

THE PENALTY KING

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF JOHNNY HUBBARD,
RANGERS' STAR OF THE 1950s

BY JOHNNY HUBBARD
WITH DAVID MASON



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FOREWORD BY SIR ALEX FERGUSON



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Prologue

The rule which instigated the penalty kick was instituted by the four nations of the International Football Association Board at Glasgow's Alexandra Hotel on 2 June 1891. They agreed that:

If a player intentionally trip or hold an opposing player, or deliberately handle the ball within 12 yards from his own goal line, the referee shall, on appeal, award the opposing side a penalty kick, taken from any point 12 yards from the goal line under the following conditions—all players, with the exception of the player taking the penalty kick and the opposing goalkeeper, who shall not advance more than six yards from the goal line, shall stand at least six yards behind ball; the ball shall be in play when the kick taken; a goal may be scored from the penalty kick.

I AM John Gaulton Hubbard, or to the followers of that great football team they call 'The Rangers' and team-mates from a bygone era, I am plain and simple, 'Hubbie'! It's a name that perhaps lacks a little imagination, certainly in comparison to the likes of

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‘Tiger’ Shaw, ‘Corky’ Young and ‘Big Ben’ Woodburn, all of whom I played alongside through a glorious spell in the 1950s. However, while I am ‘Hubbie’ to most, I have another nickname. Indeed, when I decided to commit my life story to print, it was the late great Sandy Jardine, a Rangers star of the 1960s through to the 80s, who immediately ventured the title of this book. He said – it must be called ‘The Penalty King’.

I doubt whether Sandy ever saw me even take a penalty, but he was aware of my reputation as the player who rarely missed a spot-kick. Indeed, I only missed on three occasions, although I don’t regard these as ‘misses’. They were saved by the goalkeeper! However, if the keepers had success on these occasions, there were 60 other penalties where they could do little more than pick the ball out of the net.

It was not the only thing I did in the game, of course, and I look back with some pride on a career that blossomed with Rangers over a ten-year spell at the famous Ibrox Park. It was a career that introduced me to some wonderful players and one of the greatest football managers the game has seen – Bill Struth. Under his guiding hand, I was set on a course that would establish me in one of the best teams he created, tasting the champagne of success with domestic trophies. It was a career that also took me to representative honours with both Scotland and South Africa!

It is easy to see, therefore, why I hold my time at the club with such affection. You see, at Rangers, I lived the dream – one that I had harboured through my adolescent years until I arrived in Scotland from South Africa in 1949. My dream was to become a professional football

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player and although I had talent and earned a contract at Ibrox, I was to learn that there was more to Rangers than simply football. Under Struth, I was to learn that this club, that I had barely heard of before I arrived, was an institution. It was a club where great standards were expected of those honoured with the chance to play in their royal blue jersey. A club where only the best was considered good enough and where the foundations of my adult life would be built. These ten years at Ibrox were the happiest of my life.

It did not all end there, of course, and my life has been a very happy one, with a wonderful family including wife Ella, three great children and eight lovely grandkids. I enjoyed playing football with other clubs and then, when my career ended, giving something back to both sport, and to society. Little did I imagine that this would culminate in Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth awarding me an Honorary MBE for services to the community. However, I do not believe I would have achieved anything in my career without the experience of my formative years in my homeland of South Africa. It is there, therefore, that my story starts.

1

My African Childhood

MY name is John Gaulton Hubbard and I was born in Pretoria on 16 December 1930 – a beautiful South African city far removed from the one that I would ultimately call home. Situated in a fertile valley surrounded by hills, it was known as ‘Jacaranda City’ after the trees which dominated the suburbs, adding a splash of colour with their beautiful and characteristic blossom.

I can still remember how they scented the warm moist summer air and even the dry cool breezes of winter. My memories often take me back there and to the many happy times I spent under the African skies. It was a place which was so different from Scotland, where I would eventually settle and live with great contentment, but it is a city where part of me remains. My memories are of a very pleasant place to live with a

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diverse culture rooted in the city's tribal past and later Afrikaans influences.

Unlike Glasgow, whose history dates back many centuries, Pretoria was a relatively modern place in comparison. The city was established in 1855 by the 'Boers' – farmers of Dutch origin who had migrated from the Cape colonies and it had become the administrative capital of South Africa. But around the turn of the 19th century, it had also been at the heart of the conflict which became known as the Boer War. Following the great Zulu wars, Britain had tightened its imperial control on the Transvaal region in the late 1870s, but they faced great resistance from the city fathers – the Voortrekkers¹ – who were not ready to relinquish governance of the town they had founded. They rebelled against the British forces in a fierce, but short conflict in 1880. This First Boer War, as it became known, did not bring stability and a second war followed nine years later. This time the war lasted three long years and, although Britain succeeded and maintained overall control, the governance of the country remained within Transvaal. In 1910, it led to the formation of the Union of South Africa. When peace was returned to the old Transvaal, there was tranquillity, but the city retained a vibrancy and sense of adventure, reviving the spirit of the old Voortrekkers.

