

Fraser Aird...

...on THAT free-kick, and much more!



Picture by Willie Vass

I spoke to Fraser for my book, *Just Champion*, which celebrated Rangers winning title number 55. Fraser was back home in Toronto, preparing for the new Canadian football season – and the Rangers fixture he chose to speak about was the game against Dundee United, which took place at Tannadice on December 13, 2020, which we won 2-1.

Fraser Aird could hardly believe his eyes as he watched the ball travel more than thirty metres before bulging the back of the net. He was more than three thousand miles away from the scene of the magical moment, but that only made the feat more surreal.

The 25-year-old winger was at home in Toronto watching two of his former clubs in action, and while he enjoyed his spell at Tannadice, there was only one side he wanted to win.

That's why he sat in wonderment as James Tavernier's incredible free-kick travelled almost a third of the entire length of the Dundee United pitch before nestling in the rigging behind goalkeeper Benjamin Siegrist.

Aird – who is back home in his native Canada playing professional football for FC Edmonton – hardly misses a Rangers game these days, and he was sure glad he tuned in to the match in mid-December. He said: "I thoroughly enjoyed that game, but it was a tough gig for Rangers. Not long after Tav hit that wonder strike, United equalised, and were playing quite well. My first thoughts were that Rangers were now being tested and I wanted to know how they would react to that.

"Connor Goldson popped up with another goal just before half-time and Rangers went on to win 2-1. That was my answer. They found a way to win the game, and when you're chasing a title that's really all that matters.

“Goldson has scored more than a few important goals this season, and his role in the centre of such a mean defence has also been crucial: a huge part of why Rangers managed to win the championship.”

Being in Canada, which means five hours behind the United Kingdom, hasn't deterred the talented wide man from getting up at 'the crack of dawn' to make sure he doesn't miss any Rangers' games – even if it is a 7am kick off where he is in North America.

“I don't think I've missed many games this season. I try to watch every one of them as I was really keen for Rangers to win the league. Not just because I was fortunate to be at Ibrox for five years, but because my mum and dad ensured I grew up a Rangers supporter. They are both from Glasgow, and big Rangers supporters, so any football tops I had were always Rangers, which meant I was never going to support anyone else.

“They used to watch Rangers everywhere; homes, away, in Europe, so my pedigree was solid. When they immigrated to Canada, one of the first things I believe they did was to seek out the Toronto Rangers Supporters Club and become members. They also travelled back to Glasgow many times to watch Rangers – and see family of course!”

Aird watched the match at Tannadice with his brother, and both were delighted at the final whistle as another three points were added to the total. December was a busy month, with six tough matches scheduled – but six important victories registered, and former Rangers playmaker was only too aware of how difficult it was to win any matches at Rangers.

He said: “Sure, you've got the best players, but it can be so difficult to beat teams who put so many men behind the ball in an attempt to frustrate and stifle the forward-thinking team. They are hoping to hit you on the break, and the longer a game goes on – like the match against Motherwell at Ibrox – quite often the more desperate a team can become.

“But when you have a player like Tav in the team who can come up with something as wonderful as the free kick he scored at Tannadice then you always have a chance of getting goals from set pieces. We have also seen Borna Barisic do it many times, so Rangers are incredibly fortunate to have two very talented free-kick specialists in the team.

“When I was at United, I played alongside Benjamin, and he is a great goalkeeper, so that means Tav's free kick truly was something special. For a good keeper to get beat from a free kick 30 yards out has to be something special, and that one was exquisite.

“Dundee United have always been a big club, and now that they are back in the Premier League they are desperate to get back to where they once were, in terms of league positions, but in many respects, this season's games against Rangers were free hits, because not many people were expecting them to beat Rangers – and they didn't!

“There is obviously a bit of needle in these games, so it makes it that wee bit tougher for Rangers because the United lads are extra motivated, but Rangers' class told in the end.”

Aird has been mightily impressed by the way Steven Gerrard has taken to the Rangers job, especially as his first gig was at such a massive club. “Rangers fans demand success, and managers don't often get the time they probably need to build their own team. To build the team Gerrard has takes a lot

of time: hours and hours on the training field, building all these relationships within the team, as well as the team as a whole.

“Perhaps Gerrard has been given the time because of his standing in the game, which is understandable, but whatever the reason it has paid huge dividends for the club and the supporters. The type of consistency Rangers showed throughout the season was phenomenal, and something like that isn’t achieved overnight. Last season there seemed to be a good feeling about the club that something special was in the offing.

“The backroom team was always going to be extra important, especially with Gerrard stepping into his first managerial job. Guys like Gary McAllister, with his knowledge of the Scottish game, and the game in general, was a massive appointment.

