

PART ONE: Life of football

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Learning a lesson

We left our top floor flat at 123 John Knox Street in Glasgow for the last time. It was late in the evening but a half-moon illuminated the lorry transporting the family belongings.

It was farewell to the cold dark shared outside toilet and the gloomy view of the Glasgow Necropolis opposite, the resting place of over 3,000 souls. The Victorian flat was almost a century old and 200 yards from the oldest house in Glasgow, 'The Provand's Lordship', dating back to 1471.

The Currie family were heading to the newly built spacious housing estate of Cranhill on the city's eastern outskirts. A three bedroom apartment on the top floor of 75 Crowlin Crescent, with wonderful views over the Edinburgh Road towards Carntyne and Shettleston awaited.

I was six years old and fell asleep in the lorry.

It was a new start for the family and there were grassy fields for a youngster to run and play in. I could kick a ball around with new found friends instead of playing hide and seek in the Necropolis. There was a bedroom for my Mum and Dad, one for oldest brother Dick, and the last one I shared with my middle brother John. Most importantly, we had an inside toilet... luxury.

Soon I was enrolled at Lamlash School, where most playtimes I got into fights. My oldest brother was a famous boxer so other kids thought if they could take me down they would be famous for a short while. Later I moved to Milncroft Primary School, also on the housing estate. There

were no more scraps, playtime was spent playing football with a tennis ball, two jackets serving as goalposts.

I joined the Life Boys, the junior section of the Boys Brigade, which was similar to the Boy Scouts. I think I joined when I was around eight years old or so. To be truthful I only joined because they had a football team. Despite my age I went straight into the team with kids two years older and I remember we won the Glasgow Life Boys final on one of Lethamhill's ash pitches near Barlinnie Prison. We took no prisoners, and won by 14 goals to 3; I scored five goals and Kenny Aird scored six.

Barlinnie still has inmates; Lethamhill's football pitches are now a motorway.

Kenny Aird would go on to play successfully with St Johnstone and Hearts in later years. He would be acclaimed as the best footballer in Cranhill, although a boy called Jimmy Smith, who went to St Gregory's school could dispute that title. Jimmy, or 'Jinky' as he was called later, became one of the best ever players to grace the colours of Newcastle United.

I was in good company.

A couple of young lads went to the same Milncroft Primary School as me, although a few years after I left to go to Cranhill Senior Secondary. They would become much more famous than Kenny or Jimmy, not with a ball, but with a band called AC/DC. They were called Malcolm and Angus.

I soon represented my school teams and my city at youth levels, also playing for leading amateur sides Glasgow United, Possil YM and Queen's Park Victoria XI as I grew older.

Once I got a trial for the famous youth side Drumchapel Amateurs under-15 side. I thought I played well, but they thought I was too small and lightly built; they didn't know I had only just turned 13 at the time.

I went on to play for Cumbernauld United Juniors, alongside a youngster called Kenny Dalglish, and also played for Cumnock Juniors in Ayrshire.

Ayrshire rivals, Kello Rovers wanted to sign me, but I had already signed an agreement with Cumnock, so they were forced to sign another lad called Quintin Young. Ironically, that year, when the Scotland Junior side was selected, I was beaten by one vote for the outside left position, by Quintin Young.

Quintin went on to join Ayr United under manager Ally McLeod, then to Coventry City, before joining Glasgow Rangers for three seasons and playing over 80 games for the club.

While at Cumnock Juniors I was invited for a trial at Motherwell. Well actually two trials. They were friendly games, both on home turf at Fir Park, the first would be on the Saturday against Glasgow Rangers, the second on the Monday night against Glasgow Celtic.

Playing against both Old Firm teams within three days, something special.

Rangers had a strong team that Saturday afternoon which included Jim Baxter, I was on the left wing, the full-back I was facing was Alex Miller. I had played against him a few years earlier when he was with Clydebank Strollers and knew him and his older brother, Jimmy, quite well; their dad worked alongside mine at John Brown's shipyard.

Alex would spend 15 seasons at Rangers, and that day we had a fine old tussle, but Rangers beat us 3-2. After the final whistle Alex whispered to me "don't do or sign anything, the boss wants to talk to you." The 'boss' was Rangers manager David White.