I mention this, not simply to give some background to the history of my country, but because my roots can be firmly traced to the Second Boer War. I often reflect that if it had not been for the conflict, I would not be here! If Pretoria was characterised by its diversity, with its native Africans and Afrikaans dominating, my background

¹ The Afrikaans word for 'pioneers'.

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was also somewhat cosmopolitan. While both of my parents were South African – my father Raymond from Pretoria and my mother, Johanna, from Port Elizabeth in the south – their families had come from opposite ends of the world. My father was from Australian stock, while my mother was half-Irish.

Her father – my maternal grandfather – came to Africa with the British expeditionary forces to fight in the Second Boer War, presumably around 1889. Many Irish people joined the army at that time to escape the poverty within their own country. When the conflict was over, they were faced with the prospect of returning to the desperation of Ireland. Like many, my grandfather deserted. He was not alone, because many of the soldiers in the Irish regiments followed suit. Besides, fundamentally, they did not support the action of what they saw as the imperialist army suppressing the settlers.

It was not all about the politics of the situation or the poverty of home, however. There were many other attractions to life under the African sun. The country had a much more agreeable climate than the often cold and wet Ireland and prospects for employment in the new country looked much more promising in the aftermath of the war. Maybe my grandfather even had romantic interests, because he soon got married to the woman who was to become my grandmother. By then, he was destined never to leave South Africa and he managed to get work in the building trade. It eventually led to a job in the construction of the first bridge over the Orange River. I do not know much more about him at that time, but it was a little bit of the folklore of the family that he was involved in such a prestigious bridge.

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The bridge was probably funded by Britain because, following the war, the country had offered the Boers money for reconstruction. Most of that money was used to improve the infrastructure of the country, including the railway and that is where my father's family come in to the story. The great drive towards reconstruction in the post-war era provided many jobs for the African people, but it also encouraged immigration for those looking for a land of opportunity. While the Boer War brought my mother's father to the country as a soldier, my father's family were lured to South Africa by opportunities that arose in the country in the aftermath – particularly in the railway. One of the most important projects that followed the war was the construction of a new railway station in Pretoria, which was built in 1910. It served as a terminal for a number of railway lines coming from places like the Cape and Natal, however, the station was not constructed using British money. The Transvaal government had funded the project with their residual cash rather than surrender the money to the new South African government at the time of reunification. It was a case of use it or lose it.

My grandfather had been a railway worker in Melbourne and he saw the opportunity to work in the new railway network in South Africa. He managed to get fixed up in a job as a stationmaster in Pretoria and he and my grandmother settled in the city. Sometime later my father was born and I suppose it was natural that when he grew up, he would also find his career directed towards the railway. He duly continued this family tradition by becoming an inspector of locomotives oils – a good job that was to eventually take him all over

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the world. It was possibly through one of these trips that he was to meet a lovely lady from Port Elizabeth – my mother! They were clearly taken with each other and romance seemed to have blossomed, because they soon got married and set up home in Pretoria, amid the blooming jacaranda.

Mom and dad began to build their family shortly after they were married with Ruth the first born, followed by Dorothy, Daisy, Raymond and finally me, the youngest. I loved every one of my siblings and I was close to each of them. I loved them not just as any brother would his brothers and sisters, but because they were genuinely very nice people. Being the baby of the family, I found that they were all very keen to play a part in my upbringing and I loved them for that too. It was wonderful being the youngest and I loved being the baby! They would spend time taking me out for trips around Pretoria and at home they would entertain me. I was never left wanting as they tended to all my needs and I reflect that, as a youngster, I could not have wished for better siblings.

I have such happy memories of them all at home, but as I grew older and became increasingly more independent, the family began to naturally fragment as the older members moved on. Ruth and Dorothy married and were the first to leave home when I was just a youngster, so I spent less time with them, but I shared some of my happiest times with Daisy and Raymond. Ordinarily you might think that I would have had the greatest affinity with my brother, but I actually had much more in common with Daisy. Raymond was essentially a ‘bookworm’ and more academic, but Daisy was the

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one who shared my passion for sport and tennis in particular. Raymond was not disinterested in sport and we would often play tennis together, but when he came on to the court with me, his interest in winning quickly evaporated as I hit winning shots past him! That generally sparked off a new game where he would try to hit me with the balls. Regardless of the individual interests of my brothers and sisters, we had one common bond – we were family.