“Michael Beale as well, who I believe takes about 75 per cent of training, has had a huge input. The board have backed everything the manager has done and they have shown great vision in doing so. “Rangers have improved in each of Gerrard’s three years at Ibrox, but the consistency he has achieved in his team has been the key factor. Getting to play virtually the same team week in, week out has paid dividends, and I couldn’t be happier.”

Fifteen league wins in a row in the middle of the season, two wins at Pittodrie, and Tannadice, and having the meanest defence in the league were all major contributory factors in Rangers’ league success, and while there were many supporters who refused to accept that the league was won as Rangers’ scorched a massive twenty-three points clear after beating Ross County at Ibrox near the end of January, most were secretly looking out the flags for the title celebrations.

Aird was no different, and said: “There comes a time when you’re watching the team win game after game, and you see Celtic slipping up with back-to-back draw against Livingston, and you allow yourself to believe that it’s over. You’re not going to publicly state that it’s over, but in private you know yourself that it would take a points’ swing of monumental proportions for the power to shift over to the other side of the city. You start to dream.”

And dreaming was something a young Fraser Aird started to do while he was still at primary school. With his love of Rangers now firmly entrenched within his psyche, and starting to show real signs of having a special talent for the game, Aird admitted that he one day dreamed of pulling on the Rangers shirt.

He said: “Before the advent of the Canadian Premier League in 2019, there were two routes that any promising young footballers over here could take in a bid to make the grade. They could go down the route of getting a scholarship in America, or they could try to find a club in Europe.

“I began playing with North Scarborough Soccer Club, and made a bit of a splash there, so with the help of an agent, who knew Tommy Wilson – who was the technical director at the Rangers Academy at Murray Park. He sent Tommy some footage of me playing and I was invited over to Glasgow for a week to have a trial at Murray Park.

“I did well, and I was invited to stay for a further two weeks. I put absolutely everything I had into making the extended trial a success, and at the end of that fortnight I was taken into an office and offered a contract – which I signed on my 16<sup>th</sup> birthday.

“Importantly, the term of the contract was three years, which gave me a great chance to work hard and lay down a marker. It was perfect. Being away from home at such a young age never even crossed my mind. I was a teenager just about to embark on a career with Rangers FC. How good was that? So I didn’t give much thought to any sacrifices I might be making. I was only interested in making the grade at Rangers.”

It was game on for the football-mad youngster.

Fraser worked incredibly hard at Murray Park, and it wasn’t too long before the coaching staff started to notice him. There were a few injuries in the first-team squad, and after chatting with the likes of Tommy Wilson, manager Ally McCoist – who was about to celebrate his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday – drafted the teenage Canadian into the mix for the home game against Montrose at Ibrox.

He was on the bench alongside the likes of Fran Sandaza and Robbie Crawford, and with the game tied at one apiece, and ten minutes of the second-half gone, Aird was told to go out and warm up. There was just over 45,000 inside Ibrox Stadium, but Aird was ready if called upon.

He said: “I was desperate to get on. As I was out on the touch line warming up, Lewis Macleod scored to put us 2-1 ahead, and just moments later the bench signalled for me to return to the halfway line. This was it, I was going on. I was about to make my debut for Glasgow Rangers – the team I had supported as a boy.

“I replaced Barrie McKay, and I sprinted over to the far side, near the Govan Stand, the reception I got from the supporters was incredible, and filled me with confidence. The thirty-five minutes or so that I had on the pitch passed in a blur. Further goals by Lee McCulloch and Robbie Crawford gave us a decent 4-1 win.

“Incredibly enough, the win moved us into second place in the table behind Queen’s Park, but we would be top before long.”

There was only one thing missing from Fraser’s big moment, and that was the absence of his parents at Ibrox. He explained: “They were completely made up for me, and it would’ve been great to have them at Ibrox for my debut, but the truth is it all happened so fast and they just didn’t have time to get across from Canada.

“To make your professional debut for any club is a great achievement, but to do it for Rangers was incredible. I was so happy, and my mum and dad were very proud of me. It’s the dream of millions of kids and I achieved it.”

A few days after Christmas, league leaders Rangers made the short trip across the city to Hampden to face third-placed Queen’s Park. In the games between Aird making his debut, and the Hampden encounter, the Canadian teenager had been on the fringes of the team, coming off the bench on more than a few occasions to play his part in the team moving to the top of the table.

Aird was on the bench again at the national stadium and looked on as Rangers huffed and puffed, especially in front of goal. Twenty minutes into the second half, gaffer McCoist decided enough was enough and sent Aird on in place of Ian Black. He was involved immediately, with Lee Wallace

eventually missing out on a good chance when Queen's keeper Neil Parry saved smartly at the Rangers captain's feet.

