said to him, "What's going on here Walter, we've just won the league and I scored all these goals?" He didn't say much at all, certainly nothing that convinced me I was wanted, so I decided there was nothing else for it but to pick my boots up and just go.

'It was one of the most difficult moments of my career. I had returned from holiday on a high, I was looking forward to the new season knowing we'd just won the league for the first time in a few years and that I had been a big part of that, but there I was, walking out the front door of the club I loved, into the street and gone. Just like that. The fact it had come from nowhere left me shell-shocked, but I had a decision to make; a very important one, and the last thing I could afford to do was mope around. Luckily, for me, Alex McDonald and Sandy Jardine were in charge at Hearts and that made the decision a bit easier.

'Hearts are a big club but moving there initially felt in complete contrast to Rangers. There weren't the same expectations in terms of what was expected of the players at Ibrox, although I have to say that changed over the years.

'When I signed for Hearts, they had been unlucky not to win the league just a couple of years beforehand, so I think Alex was trying to rebuild and bring players in with that wee bit of experience of winning a title, and that was why he had targeted me. I signed at the same time as Shuggie Burns, and the fee paid to Rangers was £440,000, and I used to kid Shuggie on that Hearts had paid £435,000 for me – and even then I think I overvalued him!

'I found it really difficult to settle at Hearts, and the first six weeks or so weren't great. The training was different – not that it was bad – but the facilities weren't as good. The standard wasn't the same as it had been at Ibrox, although Alex and Sandy were working very hard to improve it, and they eventually improved it massively, although naturally it took time.

'As for the football itself, I had just moved for a big transfer fee so I felt quite a bit of responsibility on my shoulders, and not long afterwards, Alex made me captain, which was even more responsibility. I'm not sure a player pays too much attention to the fee; I don't believe he thinks, "I better step up to the plate here." Nowadays it's different. We're talking about players moving for 80 and £90 million, but when I moved to Hearts, I didn't look at the fee. With me, it was more that I was a supposed big player coming from Rangers, therefore the pressure was on me to perform. It was the days before "Bosman," so more or less everyone moved for a fee, whereas clubs can now pick up brilliant players for nothing towards the end of their contract.

'The Hearts fans were great to me. Initially, I didn't play well, so there were the usual murmurs of discontent; the usual, "He's a waste of money," but once the first month or so was out the way I settled down and they were right behind me. It's a smaller stadium so you tend to hear more, but the atmosphere is fantastic and it's a great place to play your football.'

There is usually a touch of irony involved in any unwanted player move, and McPherson's "karma moment" arrived at the tail end of his first season in maroon, when Hearts faced Rangers. He recalled, 'It was at Ibrox and I scored in a 2-1 win. It meant we finished above them in the league, so you can imagine how pleased Graeme Souness was. Graeme had sold me, a centre-back, and the big name player he brought in, Terry Butcher, broke his leg, so no wonder he was mad.'

While at Tynecastle, McPherson was also an integral part of the national team, and played in all three of Scotland's games at the 1990 World Cup finals in Italy, with the match against Brazil an obvious highlight. He said, 'I remember talking to a few of the players before the match against Brazil, and it was the game everyone wanted to play in, because to say you'd played against Brazil in the World Cup finals was something special.

'We were up against guys like Romario, Careca and Muller; special players, but what a great experience. It was a real challenge but one you wanted to try and enjoy. We felt confident about getting a result against Brazil that night, but the surface was really greasy and when Jim Leighton palmed the ball out, Muller – like all good strikers – was waiting to pounce. It was a great shame, because we felt we could've qualified from the section, so to lose 1-0 to Brazil was very frustrating, especially as a draw would've taken us through. In fact, we nearly qualified through default. We were waiting on the Uruguay result, although it didn't go our way in the end. I suppose it was the typical Scotland story of so near yet so far.

'After the match against Brazil, I was asked to do a press conference with Andy Roxburgh. I met Pele, and he said, "You had a very good game," and I replied, "Thanks very much, you weren't such a bad player yourself!" It was the time when FIFA had started doing all the stats and someone passed me a sheet with all these figures, and my passing success rate was something like 87 per cent, which was great. I always thought I was quite a good passer of the ball but when you see it down in paper it's pleasing.'

After five years in the capital, and more than 200 games, there were rumours that McPherson would soon be on the move. As Hearts' most saleable asset, and the club reportedly ready to cash in on the player, an orderly queue began to form.