There was another member of the family that I should not forget to mention – a small dog named ‘Hitler’. To many people, that might have seemed a strange name for us to choose, but the Fuhrer was in the news at the time as he continued his march across Europe. We just thought it seemed suitable for our snappy little dog, but it did not turn out to be a good omen for him. One day he ran out of the house, strayed under a car and was killed. I ran around to see mom at the tennis club, with tears streaming down my face. I was yelling in despair, ‘Hitler’s dead. Hitler’s dead!’ I did not draw much in the way of sympathy from the club members and there were plenty long and puzzled looks as she put her arm around me. Later I found out that the people at the tennis club had wondered why I was in tears because Hitler had died!

The family home was a nice three-bedroomed bungalow in Tulleken Street, on the southern side of Pretoria. The family had moved in to it shortly before I was born. It was very close to the railway line and the main station, but was in a nice suburban part of town. The street was in a quiet area and the people who lived there were a reflection of the cosmopolitan population

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of the city, with families from many backgrounds, all living happily together. There were lots of children in the street and, although I would play with and have fun with my brothers and sisters, I had no shortage of friends.

Unlike kids in Scotland who have little time to play outside after school in the winter, we had the benefit of the climate and the geography of South Africa combining to make it a great place to grow up as a child. There was not much of a twilight so school times were adjusted to the light. In the summer we would go to school at 7.55am and finish at 12.55pm and in the winter everything moved forward by 30 minutes. This left plenty time to play long into the afternoon and as soon as I came home I would always go outside to play. By 5pm it was generally dark, or about to get dark and I headed home for dinner with the family, eagerly awaiting another day out in the sunshine playing with my friends.

As a child, playing with my friends in Tulleken Street would almost always involve games with a ball. We would play cricket, football, tennis and many other games, using the street as our playing ground. I really did not have time for anything else as all I wanted to do was to go out to play. Even today I still get regular flashbacks of these happy days when garden gates would be goalposts or a tree would become a wicket. If we did not play in the street, we would usually head over to Berea Park and the Railway Institute playing fields, which were situated a short distance away from our house. It was there that my love affair with sport was to truly blossom.

These fields, which were transformed from a cattle compound into fine sports grounds, were the first to be created in Pretoria and opened in 1882. I also heard that

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it was the first place that a motor car was displayed to the public in South Africa. For me, however, the playing fields were heaven. The facilities that Berea Park offered were wonderful with 12 tennis courts, two football fields, one rugby pitch, a baseball pitch and three big bowling greens. The facilities were certainly in marked contrast to what was available in Scotland at the time, particularly in the great cities. While we had a multitude of sports we could play in South Africa, it seemed that in Scotland, sport was dominated mainly by football, or to a much lesser extent rugby. There is no doubt that weather was a detrimental factor in Scotland, of course, but the facilities at the Railway Institute's grounds were all-year and every aspiring sportsman's dream.

In the summer months, all of the playing fields were cleared for cricket and the ground was the venue for some first-class matches, featuring the North-Eastern Transvaal Cricket Union and then later, the Northerns Cricket Club. Cricket was one of the more popular games among South African children and one of the kids in our group, Kenny Funston, went on to play in 18 Test matches for South Africa. His son also went on to become a first-class cricketer. South African kids at the time tended to play many sports and, like many of us, Kenny's excellence in sport was not confined to cricket. He gained soccer colours for North-Eastern Transvaal and hockey colours for Orange Free State. That was fairly typical at the time. South Africa was very sports orientated and there were opportunities to play most of the popular field sports.

Life in my early years was not all about sport of course and when I had reached six years of age, I went

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to the English-speaking Hamilton Primary School. I was to become good at Arithmetic and History, and I excelled at Afrikaans, but, unlike my brother Raymond, I was not academic. As the day at school dragged on, I could not wait to set my books aside to go outside and into the sunshine with a ball to enjoy the clean, fresh air. Even in these early years of my school life, I had already decided I wanted to become a professional sportsman. Mom was very supportive of my enthusiasm for sport, but she was also keen on the arts and encouraged me to develop other talents and interests. When I was eight, for example, she considered that I had a fine soprano voice and sent me for singing lessons. It did seem to nurture some hidden talents and that year I won certificates for mime, recitation and singing, but after six months I decided that the arts were not for me. I was a pretty active child and I always wanted to be outside playing, so being stuck inside in music classes did not really sit well with me.

