



THE
THE BEAR HUNTER

SEARCHING FOR RANGERS'
NINE-IN-A-ROW HEROES

BY JOHN IRWIN
WITH MURRAY SCOUGALL

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Introduction

LIKE SO many fans, I was born a bluenose.

I came into the world in 1951, the youngest of seven, and was brought up in the Whiteinch and Yoker areas of Glasgow. From an early age I always felt I was different compared with my four sisters and two brothers. I looked at life in a different way, and I suppose I'm what some people would call eccentric.

My dad took me to my first game at Ibrox when I was eight years old, and from that moment on I was hooked and rarely missed a home match. When I was a teenager, I started going to away games. I can still remember my first away trip – and it was nearly my last. My dad allowed me to travel up to Tannadice with my friend when I was 16. Back in those days, it wasn't uncommon for supporters to run on to the park when their team scored, although the police were trying to stamp it out.

When Rangers scored, I rushed on but was quickly huckled by a policeman and taken to the back of the terracing, beside another young guy who had also been caught. There were two cops standing guard over us, but that didn't stop the other boy from trying to escape. He was quickly collared and the sergeant punched him in the gut. I couldn't believe what I was seeing.

I was escorted from the ground and taken to the local police station. My furious dad had to come through on the train to get me. It was a bank holiday weekend, so I returned to Dundee on the Tuesday for a court appearance, where I was fined £50. I thought that was the end of it, but two months later a couple of policemen came to my parents' door. They wanted to know if I had seen the sergeant punching the other boy

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at Tannadice. I said I did, but my dad jumped to his feet and insisted I had seen nothing and sent the cops on their way. 'If you testify against a sergeant, your life will be made a misery,' he told me.

I had a habit of making the wrong choices. Another time when I was a teenager, my mate and I jumped on the boat to Belfast with no tickets and no money. Once we were in Northern Ireland, we met a couple of girls and stayed at their gran's house for a week. The problem was I hadn't told my parents, who were searching the streets back in Glasgow, frantic with worry.

I married young and had two daughters by the time I was in my early twenties. The relationship didn't work and I moved south in 1973, where I married again twice and had my third daughter. While none of my marriages went the distance, I'm proud to say I've maintained friendships with each of my ex-wives. I have to be creative when explaining to new people I meet about my Flora tattoo, though, so I just tell them it stands for 'For Love Of Rangers Always'!

I've survived all of my life by being a ducker and diver. The character of Del Boy could have been modelled on me. I would often sleep in my car overnight in order to secure the best spots at car boot sales, and I've had every job you can imagine, from painting boats to driving lorries to working in bakeries. One of my favourite occupations was when I worked as a nursing assistant in a psychiatric hospital. I also drove the bus when we took the patients on days out. One time I decided to stop by my house and invited the 18 passengers in for a cup of tea. My wife at the time wasn't best pleased.

I'm also a big royalist, so much so that I once lost a job because of The Queen. I heard on the radio that Her Majesty was visiting Chichester Barracks, which was near where I lived, the next morning. I was on the early shift at the bakery, and it was all I could think about as I brought out the rolls. I knew I would always regret it if I didn't try to see her, so I wrote on the blackboard, 'away to see The Queen, back tomorrow' and off I went. I didn't get to meet her but I did catch a glimpse, so it was worth the effort. When I went into work the next morning I was told I was fired. It was OK, though, because I got a new job in another bakery later that day.

I did, however, manage to meet Princess Diana. She was visiting a hospice in Leeds, where I lived at the time, so my youngest daughter, Debby, and I turned up five hours early in anticipation. Unfortunately she didn't come our way when she arrived. It was the middle of winter and everyone was wrapped up, but I was wearing a Union Jack T-shirt

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and no jacket, so I stood out. As she was leaving a couple of hours later, I yelled at the top of my lungs, 'Lady Diana,' and she turned round and walked over to us. 'You must be very cold,' she said. I was completely gobsmacked that she had come over and I couldn't find the words to say anything. 'You're very loyal,' she added, as she smiled and walked away.

As you can no doubt tell by now, I believe in living for the moment. But the one constant throughout my life, apart from Rangers, has been darts. I was a good player and played county for West Sussex and Yorkshire B. I managed a nine-dart finish during a match at Sir Patrick Moore's local pub in Sussex in the eighties. Had it happened on television, I would have won thousands, but unfortunately I only received £300 this night. Another time in the same pub, I watched as a group of guys threw nails at the dartboard. I had never seen anyone do this before and started asking them lots of questions. They gave me a shot and all three nails hit the floor, but I was hooked and began practising for hours on end.

