



TOTTIS

FROM THE KOP TO THE KELPIES
THE ALEX TOTTEN STORY

ALEX TOTTEN WITH JEFF HOLMES

FOREWORD BY SIR ALEX FERGUSON AND WALTER SMITH OBE

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An Al-Fresco Childhood

A SINGLE end with two small rooms – that’s where my story starts. I was born at home – 125 Glasgow Road, Dennyloanhead – on 12 February 1946, a few months after the end of the Second World War which, I suppose, makes me a ‘war baby’. I’m sure mum and dad, Mary and John, didn’t have their troubles to seek during that awful conflict but they seemed to come through it relatively unscathed.

We had our home comforts, even though they were few, although everything still seemed to be situated outside. If you needed the toilet, you had to nip outside to the almost ‘al fresco’ cludgie, while the women all went out to the wash house to launder the clothes – and after they had finished, the kids were chucked in for their twice-weekly bath. That was after you had played outside all day, which was customary when I was growing up.

I was an only child and called after my grandfather, Alexander. Mum had wanted to call me Robbie, which I suppose would have been quite a modern name, but my grandparents were incredibly strong individuals and gran got her way. She had apparently come down to the house and said to mum, ‘So it will be Alexander then?’

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And that was that, although I can't quite imagine the same thing happening today.

Dennyloanhead is a small village near Denny and we had great neighbours. Everyone was really friendly and I didn't have many problems in my early years. Leaving your front door unlocked was the norm, as no one would dare have entered another person's home. Your belongings were 100 per cent safe and that in turn bred a culture that was warm and friendly. People in our part of the village would rather have helped one another out than take what wasn't theirs, and these are values that you then carry through life.

I lived in that house until I was nine years old and went to Dennyloanhead Primary School. When we moved, it was to a bigger council house, and we got our first black and white television, which was quite something. BBC Scotland had started transmitting by then but Scottish Television, which was inaugurated in 1957, was still some two years off, so we were pretty limited in what we could watch. Mind you, it was such an exciting innovation in my eyes that I would've sat for hours on end just watching the test card!

But while I was really taken with television, I was an outdoor boy at heart. We had a large patch of grass quite near the house and that's where I spent the biggest part of my childhood. There might not have been any goalposts but that didn't matter because sticking a couple of jackets down did the trick. Your imagination did the rest. You could have been playing at Hampden, Wembley, or my own personal blue heaven – Brockville, home of Falkirk FC. Since I was able to walk, and perhaps even before that, I was kicking a ball around.

Moving house didn't mean changing friends because we relocated just a mile up the road. Along with the television we had an inside toilet and a bath. Things that people obviously take for granted these days but which were luxury to us back then. We were living like kings, or at least that's the way it felt.

Dad was a shipping clerk with the local foundry and mum worked there as well. They must have been pretty happy with me

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as I was an only child. They knew I was football mad from the first whistle and every Christmas I would get a ball, a pair of boots and a tin of dubbin to keep the ball and boots in good working order. I was the epitome of easy to buy for. A standing order for the same presents every year, but at least I was never disappointed.

I enjoyed primary school. One of my best friends was a lad called Alan Boslem and we played football in school each time the opportunity arose. Alan was a real character and used to tell everyone his dad was a traveller, when in fact he was a road sweeper! We would use the shed for one of the goals because it was the perfect shape. The other goal was a couple of posts, but I always preferred shooting into the shed because it felt like you had scored a real goal when the ball hit the wall at the back.

I always pretended to be Alex Parker. He played for Falkirk and was my hero when I was growing up. He was a great player and as I weaved my way through the opposition in the playground, in my mind I was Alex at Brockville playing in a Scottish Cup tie against one of the bigger teams, and as I hit the back of the 'net' I could hear the roar of the crowd, appreciating what I had just done for them. Some of the other lads pretended to be other big-name players, playing for the more glamorous sides, but I was happy being Alex. He was the greatest as far as I was concerned.