Knowing a few of the Rangers boys, including Baxter, McKinnon and Miller, I got a lift back to Glasgow after the game on the Rangers team bus and ended up playing cards at the back of the bus.

The Monday night came, it was a farewell game for Charlie Gallacher of Celtic as well as a friendly game under the Fir Park lights with Celtic fielding a strong side. Again, we lost by the same 3-2 scoreline, but I thought I fared well in both games.

So much so, someone must have leaked something to the press, because a few days later there was a back page story in the *Scottish Daily Express* with a headline and picture: "Rangers step in for Currie".

Before I knew it I had Motherwell manager Bobby Howitt chasing me up and asking what was going on? I still had a year of my apprenticeship as a compositor to run and thought I might get a better chance at Motherwell, so I elected to join the Lanarkshire club.

At about the same time, on the other side of the world, a young Chinese lad named Kwok Ka-ming was helping his dad in their family restaurant cleaning dishes and running errands while being enrolled on the junior training course of the Hong Kong Football Association. He joined Hong Kong Rangers and eventually captained the team. He was the first Chinese player I ever met and became a good friend.

I soon learnt that part-time football left a lot to be desired in the upper echelons of the Scottish game, particularly in terms of fitness. I thought I was fit, but working five days a week with just two nights training at Fir Park I was far from it, as I would soon find out. During our training I hardly saw a ball, instead it was up terracing steps or lapping the field with the likes of Peter McCloy and Dixie Deans. The full-timers got their practice with a ball during the day.

I recall playing against Rangers in a reserve match – they used to attract a big crowd in the main stand at Ibrox for such matches. I was running to chase a ball and was about a yard behind Ranger's Alex McDonald, the same man who would become Hearts manager years later, but also a great footballer during his years with St Johnstone, Rangers and Hearts.

Knowing how fast I was, I thought I would make up the yard on Alex easily and win the ball. Wrong – I couldn't catch him. Alex was a full-timer, that's when I realised I had a long way to go to reach the fitness standards required for professional football.

That fitness would come, but I had to go to the other side of the world to achieve it.

From Douglas Park to the World of Suzie Wong

It was September 1970 and I was standing on a concrete airstrip 6,000 miles from home. The mid-afternoon sun bore down relentlessly; there was hardly a breath of wind, just the whine from jet engines, and from my companion.

“It’s bloody hot and noisy standing here, let’s move a bit further away.” he said.

We walked 50 metres and stopped.

“It’s not just the engines, it’s just too bloody hot for me over here, I’ll never be able to play football in this bloody heat.”

My companion, Walter Gerrard, was a giant bull of a man with a powerful forehead, a square face and a rolling gait. All six feet one and 206 pounds of him. At 27 years of age he was a seasoned journeyman, having enjoyed spells at Barnsley and Berwick Rangers. He clearly felt he would have been better off back at Oakwell or Shielfield Park.

I couldn’t blame him. We had landed at Don Muang Airport in Bangkok and the temperature was 94 degrees Fahrenheit (over 34 degrees Celsius).

“It might be the land of smiles”, he said, “but I’m no smilin’. I’m getting back on the plane: I need a drink.” With that, he headed back to the shimmering sanctuary that was our BOAC jet.

As I followed him, I wondered what life in the East had in store for a boy brought up in a Glasgow tenement.

It turned out the football was only part of an incredible journey.

I had just turned 21 and here I was, on the way to a new life in Hong Kong, along with Walter and a youngster called Jackie Trainer, a lad with

stylish dark brown hair above a boyish face. We were to be the first three British footballers to play professionally in Asia.

My contract, signed at the Ivanhoe Hotel in Buchanan Street, Glasgow on August 17, was neatly folded away in my jacket pocket for safekeeping. It promised one hundred pounds a month, with a bonus of five pounds for winning a game and two pounds ten shillings for a draw. With the Hong Kong dollar exchange rate at around fourteen to the pound, that seemed pretty good to me.

A signing-on fee of fifty pounds – worth a lot more than it sounds today – was also appreciated, with a further fifty pounds if the club, Hong Kong Rangers, finished in the top three of the First Division.

You might be wondering why, at the tender age of 21, I had decided to get on a plane that would take me to a place on the other side of the world, about which I knew virtually nothing. My only previous contact being to buy a transistor radio for nineteen shillings and nine pence through a PO Box in North Point, Hong Kong.

