

Pieter Huistra

On the 1992/93 season



The Dutchman's move to Rangers might have come about through coincidence, but the passion and love he would come to feel for the club was heartfelt and genuine, and the former Netherlands international still retains that love for Rangers – many years after leaving his adopted home on the south side of Glasgow.

Speaking of how the transfer came about, he said, 'I got a move from FC Twente to Rangers through more or less a coincidence. My agent met Graeme Souness at the draw for the European Cup and within a few moments they had struck up a conversation. My agent asked Graeme if he was looking for any type of player in particular and he said he was searching for a winger. My agent said he had a Dutch international winger and Graeme asked if I could come to the pre-season training camp – and that's how it started.

'I went to the training camp at Il Ciocco in Italy and I seemed to do quite well. Graeme then said to me, "I like you but I have to see you playing in a game. Would you be willing to come back to Glasgow with us?" Naturally I was and while in Glasgow I played a match against Queens Park at Lesser Hampden and after that game he spoke to me and said, "Okay, we can offer you a contract." And that was how I ended up at Ibrox.'

Huistra had other options at the time, with one being to remain in Holland with a top club, but he admits he quite fancied the idea of taking a little bit of a gamble. He added, 'At that time I was thinking the moment was right to leave FC Twente, but I was supposed to go to PSV Eindhoven. There was no Bosman then, and Twente didn't want me to go because I was an international player,

and so they made it difficult for me to leave. PSV offered a good amount of money, much more than Rangers did. In fact, PSV offered around two million guilders, which was about £800,000, while Rangers offered £300,000. Due to the contract situation in Holland back then, it was much easier for me to go abroad, so Rangers got me quite cheaply I think at that moment.

‘But since the day and hour I joined Rangers, I never regretted the decision to come to Glasgow one bit. Many Dutch players have signed for Rangers in the last couple of decades, but I am still very proud that I was the first Dutchman to sign for the club. It was very easy for me to settle in because I had good help at the club and communication wasn't a problem as I spoke English. Mind you, Scottish was quite a bit different! It really did take me quite a while before I was able to understand some of our players, but once I could understand Ian Durrant and Ian Ferguson I was fine. Seriously, though, I felt at home right from the beginning and knew I had made a good choice.’

The tail end of Huistra's second season – 1991/92 – was about as low as it got for the talented left-sided player. He missed out on both the Scottish Cup final and the Dutch squad for the European Championships and admits he felt a real sense of frustration.

He explained, ‘It wasn't a good time for me as I missed out with both Rangers and Holland. I realise it was difficult for the Rangers manager back then because the rules only permitted 13 players to be stripped for action. Two substitutes wasn't a lot so it was a tough call for the manager, and having been a coach myself I know that it isn't easy. Normally, these days, you have a good idea of your one to eleven, and then there are one or two subs that you know must be in there, but I struggle with naming the rest of the substitutes as it's really difficult for players to miss out altogether.

‘For the Scottish Cup final it was difficult, because we had a big squad and we had good players so that's how it was and it is always going to be a big disappointment if you're not in the squad for a cup final. I certainly wasn't happy about it, but that was not a reflection on the manager or the club, just me, but I renewed my contract, so I was obviously happy with Rangers.’

Huistra added, ‘As far as the Dutch team was concerned I was in the initial squad of 25 for the European Championships, but unfortunately I was one of the three who dropped out when the final 22 was announced. To be honest, one of the main reasons I missed out on the Dutch squad was because I had a problem with my groin. I had an operation in the February, so I didn't play in March or April and I made my comeback right at the end of the season. I wasn't at my best as I still had to build up my match fitness, which is also the reason the manager left me out.’

As Rangers chased glory on the European front, Huistra revealed how the club's foreign legion would all wait patiently to see who was in and who was out. He said, ‘The three-foreigner rule applied only to Europe so every time a match came around we would all wait to see who was in the team. We all knew the rule beforehand but we would all be trying everything we could to be one of the three, so it was like a little contest within the squad. I still managed to play my fair share of European games so it was okay for me.

‘I always liked to think of myself as a wide-playing midfielder, but I liked to get up the park as much as possible and get good crosses into the box and, let's be honest, when you had players like Mark Hateley and Ally McCoist in the box you always had a chance of scoring. Hateley had the ability to turn a bad cross into a good looking one, and whatever the big man missed, McCoist was there to

clean up. McCoist was a very good goalscorer but I think he got more chances because Mark was there to distract the opponents. He was very good at disrupting the organisation of the opposition.' Huistra has no doubts that the 1992/93 season was the most successful of his playing days; a career which has included stints in Holland, Belgium, Japan and, of course, Scotland. He said, 'Yes, it was my most successful by far – definitely the best ever. Maybe we didn't have the best ever Rangers players that season but we had the best team. That team was unbelievable and many times I tell people that we simply refused to lose football matches. Our side wasn't even content with a draw, and losing wasn't an option.

'We went on a fantastic 44-game unbeaten run that season, and on many occasions we were behind in these matches, but you could physically see the players getting a little bit angry and then we would switch gear; perhaps move two gears up, and we wouldn't stop when it was 1-1, or even 2-1. When we got a third goal then everybody would say okay, and switch back a gear and suddenly think about the next game. It was quite unique.