McPherson said, 'I was very settled at Hearts and loved it there. I had broken into the Scotland side and things were going well, but I had a fair idea I would be moving when my contract was up. I remember getting calls from the likes of Borussia Dortmund and Seville, and they were interested in signing me. Both clubs said if I joined them they would give me £1 million over three years. This was in the days before agents and I'm sitting in my front room open mouthed, mumbling, 'Yeah, uhu, I'll take that, good!' But I couldn't accept their offers as it was pre-Bosman. I eventually met up with representatives from the clubs but my hands were tied. I think had I gone to Germany, the style of football would've suited me but it just never happened.

'A couple of months before the end of the season, I'd heard Rangers were interested. One day my mobile phone went and it was a journalist asking a few questions. We were getting changed for training at Tynecastle so I went into an empty room to take the call. I was sitting next to the fax machine, chatting away about the game the previous Saturday, when the machine started making a noise. A fax was coming through and it was on Southampton FC headed notepaper, so being a nosey parker I waited to have a look – but I couldn't believe my eyes. It read, "Southampton FC offer £1 million for the services of Dave McPherson!" I kid you not. I immediately stopped concentrating on the phone call, told the guy I had to go and thought, "I need to get out of here. I shouldn't have seen this." And guess what, Hearts didn't tell me about it. At the time, Southampton were a big club; a club I had always admired, to be honest, but I couldn't say anything about it because I wasn't supposed to know about the offer. To be fair, Hearts should have told me that somebody had put an offer in, but they didn't. It made me wonder if anyone else had been interested in signing me. I suppose players get to know more these days because of agents and middle men.'

McPherson was in Norway for a Scotland friendly in 1992 when he met up with Rangers manager Walter Smith. He said, 'Walter asked me if I was happy to come back to Rangers, and if I was he would put an offer in. I said I was and he put the wheels in motion with a £1.3m bid. I wasn't really surprised. I knew I was doing well and through reading the papers it was clear there were clubs interested in me outwith the ones I knew about, but I hadn't really given Rangers too much thought

as I believed I would be going elsewhere, so when Walter spoke to me I thought, "Well, I'm still a Rangers supporter..." I had been really disappointed to leave Rangers the first time, but perhaps this meant I had proved in some way that Rangers were wrong to let me go.

'I was delighted to be unveiled as a Rangers player for a second time but I just wanted to get going as soon as possible. When you move somewhere, it's the waiting until you play, and getting to know all your teammates, but it was easier for me because I'd been at Rangers previously. A lot of the staff were still there and they seemed happy to see me back, which helped. And then there was Durranty and McCoist – and you know what sort of wind-up welcome awaited! So it was easy to settle back in, although the expectation levels had risen a couple of notches because they had invested heavily in players. There was also added pressure because they had won four titles in a row and even then people were talking about getting to nine, so you felt that as well. Rangers are a massive club and you definitely feel the expectation from supporters, every member of staff does, not just the players. We all demanded success from one another.'

When McPherson first joined Rangers, the club had their own dedicated training ground at the Albion, but when he re-joined, that had gone – and hadn't been replaced.

He said, 'The facilities we were using were good, but we had to travel to them every day. Once you got there, though, it was good, and they were private. It was what we were used to, but I think at that time everybody just thought Rangers would have their own facilities because we were such a big club. Fortunately, things have changed and the club now has Murray Park, which is a fantastic place.'

'But as soon as I returned to Rangers, we were off to Italy for training, at Il Ciocco, which was just what we needed at that stage as it allowed us all to get back to full fitness after the close season. It was secluded. We were on top of a mountain, in 80 degrees heat, but I can assure you it sounds better than it actually was – but it was necessary. What it also did, was allow me to get to know guys I hadn't played with before, like Mark Hateley, so it was great for bonding.'

McPherson added, 'I think the priority at Ibrox at the start of any season is to win the league, and anything else is a bonus, so I think any talk of a treble simply wouldn't have been on anyone's radar. As it was, we became only the fifth ever Rangers side to win the treble, but that fact alone didn't sink in right away, probably because I grew up a Rangers supporter and remembered us winning the treble in the 1970s and thinking then what a magnificent achievement it had been. It was only after I left Rangers, and took the time to look at the three medals that it fully sank in. I realised I was a treble winner. It's not something which should be taken lightly as not too many players will achieve it in their career.'