We also enjoyed playing a game that involved hitting a ball off a wall and you were eliminated if you missed the wall. We would try and make angles and hit it as hard as we could in order to knock the other lads out. It was a really popular game, and good fun, but one we all took deadly serious, although one day no one could move for laughing when an accident befell poor Geordie Sherman. Someone hit the ball off the wall so hard that it went straight over a fence and Geordie jumped over to retrieve it. Sadly, for him, he jumped straight into an old bath that had obviously been dumped quite some time before, as it was filled with stale and smelly water. Moments later he re-emerged, soaked to the skin and smelling to the high heaven – but with the ball tucked safely under his arm and a big smile etched right across his face. It was hilarious.

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The whole of the school holidays were always spent at my Aunt Kate's house in Aberdour, which I loved. My mum and dad both worked but I would go there and have a great time playing with the other kids and spending a lot of time on the silver sands.

We played football around the clock in those days: at play time and lunch times in school, we kicked the ball all the way home from school and then it was out straight after your dinner until your dad shouted you in when it was getting dark. And we never tired of it. If I had remained a kid for my entire life I would've been quite happy to play football until the end of time – that's how much I loved it.

When mum went to see the headmaster, he asked what I wanted to be when I left school. Then, without waiting for an answer, he said, 'I know, a footballer!' But it was true. Just about everyone I knew played football all the time, and we wouldn't just play matches. We would practise all the little bits and pieces and, while we all wanted to score goals, we didn't mind taking our turn in goals. In fact, other sports didn't even come into the equation. The likes of golf didn't get a look in. It was football or bust – and that's just the way it was.

I was like most other young lads growing up, and got up to a few dodges, although when the snow fell one year I got more than I bargained for when I decided to fire some snowballs at a passing bus. There was a police car right behind it and when I saw it stop, and two officers getting out, I started to shake with fear. They put their caps on as they were walking across the road and one of them in particular was just staring at me. Running away crossed my mind but Dennyloanhead was such a small place that I soon thought better of it. They were laying into me and telling me how dangerous it was to throw objects at passing vehicles when I started to get this warm and wet sensation in my lower half. I had peed myself. I couldn't wait to get away and I promise you I never even considered chucking a snowball at another bus.

Mind you, that didn't stop me and one of my friends conjuring up our own party piece for those leaving the pub more than just a little inebriated. We would get a piece of rope, stretch it out and one

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of us would be at either end. When we saw a drunk man coming we would pull it tight, and you can imagine the outcome. We thought it was hilarious, and I often wondered if we encouraged anyone to give up the booze!

In school, I wasn't big on lessons. I enjoyed having a carry-on with Alan more, but we were soon separated for giggling too much. I was more into my football and even though my primary school didn't have an organised team, we made sure we didn't miss out.

We had a thriving school team at Denny High. My science teacher, Mr McGuinness, and Mr MacFarlane, a PE teacher, encouraged me all the way. I played for them on a Saturday morning and in just about every position going; full-back, centre-half, midfield, you name it, but in the afternoon, when I was just into my teens, I played in goals for Dunipace Thistle, and got picked for Stirlingshire between the sticks, and really enjoyed it. Perhaps I should have remained in that position! Seriously though, it was a great feeling representing my Shire, whether it was in goals or outfield.

It was a couple of years beforehand that my grandfather had started taking me to see Falkirk, and I later went with my friends. Brockville was a fantastic ground to watch football at. It was compact and if you stood down at the front you were just a few feet from the players. When they leaned back to take a throw-in you really did get up close and personal. I was about ten when I went to my first game but later went with my friends and we would stand in the Hope Street end where the atmosphere was electric, and where the singing emanated from. These were great days.