By the time I moved back to Yorkshire, I had become really good and fate shone on me one evening in the local working men's club. The manager of Bass Brewery was visiting, so I approached him and asked if I could have a minute of his time. I started throwing the nails and he was really impressed. At the time, Bass had a roadshow that would tour the pubs and clubs – variety acts like magicians and fire-eaters – to promote the brand, and I asked him if I could have a job.

A month later he was in touch to offer me a contract, and for the next ten years I travelled the country with Bass Brewery, challenging punters to a round of darts – they would throw standard darts while I would use nails, screwdrivers and anything else I could lay my hands on. It was a great time, and I was sad when my time as a professional nail thrower came to an end.

I returned to Glasgow in 2006 after retiring from my security role at a Butlin's holiday camp, and I was on the lookout for something that would occupy my time. It should come as no surprise that my idea of a hobby was something a little different from the norm ...



Dave McPherson

TENS OF thousands of miles around the world, tens of thousands of pounds spent getting there. All to track down every man who ever played a minute for my beloved Rangers during their glory nine-in-a-row years between 1988 and 1997. I met some of my biggest heroes and found myself in cities and situations I could never have imagined when I returned to Glasgow, having previously lived more than 30 years in England. There I was, thinking I was coming home to live a quiet life in my retirement. Instead it became my greatest adventure, although it all started quite accidentally.

I moved into a house just a short walk from Ibrox Stadium, and thought I might try to gather a few autographs on matchdays since I was so close. I didn't just want the signatures on scraps of paper that would go missing, so decided to buy replica strips and use them as my canvas. I bought three identical shirts online – the white away top from the 1992/93 season. It would be easy to see the autographs on the design, and also it was the strip from one of the greatest seasons of the nine-in-a-row years, when Rangers won the treble and were a goal away from reaching the inaugural Champions League Final.

I was watching television one Friday evening when a football preview show came on STV. Their guest was ex-Rangers defender Dave McPherson. As I watched, a notion popped into my head. I'm going to go to the studio for his autograph. The STV and BBC headquarters are just a short distance from Ibrox, down by the River Clyde, so I pulled one of the strips from the drawer and made my way to the studio.

I explained at reception that I would like Dave to sign my shirt once he had finished filming. They told me I couldn't wait, but if I wanted

to leave the top they would have him autograph it and I could collect it the next day. I was hoping to meet him since I had gone to the effort of walking round, but I agreed and left it with the receptionist. I returned the following morning and was pleased to see it had been signed, along with a little message, 'To John, best wishes'.

Dave McPherson, also known as Slim thanks to his lithe 6ft 3in frame, was signed by his boyhood heroes Rangers when he was just 15, arriving from Gartcosh United in 1980. He played his way into the first team within a few years – making his debut in a 1–0 League Cup win against Brechin when he was 17 – during what was a miserable time on the pitch for the club. Better times were around the corner, and the big defender won the title in Graeme Souness's first season as manager in 1986/87. But he was soon surplus to requirements as the gaffer brought in one big-name international defender after another, and he was sold to Hearts in 1987, where he was a big success and well liked by the support.

By 1992, Walter Smith was in charge at Ibrox and was actively signing the best Scottish talent as he tried to deal with the three-foreigner policy, which meant no more than three non-Scottish players were allowed to play in European fixtures. As well as being an able centre-half, McPherson could also run with the ball, so could slot in at right-back. Walter took advantage of that and re-signed Dave in 1992 for £1.3m, beating other reportedly interested clubs like Seville, Spurs, Southampton and Borussia Dortmund. He played a big part the following season, the aforementioned treble-winning campaign, and the sight of his long-haired perm bobbing up and down the touchline soon became a regular one, although it did take him a while to adjust to the role.

Dave played 34 times in the league that season, following it up with 28 appearances during six-in-a-row. Unfortunately that campaign ended on a downer for Dave, after a defensive mix-up between him and goalkeeper Ally Maxwell during the Scottish Cup Final allowed Dundee United to score the only goal of the game and end my team's hopes of a historic double treble. In the following season he made just nine appearances, his final game for Rangers coming in a 2–1 away defeat to Motherwell on 22 October. He was sold back to Hearts just a few days later.