McPherson reckons Walter Smith swapped star individuals for an all-round talented squad that season – and he reckons it paid dividends. 'I don't think there was any one individual star in the squad,' he said. 'We were all very good players, and Walter did a great job putting it all together and playing players in certain positions. I played right-back in the majority of games even though he had signed me as a centre-back. It's a case of when you're playing for Rangers you just get on with it and do what's best for the team. I think that was the feeling regarding every player. Everybody in that squad gave everything they had in every game; we had a tremendous never-say-die spirit, so we knew very early on that for a team to beat us, they would have to be either very lucky or absolutely brilliant. We were certainly not going to lose games easily.'

'Gary Stevens was our regular right-back, but he'd picked up an ankle injury and it was giving him a lot of trouble, so Walter called me in to his office one day and said, 'I know I signed you as a centre-back, but I need to play you at right-back because Gary is still injured. I know you're comfortable playing in a number of positions, so what do you think?' I told him as a Rangers player I would play anywhere for the club. Bomber Brown then filled in at centre-back and I played most of the season at full back. We had a great balance to the team that year, which was another important ingredient. 'I played 53 games that season, and something like that can work both ways. Naturally I was happy to be a regular in the team, but that amount of games can also have a detrimental effect on your body. It takes its toll. Even the seasons I played at Hearts, I played just about every game, maybe 70 games a season at times, when you include domestic cup, European games and internationals. It all adds up to a pretty hectic season. If you are playing in a World Cup or European Championships during the summer, you're not getting a break, but it's worth it as it means you're successful.'

And like every other player that term, McPherson was incredibly proud of what Rangers achieved on the European front. He said, 'On reflection, I think we might even have been able to win the Champions League. Of course, I'm very proud that we reached the group stages but then to go through that unbeaten leaves you wondering what might have been. Sometimes all it takes is a wee break here or there. I was disappointed we didn't win our last game, against CSKA Moscow, but to be fair, they were a very good side and perhaps tiredness was a factor by that point, because we didn't have a massive squad. At that time we hardly trained because we were playing so many games, but there is still a certain amount of training you have to do to keep your fitness levels up. 'The build up to both games against Leeds United was amazing. We were all looking forward to playing in the Battle of Britain, as the tie had been billed, but then Gary McAllister sticks one in the top corner in the first minute of the first leg at Ibrox and we're thinking, "Where did that come from?" It was probably the best thing that happened as it spurred us on even more and we managed to win the game. Leeds had a great team. When we went down to their place, there was a ban on away supporters, but I remember thinking there were some dodgy Leeds fans in attendance, and when we scored they started to cheer – which just conformed my suspicions! We went down there thinking we could get a positive result, maybe not win the match, but I was convinced we wouldn't lose. They fired everything at us but we were well set up, got the early goal and held out for a famous win. I think the English press thought Leeds would beat us no bother, so they were sick when we won.'

McPherson added, 'We were playing virtually every midweek, and it's sometimes hard to get motivated for every single game, but I think adrenaline keeps you going. I'm not decrying our league but you're going from an elite European level to a lower level. You might be playing one of the lesser lights in the SPL, and they want to beat you every bit as much as Leeds United do, but you do tend to back off a wee bit because you're tired – and have just come down from a massive European high – but one thing Walter always emphasised was the next game was all about getting a result, and we often managed to battle through games without playing well, and get a positive result.'

Speak to Rangers fans about season 1992/93, and each will have their own special memories. The most popular might just be the Hateley/McCoist partnership, which proved more potent than the F-22 fighter jet, but McPherson is keen to talk up the case for the defence, and said, 'We had the best defensive record in the league, so every part of that team was doing its job. The team spirit was also great and everyone worked together really well and that's what makes a great team, rather than two or three outstanding individuals.'

'I see a lot of players coming through at different clubs these days and the emphasis seems to be more on individuality than team ethos. They are brought up through the academy system and it's all about how the manager wants them to play, but they don't really know the game. Going back to 92/93, each player at Rangers knew how their teammates played. It was more important for us all to know each other's strengths and weaknesses, and that's how you covered each other.

'I knew exactly when Andy Goram was going to come off his line and punch the ball away, so I knew when to get out of the way. It might sound like a small thing, but add them all up and it's good team play. It's a sort of in-built intuition that I think was far more prevalent when I played than it is now. 'I would say that winning the treble and the run we put together in Europe means 92/93 is my most successful ever season in the game, and the fact I'd just come back from the European Championships meant it was a massive season. I'm not so sure we managed to fully enjoy it at the time, given the number of games we played, but we had some great nights out! Mind you, they were few and far between because of the number of games, but when we got one, we enjoyed it!' Was McPherson surprised that Aberdeen were Rangers' main challengers in 1992/93? He answered, 'I know a few Aberdeen supporters and they hate me when I bring that season up in conversation. I suppose most people think Rangers and Celtic will challenge each other every season for the honours, but back then Aberdeen had a really good side and we had to be at our best to beat them. The games against the Dons were really tough – and close – but we had the Indian sign over them. We believed we were the better side and that attitude helped us. I think we got inside their heads and over a long and hard season that definitely worked in our favour. It doesn't matter if it takes a last minute goal to win the game, but you have the belief that you will do it at some stage.'