'The games were coming thick and fast so that is why we had to peak in such a short space of time; turn the game back in our favour and then relax a little, because we had so many matches to play. After you switch back down the gears, often what happens is you get a bit more space. You relax more and tend to keep the ball and pass it around a bit better and longer.

'I certainly think the best way to peak as often as possible is to play as many games as you can. Okay, sometimes you can have too many games – possibly like that season – but you are calling on your adrenaline, and also the games against the bigger teams tend to bring out the best in you. If you're playing against the smaller Scottish teams; games that you're expected to win comfortably, then we are only human and sometimes you relax just a little too much.

'Aberdeen were definitely the second best team in Scotland that season. We beat them in both cup finals and they finished just behind us in the race for the championship, so they were our main contenders. They had a very good team at that time; they were a good unit. They stuck together very well and gave us a few problems. They were a tough team to play against but we ultimately did very well against them, especially when it mattered most.'

Huistra added, 'The thing that made us such a difficult team to beat that season was our incredible team spirit, there is no doubt about that. I can't underestimate just how important that is in football. We played an incredible amount of games, so therefore team spirit became that bit more important as we had to rely very heavily on each other. If you take the number of games for Rangers and add in matches for the various international teams, then we were more or less playing weekends and midweek for the entire season. Playing all the time takes its toll on your body, while travelling and not getting to see your family so much can also be emotionally tough. Guys like David Robertson played just about every game that season, so he must have been very tired at the end. If my memory serves me right, he pulled his hamstring just through sheer fatigue. But it would be worse if it was a long season and you had nothing to show for it at the end.

'One of the most important things was that you walked onto that pitch knowing you had a great chance of winning, and also knowing that the team would support you whatever you did. That makes you feel almost invincible, and it was something that I never had to such a high degree in any other season. And with your body language, the other team knows that you think you are invincible,

so it maybe has twice the impact. You could see it when you were in the tunnel waiting to go out. Perhaps it was a little bit of arrogance, but you could certainly feel it.'

Huistra will never forget the incredible European campaign as long as he lives. It seemed like Rangers made a new memory with each passing tie, but it wasn't all a bed of roses. He said, 'To be unbeaten in all 10 matches was very pleasing, but there was a sense of both pride and frustration at the way it all ended. First and foremost we were very proud of what we had achieved. In the run-up we played Lyngby and Leeds – and won both home and away legs – which was very pleasing.

'Up to the last group game it was all about goal difference, as we had drawn both games against Marseille, and then they had this crazy score against CSKA Moscow, and against a very good Moscow team, I should add. To this day people still talk suspiciously about that result.

'And of course we were a little bit disappointed that we drew the last game against Moscow. They had good players but we were very keen to finish up with a win, and we tried so hard and had so much pressure in the game at Ibrox but they just didn't give in.

'It was a pity we didn't qualify to meet Milan in the final but we could still take a lot of pride in what we achieved in Europe that season. We came very close to being in the final. In fact, after the final match was over I was speaking to a few of the AC Milan guys when we met up with the Dutch national squad and they were saying they were happy not to be playing us. The likes of Marco van Basten and Frank Rijkaard knew how we played and said they didn't like our style. They didn't like our fight and determination, but they also couldn't cope too well with our direct approach in games.' Huistra insisted he will never have anything but good memories of his time at Ibrox, and said, 'For me, my time at Rangers was the best part of my career. It really was a great place to play football and whenever I look back at it I do so with real fondness.

'When it was time for me to move on from FC Twente, I didn't see the move to Rangers as too much of a gamble, as they already had a very good name on the continent. Scottish football in the late 1980s was doing okay in Europe. We had the likes of Aberdeen and Dundee United, and obviously Rangers. So, for me it was not a big gamble as Rangers were a big club, and I knew of them.

'I suppose when you move anywhere you always have to wait and see how it will turn out, and that was as much up to me as I was going to a new place and I had to make the best of it. You have to adapt and you have to work on making yourself a better footballer. I definitely improved as a player because of my time at Rangers.

'I had a good relationship with Graeme Souness, the man who took me to Rangers, and I always felt appreciated by him, and when Walter Smith took over it was more or less much of the same. I think Walter and Archie Knox were definitely the right management team at the right club. They knew all the players very well, especially Walter, as he had been the assistant to Graeme Souness, so there were no real problems when he took over as manager. Archie then came in and he gave the players energy with his banter and enthusiasm, so that was a big positive.'

Huistra added, 'I also got involved in management. I managed in Holland, Indonesia, Japan and then Uzbekistan. Japan is a lovely country and I thoroughly enjoyed it, but it was time for a new chapter, and I joined Shota Arveladze at Pakhtakor Tashkent FK in Uzbekistan, which was another fantastic experience.'

He added, 'One of the main legacies I will carry with me from my time at Rangers is the fact that we were only the fifth Rangers team in the club's history to win the treble. To be honest, that was very special. It was definitely one to cherish as it hasn't happened so much, therefore it means an awful lot to me.'