When I was 11, Falkirk went on an amazing run in the Scottish Cup and even at such a young age I could sense something special was happening. I went to every game, home and away, and we eventually went on to lift the trophy when we beat Kilmarnock 2-1 in a replay at Hampden Park. I remember travelling to that game on the supporters' bus and winning the sweep thanks to big George Merchant. He scored the first goal and I netted the princely sum of 3/6, which is around 17p in today's money. Never

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mind a prince, I felt like a king with all that money in my pocket, and with Falkirk winning the cup, it was like a double celebration for me. The victorious team still holds a prominent place in my heart. It was Slater, Parker, Rae, Wright, Irvine, Prentice, Murray, Grierson, Merchant, Moran and O'Hara.

Alex Parker, who was a right-back, the same as me, was one of our important players that season and was simply sensational. A few years later, when I made the move south of the border, I played against Alex and took great delight in telling him that he had always been my hero. He had moved to Everton so to play against him in a Merseyside derby, albeit for the second string, was something special.

He was at my testimonial dinner with his wife and I made sure he sat at my table. It was a great night and after that we became really good friends. Sadly he took ill and ended up in Dumfries Royal Infirmary. He had to undergo an operation to remove part of his leg. It was a real tragedy, and when he died his wife asked if I would take a cord at his funeral to help lower his coffin into the ground. He lived in Gretna at the time and had the Coach & Horses pub in Carlisle, and I went down to see him a couple of times. He was a lovely man, and a great player. I can still visualise him with Everton, pinging precision passes all over the park. He was Falkirk's most capped player and no wonder. I think he won about 14 caps for Scotland.

What was great for me was that when I finally got to meet him, he was such a gentleman. It meant that all those visions I'd had growing up weren't shattered by finally meeting my hero and him turning out to be arrogant or dismissive. No such fears there, although I remember one particular occasion when I was at Dennyloanhead Primary and Rangers were due to play at Brockville. My dad was a big Rangers fan and would occasionally take me through to Ibrox, which seemed further away in those days, as there were no motorways. I loved that as well as there were often 70,000 and 80,000 at matches and the atmosphere was incredible. My favourite Rangers player was Billy Stevenson, who

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would go on to join Liverpool in a mammoth £20,000 deal, after his place had been taken in the Rangers team by Jim Baxter. One day, we had waited outside the Royal Hotel in Dennyloanhead for ages for the players to come out so that we could catch a glimpse of them. Out they started to filter and we approached them for an autograph. I asked Sammy Baird, a huge player with Rangers in those days, and a local guy to boot, and he told me to 'eff off'. I was only about nine at the time and was devastated. I was just thankful that it wasn't Billy Stevenson who swore at me, as that would have been such a let-down.

I had the best of both worlds at that time, getting to see my hometown team in Falkirk, and also heading through to Ibrox to watch Rangers, a club I was very fond of. In fact, I can still recall that Rangers team. It was Niven, Shearer, Caldwell; Davis, McKinnon, Baxter; Henderson, McMillan, Millar, Brand and Wilson.

But your life moves on and when I turned 13, I had a decision to make. Continue to play football or watch it, and as much as I loved Falkirk, it was a no-brainer. You can't beat playing competitive football so the choice really was quite an easy one in the end.

Mr McGuinness and Mr MacFarlane had recommended me to the Stirlingshire Schools FA, and insisted I could do a good job for them at right-back. I was chosen for the trials which in itself was a real buzz, and eventually picked to play for my local county. That was a fantastic honour which made my mum and dad so proud. When you're younger you dream of playing for your favourite team, but representative football is also a great achievement.

When I was 15, a man called Sandy Brown, from Graeme High School, took Stirlingshire and he was absolutely delighted when four of his players were picked to play for Scotland. We were following in good company because big George Young, the former captain of Rangers and Scotland, had come from Stirlingshire, but we created a record for the county when four of us were chosen to represent our national team. It was a tremendous feeling and we all became close after going through the trials together.

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The first international match I played was against Wales at Rugby Park and there were three coachloads of family and friends down from Denny High. We won 4-1 and the team played really well. Pulling on that Scotland strip was such a buzz, and you felt like you were representing your entire country, and not just your team-mates, family and friends. The other Stirlingshire players in the squad were William Smith, a left-back, David Cattenach, who played centre-half, and Ian Mitchell, an outside-left.