The Tynecastle club were in financial trouble and were forced to offload their star prospect, young defender Alan McLaren, who came to Rangers in a swap deal for Dave, with Rangers also paying an

additional fee. McPherson picked up where he left off in Edinburgh and was one of Hearts' most reliable players. When he had his testimonial match in 1997, there could be only one opposition – Rangers. He moved to Melbourne in 1999 to play with Carlton SC, but not before he lifted the Scottish Cup the year before, defeating Rangers in what would be the nine-in-a-row squad's final match together.

In Australia he was playing under fellow nine-in-a-row alumnus Stuart Munro, but the club sadly went out of business. Dave returned to Scotland as assistant manager and then player-manager with Morton in 2001/02, playing 16 league games and scoring four goals. He moved into sports management once he retired from playing.

I met him outside Ibrox a few years after he signed the shirt at STV. By this point I had decided to ask each player to be photographed with the strip when they signed it, so I took the opportunity to go over and introduce myself. To my surprise, Dave knew who I was and was happy to pose for a picture. Clearly word was spreading among the players about my project. But I'm getting ahead of myself. In the weeks after McPherson's signature in 2009, I met a few more ex-players outside Ibrox and had them sign the top. I realised the four or five autographs I had so far were from the nine-in-a-row squad.

How many players featured during those nine years, I wondered, and wouldn't it be great if I could have them all sign the shirt? I researched it online and found the answer – 86.

I can't explain it, but I knew from that moment on that I was going to dedicate myself to tracking down each of those men, except for the late, great Davie Cooper, of course. Little did I know it would consume the next seven years and take me on a journey I never could have imagined. This is the story of my trip around the world in 86 signatures.



Alexei Mikhailichenko

ALEXEI MIKHAILICHENKO'S Rangers career can be summed up in one word – frustrating. And that's the polite way I would describe my dealings with him when I tracked him down to sign my shirt. It led to a terrifying night in Kiev that left me convinced I was going to die and almost made me throw in the towel in my quest to meet all of the nine-in-a-row squad. People think it's just a signature on a shirt, but they don't understand the hassle, the trials and tribulations and the drama that securing an autograph often entailed. My experience with Miko was the most stressful of them all.

When Alexei signed for the Gers in 1991, he was regarded as one of the most talented attacking players in Europe. He quickly became one of my idols of the Rangers team of that era, which makes my encounter with him even more disappointing.

Born in Kiev in 1963, the gangly 6ft 1in playmaker played for his home-town team, Dynamo Kiev, from 1981 to 1990 and was instrumental in their success. He first came to the attention of the Rangers support in 1987 when Kiev played the boys in blue in the European Cup. Following a 1–0 win for the home side in Kiev, Rangers triumphed 2–0 in the second leg to win the tie. (This was the famous game where Souness reduced the width of the pitch after Kiev trained on the park the night before, in order to reduce our opponents' attacking options down the wings.)

Mikhailichenko was named the Ukrainian Footballer of the Year in 1987 and won it again the following year, during a prodigious period for Miko when he also won Soviet Footballer of the Year, came fourth in the Ballon D'Or and won Olympic gold at Seoul. After winning the

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league title with Kiev in 1990, he moved to Sampdoria and won Serie A with the Italian team, before Rangers came in with a bid of £2.2m – at the time a Scottish transfer record.

He made his debut at Falkirk on 7 September 1991, marking his first game with an audacious attempted shot from the halfway line. During that first season he made 24 starts in the league, with three appearances off the bench, and scored ten goals, his first coming in a 2–0 victory over Hearts at Ibrox. Alexei was a typical attacker in the sense that he ran hot and cold, one minute electrifying the crowd and the next looking like he couldn't be bothered chasing after the ball. He was regarded as lazy, and there's a famous but most likely apocryphal tale of assistant boss Archie Knox ordering him to warm up for training only to come back into the dressing room soon after to find Miko heating himself with a hairdryer!

To be fair to the player, he was often played out of position as a winger when he was best utilised as an attacking midfielder and playmaker. He certainly had his memorable moments in a Rangers jersey, such as his pinpoint cross for Gary McSwegan to score against Marseille in the opening group game of the inaugural Champions League at Ibrox in 1992. He also scored twice in the 4–2 New Year's Day Old Firm game in 1994 at Parkhead. He followed that up with another goal against Celtic in a 1–1 draw at Ibrox in April, the match where Rangers owner David Murray banned Celtic fans from the stadium.