Although I had a lot of other interests at the time, my life really revolved around my passion for sports. This was to be a feature of my life from my earliest years. As the months passed, I spent more and more of my time at Berea Park, cycling there as quickly as I could after school each day. During the summer, we played cricket and in the winter when the pitches had been restored, we played mainly football (or soccer as we called it), rugby, or occasionally hockey.

In this environment with opportunities to play almost anything, it was not difficult to get involved and reach a decent standard in every sport. By the time I had reached ten, I was already active in a number of different

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sports, but my love for the game of football, in particular, was growing.

As my siblings grew up and turned their interests elsewhere, the sports grounds at Berea Park were to become increasingly important to me. At every opportunity I looked to get involved in a game of football and if I could not play because there was a match, I would spectate. These matches would tend to involve my local side, Berea Park, who played at the grounds every other Saturday. They were more than just a team to me, however. I believed that they were a famous soccer club and, although they were nowhere near the standing of the British clubs at the time, they were a good side. Some measure of their standing is that England manager Roy Hodgson had his first experience of coaching at Berea Park in 1973. During his time there he played for Berea and coached the first team, as well as the under-14s and some of the schoolkids. It obviously gave him an introduction to football coaching, although not a successful one – he took them to relegation.

Although I had heard of some of the British football teams, especially those that toured the country, the game in South Africa revolved around the local and regional teams and Berea Park was my team. I loved them as much as any young Rangers fan adores his club today and, just as the Light Blues supporters have their idols, I had my favourite too. My hero was a Scot named ‘Snowy’ Walker – one of Berea Park’s star players. When I went to watch the team, I would always stand next to the entrance to the dressing room and when Snowy came out to take to the field, he would stop, break his Black Jack chewing gum into two pieces and give me one of them. I was in

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awe of this man whom I saw as a real football star. He was my inspiration and at half-time after we had watched the first 45 minutes, I could not wait to play soccer with a tennis ball along with all of the boys. We would play out every move, taking on the mantle of our heroes. I was the leader of the pack, honing my skills on that little ball and dreaming of the day when I could emulate Snowy.

Snowy Walker was every bit the hero figure and his sporting skills went beyond the football field. Like many great sportsmen, he had good eye-to-ball co-ordination and when he retired from playing football, he took up bowling, reaching the top in that sport too. In fact, he reached greater heights in bowls than he did in football. He won the South African singles championship a number of times and he was also a member of the 'fours' that won the team championships on several occasions. His standing in the game was such that he went on to represent South Africa at the Empire Games and his team won the gold medal in 1950. Even today he is considered to have been one of the best bowlers that South Africa has ever produced. He was such a big star in the country that they later named a street after him in Pretoria.

When I eventually left South Africa several years later, I never imagined that I would ever meet Snowy Walker again, or that if I did, I doubted if he would ever remember me. However, in 1956, long after I had become established at Rangers, he turned up at the front door of Tynecastle Park, completely out of the blue. We had just played against Hearts in a Scottish Cup match and he had taken in the game. I was deeply honoured that he had remembered the little boy who waited faithfully by

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the dressing room doors of Berea Park almost 15 years earlier. He told me that he had followed the progress of my career in South Africa, then on to Scotland when I went to Rangers. Meeting him once again was such a wonderful surprise and from that day on he was to remain a family friend. Even after he died some time later, my wife and I remained friends with his wife and daughter.

There is no doubt that as a youngster, I gained a lot of my inspiration and desire to become a professional sportsman from watching Snowy perform on the pitch. I suppose that this ambition to be like him was one of the reasons that I was never really interested in school. If Hamilton Primary was not going to be a focus for academic interest, however, it did at least give me my first competitive game at the age of 11 – in rugby, not football. Rugby was not my favourite, or best, sport and my teammates were not cut out for it either. Quite simply, we were not very good. Our greatest ‘success’ in a series of uninspiring performances was a 33-0 defeat! To their credit, the schoolmasters recognised that perhaps we would do better if we changed codes to soccer – probably because all of the kids were deflated. It was a welcome solution all round and, since I had some experience of playing the game, they made me team captain. I played inside-right and at last I had found something in school that now held some interest for me.