Unless of course you count watching movies with my Mum when William Holden was falling in love with Jennifer Jones in the old classic *Love is a Many-Splendored Thing* and drooling over Nancy Kwan in *The World of Suzie Wong* – both filmed mainly in Hong Kong.

At the time I certainly didn't think that just a few years later I'd actually meet Nancy Kwan in person! (I was introduced to her by the man who dated her for quite a while, the jockey Peter Gumbleton.)

But before going off on a tangent like Billy Connolly I should mention that my Dad convinced me early on to learn a trade, warning me of the perils of football: a bad tackle could lead to a bad injury and, ultimately, the end of a dream.

My father worked at John Brown's shipyards and knew how tough life could be. He was playing the each-way card with me, and I appreciated that, so learning a trade it was.

I spent five years as an apprentice compositor in the printing trade – in a football sense perhaps five wasted years, five missed years of training full-time, but I had youth on my side. Despite my slight build and lack

of height – just under 5 feet 9 inches – I was quick as lightning and knew how to put the ball in the net.

I always believed I had the ability to make it in the professional game and that my time would come. After all, the Swinging Sixties was the decade of dreams: the music of the Beatles, Rolling Stones, Manfred Mann, and the jokes of Tony Blackburn, on Radio Caroline (before he joined Radio One in 1967), so things couldn't be that bad. Some of Mr Blackburn's jokes were even funny.

I had played football for the Victoria XI, part of the famous Queen's Park Football Club. Steeped in history, it was the only amateur club in Britain playing in a professional league. Posh was not the word: we had to wear a blazer with the club crest to all our games, along with the official tie. We looked more like young bankers than lads going to play football on a Saturday afternoon. It was their centenary year while I was there, so it was a proud time for the Club.

Harold Davis, the ex-Glasgow Rangers stalwart, was the coach. Harold was a tough customer, he had enlisted and fought in the Korean War, got shot in the trenches and had to undergo 18 operations after taking bullets in the stomach and foot. He was nicknamed the 'Iron Man' in his playing days and I learnt a lot about fighting spirit playing under him.

I came from a sporting family. My Dad had been a very good junior footballer. My eldest brother Dick was a bit of a legend whilst I was still in short trousers being a former flyweight Commonwealth Gold Medallist and two-time British ABA Champion boxer. He then became chief boxing reporter for the *Daily Record*, the top-selling newspaper in Scotland at the time.

My middle brother John played at Ibrox for Glasgow Rangers for a time but because he was a part timer never got the jump up to the first team. Just newly married, he had another job, also as a compositor, and two wages went a long way in those days.

I decided to finish my five year apprenticeship before taking my chance for full-time football with a professional club. In my last year in Scotland I was part time with Motherwell.

So, how did I finally get my big break into full-time professional football?

Well, you could say it stemmed from the best World Cup tournament ever: Mexico 1970.

With the heat, humidity and altitude, the pace of the games there might have been slightly slower than usual, but they produced some of the finest individual displays ever seen on a football field. This was especially evident when the masters, Brazil, were playing. They made the game beautiful; movements almost poetic as players glided past opponents with ease and assurance – best illustrated by the greatest footballer of the time, Pelé.

You could hardly say that Carlos Alberto, Clodoaldo, Jairzinho or Tostão were merely part of the sideshow. They were junior royals; but Pelé was the king.

Now in early August of that same year, while the world of football was still swooning over Brazil and their destruction of Italy in the Aztec Stadium in Mexico City, I was heading to Douglas Park, home of Hamilton Academicals for a trial against a scratch side that had been put together by former footballer and writer Doug Baillie.

Doug, who later joined *The Sunday Post* (the Scottish one) as their chief football reporter, had good playing spells with Airdrie, Rangers and Falkirk. A giant of a man, his reports on football always put his readers in a good mood reading his amusing quips and anecdotes of the game. They were few better than Doug.

The offer of this trial had come about because of the disastrous season Hong Kong Rangers had just endured. Professional football was still in its infancy in East Asia, there was no influx of players from Europe and South America as there are today. Hong Kong Rangers' founder and manager Ian Petrie therefore came up with an ambitious project.