In Miko's final two seasons in Glasgow, he made only fleeting appearances, with the signings of Brian Laudrup in 1994 and Gazza in 1995 pushing him further to the sidelines. His last league appearance, at Ibrox on 23 March 1996, was against Falkirk, the team he also faced on his debut, and he retired at the end of the season aged just 33.

After hanging up his boots, the man who earned 41 caps for the USSR and CIS and a further two caps for Ukraine became assistant boss at Dynamo Kiev, and then manager from 2002 to 2004. From there he spent four years as Ukraine under-20s boss, followed by a spell as national manager. He then returned to Kiev as sporting director in 2013.

One of the biggest hurdles when trying to locate foreign ex-players is the language barrier. What I was doing was fairly odd even when explaining it to someone who could speak fluent English, but when I went on the phone to another country and tried to explain as briefly and plainly as possible, it could become horrendous. I'm sure lots of the

people I spoke with thought I was at the wind-up, but thankfully on this occasion I managed to talk to a helpful chap at the BBC in Ukraine, who said he would try to get in touch with Miko. A short time later, he called with a mobile number for him.

Alexei's English wasn't great when I called (he refused to do interviews during his time in Scotland, blaming the language barrier, although it was rumoured he could speak English perfectly well), but eventually he seemed to understand and agreed to meet me. I spoke with him a few more times while I gathered the money I needed for the flights, cobbling the cash together by selling some replica jerseys that some of the current squad signed at the gates of Auchenhowie, Rangers' training facility.

I called him to confirm when I would be flying and was delighted when Alexei said he would meet me at the airport with two other Ukrainian-based nine-in-a-row players, Oleg Kuznetsov and Oleg Salenko. This would allow me to tick off three players in one shot – great news for my limited budget.

I'll be the first to admit the timing of my trip wasn't the best. It coincided with Ukraine rarely being out of the news after civil unrest broke out, and it seemed every day there were reports of shootings and stand-offs. I was fairly confident that Kiev was far enough from the trouble spots to not be affected, but you can never tell what you'll be heading into when a country is in turmoil. Understandably, some of my family weren't keen about my plans, but I don't believe there is any point in worrying in advance. I deal with a situation as it arises. Besides, I had established contact with Miko so I wanted to act while that line of communication remained open.

I flew into Kiev at 5pm, as scheduled, via a three-hour stopover in Amsterdam, and made my way through to the main arrivals lounge, passing by intimidating security guards dressed all in black, including balaclavas. Not the most welcoming sight when entering a country, it must be said. I looked all around for Miko – I had seen recent pictures of him on the internet and he hadn't changed much, so I was confident I would recognise him. I walked around again and again, but he was nowhere to be seen. Maybe he had been delayed. I tried calling him but it rang out, so I sent a text to tell him I was here and asked if he was on his way. No response.

I took a seat and waited. I had no idea what to do. I called again and sent another text, and while I waited for a response I decided to exchange my money. To say I didn't have much would be an understatement – it

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was probably less than a tenner. As I mentioned earlier, I made all of the trips on a strict budget, hence flying into a country at war with no travel insurance! I didn't think I would need much cash for this trip, since Alexei was supposed to be meeting me at the airport. Once he signed it, I intended to just hunker down in a quiet spot and sleep while I waited for my flight home the following afternoon. At the most I would need just a few quid for some food and drink.

I located the bureau de change and stood in the queue. Just as I stepped up to the booth, the woman on the other side of the glass pushed the window down and walked away. I stared at her, wondering what was going on. She didn't crack a light. There were people behind me in the queue, too. 'They do that here,' said an American guy standing just off to the side of the window. 'When it's time for a break they don't care if there's someone still to serve. She'll be back in 45 minutes.'

While I waited I tried calling Miko's number again and sent him yet another text. I was becoming increasingly concerned at the lack of response. The teller with the thunderous expression returned 45 minutes later and I exchanged my few pounds into the local currency, hryvnia.

By now my nerves were jangling – I needed a smoke. I walked out of the terminal and across the road, making sure I was a good distance away from the building since I didn't know what the smoking laws were in Ukraine. I had just put a cigarette to my mouth when I felt a presence beside me and all of a sudden the fag was slapped from my lips. I looked up, shocked. In front of me was a stern-faced policeman. He began speaking in a raised voice and, although I couldn't understand a word, I knew this wasn't a friendly 'hello, welcome to our country'. The last thing I needed was a fine. Then another two officers arrived – one stood in front of me and the other behind. They were making sure I was going nowhere, not that I intended to run. I could only assume I was in a no-smoking area, but this seemed a rather intimidating reaction.