But McPherson wasn't finished yo-yoing between Glasgow and Edinburgh, and in 1994 he was heading back to Tynecastle. He explained, 'Rangers were looking to bring some fresh players in and Alan McLaren was doing well at Hearts. Rangers put an offer in and I believe the Hearts manager Tommy McLean said that if Rangers wanted Alan they would have to offer a player in return, and we would like Davie McPherson if he's available! We had a chat about it and I decided to go for it. It was a lot smoother and easier to make the decision than it had been the previous time I'd moved from Glasgow to Edinburgh.

'I enjoyed my second spell at Hearts, although probably not as much as the first. I think there was a wee bit of turmoil at the club and Tommy and Eamonn (Bannon) struggled somewhat. Jim Jefferies then came in and Hearts won the Scottish Cup in 1998, which was a tremendous feat, given the number of years it had been since Hearts had won a major trophy. In my first spell at Tynecastle, we had come so close to winning silverware so it was nice to finally get over the line. It was a massive relief for everyone at the club – and to win it against Rangers at Celtic Park!'

He added, 'I had nine years at Ibrox and 10 at Tynecastle. When I look back at my career I'm very proud of what I achieved, and to get into the Rangers Hall of Fame was a real privilege. Being a Rangers supporter, that was a huge honour for me, especially when you look at some of the names that are there. I also like to see Scottish players getting recognised in this way because nowadays it is more about foreign players, but to be brought up a Rangers supporter and be inaugurated into the club's Hall of Fame is something truly special. When you take into consideration the number of players who have represented the club, there is only a very small percentage in that exclusive club, so it's something I will never take lightly.

'I've had a great career overall, although it's almost like two careers. I think a modern footballer would be lucky to do what I did at Rangers, but I did just as much at Hearts.'

McPherson left Tynecastle in 1999, and at the age of 34, decided he needed a new challenge. He was soon on a flight to the other side of the world.

'I needed a fresh challenge. I had played all my career in Scotland and as you're getting a bit older, the thought of playing another winter here filled me with dread. I had a chance to go and play for Carlton SC in Melbourne, Australia, get a bit of sunshine and play in the summer, and I thought I would give it a go. I loved it but financially it wasn't as good out there as it is now; it was a bit unsettled, but the actual standard of football was good.

'There were some very good players in Australia, but I think being older and playing in the heat made it a bit easier for me. The pace was slower and I could read the game quite well. It was quite often around 40 degrees, so there weren't that many people running about, which made it more comfortable for me. A lot of games took place on Friday nights, but it was really humid, and that took its toll on you as well, although I thoroughly enjoyed the experience. Sadly though, the club was struggling. It was a franchise and the owner wasn't putting any money in. I then had a chance to go to a club in Sydney but it wasn't a 100 per cent secure contract so I made the decision to come back to Scotland.'

And that was to Greenock, to take up a role as player/coach at Cappielow. McPherson recalled, 'I'm sure I won't be remembered for my time at Morton but I'm glad I gave it a go. I went there as player/coach, and then player/manager. Let's be honest, when you get the chance to become a manager it's hard to say no but with the benefit of hindsight I shouldn't have taken it, because when you're sacked from your job as a manager, it's difficult to get back into it.

'It was a bit frustrating because the team was doing well but I just didn't get on with the chairman. He was trying to be too influential. When you get someone with my background in football, you bring them in as a manager to manage the team. Have an opinion, don't get me wrong, because you own the club, but don't try and pick the team. He used to come into the dressing room before the game, at half-time and again at the end, but I eventually locked him out and he wasn't best pleased. You can imagine how frustrating it was for me.'

McPherson still follows the fortunes of Rangers very closely, and said, 'In recent years, Rangers did overspend massively, which was completely wrong, and a lot of mistakes were made, including some of the people who were brought in to run the club. I bumped into Paul Murray and he has always come across really well and I was chatting to him about the future of our club, but I'm just looking ahead and thinking, what has happened in the past has happened, and you can't make it disappear, but let's look forward and get on with the job of rebuilding the club.'