After consulting with team officials Dr Chiu But-york, Veronica Chiu (also known as Veronica Chan Yiu-kam, later one of the key figures in the development of women's football in Hong Kong), Willie Jorge and team

captain, Kwok Ka-ming, Petrie embarked on a trip to Scotland to bring back quality players to strengthen the team.

Up until then, the main Scottish exports to the colony had been bankers, accountants, policemen and whisky, not necessarily in that order.

An advertisement was placed in a leading Glasgow newspaper stating that Hong Kong Rangers were looking for players to join the club professionally; those wishing to be considered should attend an interview at the Central Hotel in Glasgow at a specified date and time.

A pal of mine told me about the interview and I more or less turned up just to keep him company, although I admit I was a little curious and a game of football was a game of football. A chance to play at Douglas Park on a Sunday morning was great, no matter what the occasion. Plus, there was always the possibility some other scouts might be at the game and I still hoped to get a chance at another club in Scotland on a full-time basis.

Dozens of applicants were interviewed and 20 were selected for a trial. I was one, along with Jackie Trainer and Walter Gerrard.

My trial only lasted ten minutes or so. I had just scored a goal with my head, hardly a common occurrence for me; unlike Walter Gerrard who was built for the aerial side of the game. After gliding the header into the corner of the net I was substituted. Having shown off my trademark darting runs I assumed it was to give other trialists an opportunity to demonstrate their skills.

I knew I had ability and could score goals, and that's what wins games. I was not strongly built, but I had strength in my legs and ran, and looked, like a whippet.

However, that was not what most managers looked for, even today they prefer tall, physically strong lads; except of course if you have the pedigree of a Messi or a Maradona.

I recall playing in a trial for Dumbarton on my 20th birthday – although it was an official Scottish second division game at their old home ground of Boghead Park against Berwick Rangers. The legendary Jock Wallace,

whose name those with knowledge of the game will recognize, was Berwick's player manager at the time – he was a goalkeeper. But as the memory dims, I can't recall if he played that day.

We won by three goals to one and I scored two. I did get the ball in the net for my hat-trick, but it was disallowed for offside – not me, but someone standing near the touchline on the left side of the park not interfering with play. Of course that old offside rule has been scrapped now, and rightly so, but it cost me the birthday present of taking the ball home – the accepted prize for scoring three goals in a game, which is still carried forward to the present day.

Anyway, after the game my Dumbarton team mates for the day congratulated me and shook my hand; justifiably, I thought, as I had helped them get their win bonus, plus two more points to help them move up the league table.

The Dumbarton manager, Jackie Stewart, also shook my hand before I left and handed me my £5 playing fee in a brown envelope. He said "well done", but that was all. I felt like a losing ticket on a bookie's floor; obviously no offer was forthcoming despite the headline the next day: "Two-goal Currie seals win against the young 'Gers."

When my eldest brother, Dick, who knew Jackie Stewart quite well, asked him how I had performed his answer was: "Good player, fast and knows how to score, just too small and lightly built."

Does size really count that much if you are fast and can score goals? I was no giant, but hardly a midget. I'll prove these managers wrong I thought. But back to Douglas Park and the Hong Kong Rangers trial.

Petrie indicated that he would like to talk to me after I had showered and changed so I was not to leave the stadium. Half an hour after the game he ushered me to a quiet corner to have a word.

"We think you could be an asset to the club and would like to sign you and take you to Hong Kong" he said.

I asked if he could give me time to think about it. Then he hit me with the knockout punch.

“Santos and Pelé are coming to Hong Kong in December. We think you will be good enough to get into the Hong Kong League XI side to play against them.”

“Pelé!” I repeated, mesmerized. My knees went weak, but my brain stayed focused: “Where do I sign?” Everything else went out the window.

An unbelievable opportunity had surfaced: from an interview that I had almost not attended to possibly playing against the greatest footballer of all time, only months after I had watched him on our 18-inch TV at home in Glasgow lift the Jules Rimet Trophy.

The world was getting smaller and I was getting taller.

Walter Gerrard and Jackie Trainer also signed on the dotted line and soon we were heading for the mysterious Far East and the World of Suzie Wong! The flight took 20 hours with stops in Beirut and Bangkok.