You got a sense that the goal was coming, but it was a long wait for the 30,000 Rangers supporters, and with time running out Aird picked up the ball on the edge of the 18-yard box and curled a beautiful shot past Parry and into the net. It was a goal of real quality and was worth the wait. We were already a minute into stoppage time and there was no way back for the amateurs. Fraser Aird had his first Rangers goal, and it was a winner at Hampden!

He recalled: "I might be wrong, but I'm sure I read somewhere that the away support that day was the biggest ever for a league match in Scotland? It was unbelievable, just like being at home, so it was a great boost for us, and to score my first goal for Rangers in the national stadium was truly a dream come true. The fact that it was in injury time, and the winner, was extra special." Fraser will always be thankful to Ally McCoist for giving him his Rangers debut, and then sticking by him as the team went on to win the Third Division and League One titles.

He said: "Ally McCoist was fantastic with me. He was a proper club legend, so to work under someone who had enjoyed such a great career as a striker was excellent for me. He had been an idol of mine, but he was down to earth and always passing on lots of tips to the strikers. He had a lot of time for the kids, and would never pass you in the corridor. He was a fantastic man-manager." "I loved my time at Rangers; it was such a wonderful way to begin your football career. The type of days that you remember for the rest of your life. Sure, we had a lot of disappointments too, like losing the cup final to Raith Rovers at Easter Road, which is still one of my career low points, but the good times definitely outweighed the bad.

"I completely get that it wasn't the greatest of periods for Rangers as a whole, with all the never-ending takeover stuff going on in the background, but we just had to try and focus on the football and go out there and win games. It was what it was and we just had to deal with that. "My absolute dream would have been to stay at Ibrox for my football career, but we know football – and life – doesn't always work like that. Who knows, though, if I keep doing well there might be a wee chance that I could return some day. Now that would be something.

"After all the gloomy years, the club is now on the up again, and it's a great time to be a Rangers player – and a supporter."

But like all good things, Aird's time at Ibrox came to the beginning of the end in January 2016 when he went out on loan to Vancouver Whitecaps. On returning from Canada, he joined Falkirk for the second half of the season.

"I wanted to play football, it was as simple as that. Football is a really short career and I didn't, as much as I loved Rangers, want to sit on the bench every Saturday. I wanted to play, and that was my only motivation to leave the club.

"Sure, it was a wrench. It was my team, my first professional club, and playing in front of 40-odd thousand every week was a buzz, but it was definitely the right time to leave. I'd had a lot of success at a young age, and working at Murray Park every day was fantastic, but football is football and needs must.

“It can be quite dispiriting for a footballer to sit on the bench every week. There’s also that whole thing about feeling part of a team, and you can only really be part of something if you’re contributing regularly. Rangers are the biggest club in Scotland, so it was a step back to go forward again.”

Aird also played for Dunfermline Athletic, Dundee United and Cove Rangers in Scotland, before heading back across the Atlantic to sign for Valour in the Canadian Premier League. He has since joined FC Edmonton – who also play in royal blue shirts – and now plays his home games at the 5,100-capacity Clarke Stadium, in Edmonton, Alberta, which is just a lengthy goal kick from Alaska. “Yes, it gets pretty cold here,” he laughed. “It was -27 when I stepped off the plane to sign for the club! When it gets to -30 no one really bats an eyelid. But I’m excited about being here and also for the future of Canadian football. The new Premier League has just started and it will offer a new pathway for young kids coming through.

“Kids who show real promise can showcase their talents in the new league and those who run clubs in the MLS will be looking on, so now there is a clear route to signing for an American or a European team. That wasn’t there when I started but I’m glad to be playing my part in it now.

“My ambition had always been to play in Scotland, at Rangers in particular, and I achieved that. That doesn’t mean to say that I’m not ambitious anymore, because I am, but we will just take it one step at a time.

Aird played for Canada Under-15s in 2010, but when he moved to Scotland he was given an opportunity to represent Scotland at Under-17 and -19 level. He played many games and scored goals at this level for the Scots, but when it came to making a decision about which senior national team he would represent, he took a bit of time to decide. In the end he plumped for his native Canada.

He said: “I was close to being named in the full Scotland squad a few times, but in the end I decided to represent Canada. I made my debut by coming on as a substitute against Ghana. It was a fantastic honour and I felt really proud being part of it all. I definitely made the right decision.

“I know I’m half Scottish, but I was born in Canada, and I’ve played eight times for my country now and I feel really lucky to have achieved that. I scored my first goal for Canada against, ironically, Scotland, in a friendly at Easter Road. It was a 1-1 draw and that was another landmark moment in my career.

“I’ve been very fortunate to have achieved what I have in my career. I’ve enjoyed just about every single moment of it, and getting the opportunity to play for Rangers will live with me forever. And watching them lift their 55<sup>th</sup> title was very sweet for me, both as an ex-player and as a fan. Let’s hope number 56 isn’t too far away either!”