I tried to explain in a few words why I was there but I don't think they understood. One of them said 'passport'. I handed it over and they examined it, then looked at me as I stood before them in my Rangers top. One of them pointed towards the terminal. It looked like I was being dismissed, so I didn't hang around. As I walked across the road, shaken and annoyed at the way I'd just been treated, I looked over my shoulder and saw one of the cops lighting up a cigarette.

I went inside and waited. My flight home left at 2.30pm the following day. By now it was 9pm, four hours after I'd landed. Just then a text came through. It was Mikhailichenko.

‘Where are you?’ it read.

‘I’m still at the airport.’

A few minutes later and another text pinged.

‘Get a taxi into the city centre.’

That was it, end of communication. I didn’t know how far it was to the city centre or how much it would cost, but I felt I didn’t have any other option. I went outside and got into one of the waiting cabs, but of course I couldn’t tell the driver where to go. ‘Centre, city centre,’ I said, but he didn’t speak any English. He dropped me off at the train station, maybe because I was foreign and he thought I was continuing my travels. Thankfully the fare was the equivalent of pennies, so it didn’t eat too much into my very limited funds.

I texted Miko again to tell him I was at the station. I stood outside, near what I suppose could be termed a taxi rank, except it seemed to be a long line of private cars, where the drivers bartered with customers over the fare. My stomach rumbled while I waited, and I realised it had been hours since I’d eaten. I went into a café on the outskirts of the station and ordered by pointing at whatever I could see, so I ended up with French fries and a Coke. I sat at an empty table and tried to relax for a moment as I ate. Just then a text came through from Mikhailichenko. My heart sank as I read it. I was miles away from where I needed to be. He gave me an address for Kiev’s training complex.

I finished eating and stood up, a million thoughts swirling around in my head. I was about 50 yards along the street towards the taxi rank when I froze in realisation at what I’d done. I had left the bag containing my nine-in-a-row strip under the café’s table. I rushed back as quickly as I could, praying someone hadn’t picked it up and walked off with it. Years of work could be gone in a moment of absent-mindedness. I went straight to the table where I’d sat and thankfully the bag was still there. I gripped it tightly in my hands and let out a relieved sigh.

I returned to the taxi rank. By now it was nearly midnight. This is crazy, I thought. A driver approached me, ‘Taxi, taxi?’ he asked. I nodded and showed him the text from Miko with the address. I managed to knock the price down by around 50 hryvnia (the fare was the equivalent of about £4) and sat down in the back seat of his beat-up old Lada with more than a degree of trepidation. As we set off I tried to speak to him – ‘How long will it take? Where do we go from here?’ – but he never said a word. We drove in silence for what seemed like forever.

Sometimes the mind remembers things at the most inopportune times and, while I sat in the car, my teeth rattling as we struck giant

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pothole after giant pothole, I suddenly recalled the stories I had read weeks before about two separate instances of men being kidnapped in Kiev while taking taxi rides.

The worry only increased as we seemed to drive farther out of the city. There were no street lights, so we were enveloped in darkness, but through the night sky I could distinguish the outline of trees all around. We appeared to be driving into a forest. Maybe it was the long day or the isolating feeling of being in a strange country, coupled with the uncertainty and confusion I had faced since arriving, but as we drove deeper into the wood I convinced myself I was going to die. I stared at the back of the driver's head and wondered how he was going to kill me and where he was going to dump my body. Would I ever be found? Could I try to escape? I'll admit I have never been as frightened in my life as I was at that moment.

We had been driving for more than an hour when the car headlights shone on a sign at the roadside. From the quick glimpse, I was certain I recognised it from a picture I'd seen online while doing my research. It was for Dynamo Kiev's training complex! Thank God, I thought, he is taking me to the right place after all. He pulled up outside the gates and I hurried out, making sure I lifted my bag, and gave the driver a nod as he pulled away. By now it was after 1am, and I wondered why on earth Miko was at the training ground at this time of night.

I walked over to the gates, where there was a security box with two armed guards sitting in the dark inside. I explained I was there to meet Alexei. I knew they wouldn't understand, so I brought out an old picture of him from his Rangers days and pointed at it and then at myself. One of them spoke into a walkie-talkie and I prayed they understood. A few minutes later I saw a figure approaching from the opposite side of the gates, which began to open. As he came closer I realised it was Miko. Thank you! I smiled and said hello, and brought out the shirt.

'Where's your taxi?' he asked.