As we were just seconds from landing at the notorious Kai Tak, I glanced out the window and almost fell out of my seat as the plane banked sharply to the right. Hong Kong’s International Airport was backed by hills and had a landing strip jutting out into the sea from the Kowloon Peninsula. Fortunately during the flight Kwok Ka-ming, the Rangers team captain, had warned us that it could be a scary landing. We soon understood why.

Approaching ‘Checkerboard Hill’ we could clearly see an orange and white marker painted onto the hillside as a landing guide. On seeing it the captain had to manoeuvre into a low altitude 47-degree turn at almost 200 miles an hour! The aircraft then shot over tall apartment buildings and busy streets, before wheels eventually touched down on the concrete runway, much to the audible relief of all on board.

People who regularly flew into Hong Kong in the old days said on many occasions they saw women leaning over balconies hanging out washing as the aircraft appeared to race between buildings before landing. I never did: my eyes were always tightly closed after the 47-degree turn.

Just before landing Petrie briefed us on what to expect and the enormity of the decision I had made in coming to this fabled British colony finally dawned on me.

“Guys, when we arrive in Hong Kong there will be a press conference at the airport. There could be a lot of journalists so be prepared. I will handle the introductions, but you must be ready for any type of question.”

To be honest, we had little idea of what to expect in Hong Kong, or even what the standard of football was like. No pushing buttons on a keyboard, connecting to the internet, and getting quick answers to questions in those days. It felt like going on holiday to a strange exotic land: a tingle of excitement and a rush of adrenaline.

What we were not aware of at the time was that Hong Kong Rangers had been relegated at the end the previous season, along with the amateurs of the Hong Kong Football Club. Fortunately though, we would not be starting our professional careers in the second division. Petrie had carefully studied the HKFA laws and found that the first division could be extended to fourteen teams from the previous twelve.

Unbeknownst to us, a bitter legal battle had been going on for months between those who were in favour of an extension and those against.

Much of this was political bickering, but initially those against the extension seemed to be winning. Petrie apparently had many enemies in the local Football Association. To settle the many disputes he had engaged Mr Jackson-Lipkin from the lawyers Johnson, Stokes & Master, and eventually the case went to Hong Kong's Supreme Court. At the end of the day the Court ruled in favour of Petrie, and Rangers were given a lifeline.

This was the first time in the history of the Hong Kong Football Association that a case had gone to the Supreme Court. Ian Petrie was a determined man, and quite honestly he was the one who really helped get professional football in Hong Kong started.

A fellow Scot, Petrie had been looking through the advertisements column of a Scottish evening newspaper one bleak winter's day in February 1958 and had come across a job offer with a ship repair company in Hong

Kong. Had he not decided to put pen to paper and fill out an application, followed by interviews in Greenock and London which landed him the job, the story I am writing might never have happened.

Ian Petrie was a controversial character in many ways, but he had a great love of the game, and it was not long after arriving in the colony that he formed a youth team, aptly named Hong Kong Rangers due to his Govan background in Glasgow.

Petrie, by all accounts, was a reasonable centre-forward himself. After a trial at the Hong Kong Football Club, under the watchful eye of Jimmy Mair, who went on to become General Manager of the Club, Petrie signed on; but his footballing career never really took off. Instead he turned his hand to refereeing, and by his own admission was a better whistler than striker.

He enjoyed great success with his Rangers youth side, while still finding time for refereeing duties. Eventually he was promoted to Class One Referee status and went on to join the FIFA list of international referees. His Rangers team eventually joined the professional ranks.

In 1961 Tom Finney received an invitation from the English FA to come out of retirement and manage, captain, and play for, an FA touring side to the Far East. In that side was a youngster by the name of Bobby Moore. Finney's penultimate game in the Far East was against Hong Kong and his boys ran out 4-2 winners. The referee that day was none other than, you guessed it, Ian Petrie.

Years later I would see a black and white picture of him and the great 'Preston Plumber' Sir Tom Finney, walking side-by-side out onto the field at the Hong Kong Government Stadium. Petrie was proud of that photograph and it rarely left his office in Causeway Bay.

I have little doubt that when his application for the Taikoo Dockyard job was accepted he could not have imagined that one day he would be walking out onto a football pitch with Finney and Moore.

But back, or rather forward, to September 1970.