The decision by the school to give up on rugby and let us play football was inspired. We turned out to be a far better football team than rugby side, which was not difficult, and we made good progress. By now, the daily lessons of school were becoming a mere sideshow as my

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focus and attention switched firmly to football. Once, we were due to play a cup game, which was arranged to be played at the end of the day when the classes were over. As I sat in the geography class that morning, I was cleaning my boots under the table in preparation for the game. The teacher spotted me and I was hauled out of the class and sent along to see the principal, Mr du Plessis. When he was told of my misdemeanour, he was not a happy man. He told me that I would not make a living from playing football and that schoolwork was much more important to my future. Unrepentant, I told him that one day I would be a professional soccer player, but that show of self-confidence did not seem to impress him at all. He said, 'Today you are getting the cane and that's that!'

With corporal punishment prevalent in schools at that time, I was duly given the cane and a stern lecture. Certainly the punishment worked because I never again cleaned my boots in class. However, it did not alter my view on where my future lay, or my lack of interest in regular schoolwork. Ironically, the school's motto at that time was 'Ipsum Nosce', which translates 'Know Thyself'. Perhaps if Mr du Plessis had taken heed of that, he may have realised that I knew more about me than he did. Maybe that is why he eventually changed the motto to 'For Others'. In hindsight, I think he realised the futility in punishing me, as he knew that I had more interest in sport than the academic part of school. I am sure he knew that no amount of scolding would change my outlook, but it went further than that. It was not simply about my lack of interest in school and an over-enthusiasm for sport. I wanted sport to play a major

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part in my life and I reckoned that the ‘big umpire in the sky’ had given me a talent. I was determined I was going to make full use of it and I was convinced that I would become a professional footballer. Moreover, I was determined that not even Mr du Plessis’s cane could change that.

I loved playing football and it was becoming more and more of a respite from some unhappy times at home – but only when my father was there. Although I had a wonderful life as a youngster in the Transvaal, our family setting was hardly idyllic. The railway took my father away from home for long periods, but, ironically, these were the times when our home was happiest. When he was at home, he was strict with all of us and the atmosphere in the house was strained. I remember on one occasion he caught me swearing and dragged me into the bathroom where he forced me to eat a bar of soap. It was a stupid thing to do and it nearly killed me. I survived, of course, but, importantly, this unsavoury incident had a marked effect on our relationship.

To me, this was not the kind of behaviour that would create the kind of bond a son would want with his father. In fact, I had no bond with him at all. His relationship with my mother also deteriorated and we later learned that he was a bit of a philanderer. They ultimately divorced when I was around 12 and he left our family to live in Durban with another woman, who had a few children of her own. He never had any more children and when he walked out, he left his only family behind, leaving my mom to raise us. We never saw him again. It must have been enormously difficult and stressful for my mom, especially as things became very tight financially.

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He had left her with no money or any other means to bring the family up. The whole situation was very upsetting for the family, but the experience probably bonded the rest of us closer together.

If my father was a huge disappointment, my mother Johanna was an angel and she was to be the rock upon which our family was built. She had seen her husband leave and shortly afterwards her daughters had grown up, got married and also left. She must have felt that her family was disintegrating when her husband left, but she held everything together for us. However, despite having what must have been a very low income, we never at any time felt that we were poor. We always seemed to manage to get by and, apart from my father's absence, we were a happy and contented family.

Looking back on these days I realise the huge sacrifices that mom must have made to give us such a great life. She must have given up so much to keep us clothed and fed. We certainly had enough fruit in the house from the trees in the garden – two peach, a pear and a few quince. However, I can never recall any time when we did not have other foods on the table. Neither was I ever conscious of our family life being anything other than normal, even if it was without a father in later years. Whenever I needed new clothes or sports equipment, they were always there for me. Mom would buy me tennis shoes, sports boots and even my own cricket bat. She would also always show interest in what I was doing, coming to watch me play football and tennis, or to take me to the cinema to watch the kids' films on Saturday mornings. When we were together at home, we would play ludo or cards. She put everything into

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the family well-being and no one could have wished for a better mother.

When all of my sisters and my brother eventually moved out and got married, I lived alone in the house with my mom for six years. The house remained a happy one, although I was not around so often. By then, this love of sport had completely taken over my life and I would spend most of my time at the Berea Park playing fields. Mom never remarried, although she enjoyed the company and friendship of an older man who lived nearby. They would go to Berea Park for a drink occasionally and we often wondered why she did not remarry, but she seemed happy for things to remain that way.

In my later years in South Africa, before I went to Scotland, there was just mom and me. However, in the first 12 years of my life, there was another woman in my life. She was introduced to us in circumstances which reflected the political and cultural situation of South Africa, but might seem quite alien to those born and bred in the United Kingdom. At the time, the white man ruled the country and a policy of separatism prevailed. It was a system that would eventually cast a shadow over life in the country.