I couldn't believe it. Those were his opening words. Not 'Hello, John' or 'How was your journey?' or 'Sorry for messing you around earlier.' Three abrupt words.

'I let it go. I wasn't sure how long I would be here, so he's gone.'

He didn't say anything as I handed him the shirt and a pen. As he signed it I asked where Kuznetsov and Salenko were, since he'd told me all three would meet me at the airport.

'Call this number,' he said, digging into his pocket and pulling out a scrap of paper that was no more than a couple of inches long. It had

a phone number scribbled on it which, I presumed, was for one of the men.

He clearly wasn't waiting around to chat, so after he posed for a picture I reached into my bag and brought out two more Rangers tops for him to sign, which I intended to auction off for my next foreign trip. But he refused to sign them.

Just then a car drove towards us from within the grounds, with a middle-aged man and woman inside. Alexei spoke to them briefly, then turned to me and said to get in and they would take me back to the airport.

'I don't have any money to pay them,' I explained, but he told me not to worry. With that, my time with him was over. The meeting had lasted no more than 30 seconds.

As I drove away with the two strangers, I couldn't help but feel let down by what had just happened, although I was relieved to have secured the signature. I attempted to talk to the pair in the car but didn't receive any reaction. I assumed they did not speak English. I had no idea if they were part of the Dynamo Kiev staff, visitors or Miko's friends or family, and I wasn't likely to find out. We spent the next hour or so in silence while bouncing back through the crater-like potholes and navigating pitch-dark roads.

As the man pulled up at the airport, the woman put her hand out and said 'money'. She said it with such forcefulness that it shocked me.

'I'm sorry, I don't have money,' I explained apologetically, reaching into my pocket for the remaining loose change. I placed it in my palm and said, 'This is all I have.' The woman snatched every last one of the coins from my hand. I hesitantly thanked them for the lift and stepped out, wondering what could possibly happen next. Those few coins, however little they might have been worth, were my lifeline. Now I had absolutely nothing.

I was approaching the terminal's main entrance when I spotted what appeared to be a full bottle of water sitting just outside the door. I picked it up, checking for police in case they gave me any more hassle. The night had been hellish enough already. The seal wasn't broken, so I pushed the bottle into my pocket and went inside. I don't enjoy the best of health – I've suffered multiple heart attacks, among other complaints – so I have a lot of important medication I need to take every day. I required that water to swallow my tablets, because I was wary about drinking the water from the taps in Ukraine, what with the spectre of Chernobyl lingering three decades on. I also knew the water

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was the only thing that would pass my lips between now and my flight the following afternoon. Once inside, I found a quiet spot and settled down for the night. It was after 2am and I was exhausted.

I shifted around in the seat, uncomfortable and irritable, for a few hours. And then, at 8am, came the last kick in the teeth. A group of men came walking through the terminal, wearing tracksuits that I recognised to be those of Dynamo Kiev. It was the team. And then I spotted him. Mikhaïlichenko. He had been coming to the airport all along. The bother, worry and strife I had gone through the night before could have been avoided if he had just told me to sit tight until the morning. He was just yards from where I stood. I don't know if he saw me, but I was furious and had to bite my tongue as he walked past me and into departures.

When I felt it was an acceptable hour I called the number on the scrap of paper he had given me at the training complex. It seemed I was calling Oleg Kuznetsov. I explained to him what I was doing, that I was in Kiev and expected to meet him, Miko and Salenko at the airport the night before. Oleg was apologetic, but said he knew nothing about it and that 'we' were in Poland right now. I wasn't sure if by 'we' he meant him and Salenko or him and the team of Ukrainian youth players he was coaching. He said I could keep in touch and arrange to meet him the next time he and the team were in a place that was a little easier for me to reach.

I've never been so glad to board a plane as I was that afternoon. Due to the stopover in Amsterdam and the connecting flight, it was late before I finally made it home to Ibrox. It had been a hell of a couple of days, and, if I'm being honest, the experience left me totally sickened, so much so that for a few weeks I seriously considered abandoning my quest. My previous experiences with the players had all been so positive, but this encounter left me wondering if it was all worth it. What made it worse was the expectation of picking up three signatures on the journey and coming back with just one – barely. But my nephew, Andy, who was my biggest supporter and helper through the adventure, soon talked me round and it wasn't long before I was planning my next trip.

Little did I know, years later, that Oleg Salenko would prove to be the final piece needed to complete my nine-in-a-row jigsaw.