After completing immigration formalities we emerged into the greeting area at Kai Tak airport. I can still recall saying to Walter Gerrard at the

time, "There must have been someone famous on the plane, perhaps it was Steve McQueen." And we both laughed.

The reason for the comment was that in front of us was a melee of people who, on closer inspection, appeared to be mainly newspaper reporters, many with cameras strung around their necks. For good measure, there were TV crews too.

"They're here for you," Petrie said as the crowd surged forward.

Once a semblance of order had been restored we were asked to pose for photographs, then taken into a large room for a supposedly brief press conference. I am not exaggerating, Pelé couldn't have pulled a bigger crowd.

Petrie introduced us to the reporters in both Cantonese and English, giving a brief background on each player, with some additional help in Cantonese from club captain, Kwok Ka-ming.

He described Walter Gerrard as a strong header of the ball who would score goals and worry a lot of local centre-halves and would more than pay his way at the club. At the time Walter looked more like a heavyweight boxer than a footballer: he had a few stitches on his nose. When questioned by one member of the press Petrie said it was a clash of heads in a friendly match before they left.

In reality, it happened on the big man's farewell night when someone took exception to us enjoying a song in the pub, a thug from a local gang who 'glassed' Walter and turned a peaceful night into a fight. Without going into detail, the person responsible got his due comeuppance.

Boyish 18-year-old Jackie Trainer was described as a great prospect, plucked from under the noses of Queen's Park who had been keen to sign him. Jackie was carrying a Subbuteo set, the tabletop football game, and that certainly added to his boyishness. But the game was not meant to be a toy for him, rather a coaching aid for Petrie who planned to use it for tactical purposes on his boardroom table.

Petrie finally introduced me as playing in the style of Manchester United winger, George Best (I can assure you that description never came from me!)

Then the questions came as fast and furious as last orders on a Friday night in a Glasgow pub.

Not all of them pertaining to football. “Are you here for the women or just the money?” one asked.

“Never met any women and not been paid yet,” I replied cheekily.

Rangers officials had already nicknamed me ‘Flying Horse’, so someone asked me how fast I was?

“Faster than Nijinsky,” I replied, referring to the horse who had won the English Triple Crown; not to be confused with the ballet dancer born in Kyiv, I might add.

“Hippy-Haired Currie”, was Neil Perera’s description of me in the *South China Morning Post* the next day: “the most humorous of the three.” Joking soon came to an end when we went through the rigours of Petrie’s first training session at Happy Valley a few days later.

After the press conference we were taken from Kowloon to our accommodation on Hong Kong island. Until the opening of the Cross Harbour Tunnel in 1972, the only way to cross Victoria Harbour from Kowloon to Hong Kong was by ferry; either privately owned, or run by the Hongkong and Yaumati vehicular ferry service.

I vividly recall my first sighting of Hong Kong island as I stood on the deck. As I breathed in the hot, humid air I gazed ahead expectantly; but all I saw was a skyline of never ending neon. I felt a tinge of disappointment.

Although I hardly expected Suzie Wong to be waving to me from a passing sampan, I did expect to see more old colonial buildings; bygone reminders of Hong Kong’s swashbuckling past. As we neared the island, however, I did make out a few rickshaws with their two wheels propped up against the wall of the ferry terminal.

After disembarking we were driven to the Alba Hotel in Yee Wo Street, Causeway Bay; a stone’s throw from Victoria Park. Along the way we passed tramcars packed with people; this had once been a very popular mode of transport in Glasgow, but they closed that system in 1962. On Hong Kong Island it appeared still to be in great demand.

It was a smartish looking hotel, a good omen, I thought. However, any notions of going upstairs to our separate rooms, relaxing, having a shower, or trying to see if there was any English channel on the television were soon dispelled.

As we rode the elevator with Petrie, he informed us that he had only booked one room.

“Will it not be a bit tight for space and beds?” a worried looking Jackie asked.

“It’s okay, there are two single beds, and we’ve added a camp bed,” said Petrie.

There was no tossing a coin to see who slept in the camp bed: seniority ruled.

“Jackie, the camp bed,” roared Walter.

In fairness, we took turns to sleep on it during our brief stay.

So there we were, 6,000 miles from home in exotic Hong Kong, Pearl of the Orient. Romantic scenes from the World of Suzie Wong were running through my head. And then Walter started snoring!