I remember my parents received a letter from the association prior to the match and one of the rules stated, 'Boys must bring pyjamas, handkerchiefs, comb, raincoat, towel and toothbrush. They must also bring properly studded boots, stockings, shin guards, white pants, a jersey and rubber shoes. These will be required for a practice and a complete strip will be provided for the match.' We were also warned that 'charging the goalkeeper wouldn't be tolerated!' There was a civic luncheon planned to take place before the match at the Co-operative Hall, in Dunlop Street, Kilmarnock.

Afterwards, a match report in a newspaper, written by Jimmy Delaney, the ex-Celtic star, read, 'Right-back Alex Totten kicked well with both feet and used the ball intelligently. For Wales, Jones was a heroic red-shirted defender, but the only Welsh forward with progressive ideas was Humphries, who faced the best Scots defender, Totten.' I was fair chuffed when I read that.

We were staying at the Broomhill Hotel, in Kilmarnock, the night before the game and I'll always remember receiving a telegram which read, 'Mr McGuinness, Mr McIntosh, Mr MacFarlane and your team-mates wish you the very best of luck in tomorrow's game.' It was a lovely touch and very much appreciated.

From there we moved on to Dens Park, Dundee, to play Ireland on a Friday night, and little was I to know that the ground would one day become my place of work, although that night we turned in a first-class performance and again won 4-1.

A contemporary report stated, 'Before the international series, only Mitchell, of the four Stirlingshire lads, had been capped. The

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selection of Totten, however, was no surprise. He is a talented and versatile young footballer who is equally at home in goal or at centre-half, as well as either of the full-back positions. Indeed, two years ago, he represented Stirlingshire Under-13s as a goalkeeper against Glasgow. The following season he was outstanding as a centre-half and impressed again during trial matches at Stenhousemuir and Linlithgow. Totten is an all-round athlete who has represented his school at the County Sports.' Glowing praise indeed!

The bandwagon was rolling, and I was so glad to be on it... but the big one was still to come. England were *the* team to beat and we knew that only a momentous performance would help us achieve that. The match was originally scheduled to take place at Wembley but the fixture clashed with the English FA Amateur Cup Final so it was switched to Sunderland's Roker Park. I'll never forget that day because just before the game I was standing out on the pitch looking up at my dad in the stand. The national anthem was playing and my chest had expanded a few inches and dad was the proudest man in the stadium. I wasn't too far behind, mind you, because I can only begin to describe the joy I felt at wearing the dark blue jersey.

It was a fantastic game and I was up against a lad called John Sissons, who would sign for West Ham United, but we won 3-2, after being three goals up, and when the final whistle went it was an incredible feeling – not to mention a great relief. We had just defeated England on their own soil and not only that, but had secured the Victory Shield in the process. Mr Reid took the team and when we got back into the dressing room he congratulated us all on a great performance, but said his only regret was that the match hadn't been played at Wembley, and that was our regret as well because I would love to have played there. But we had still beaten England in front of 30,000 spectators, which was a 'decent' consolation.

A match report read, 'This victory helped Scottish fans get over their Wembley headache. The way the boys fought and blended against a more powerfully built English team was a credit to the

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teacher-talent spotters who chose them. The result at Sunderland was a great achievement because the boys went to Roker as the “no chance team”, and after taking a buffeting for five minutes, settled down to give an exhibition of football that the opposition simply couldn’t counter. They outwitted their opponents with skilful teamwork and until 10 minutes from time, were leading by 3-0.’ The ‘Wembley heartache’ the report alluded to was the infamous 9-3 game, when the English ran riot in the annual Home International match. We all felt sorry for goalkeeper Frank Haffey that afternoon.

It was 1961, and a centenary year for the association, and as part of the celebrations we played England later in the year at Tynecastle. We drew 2-2, which meant they hadn’t managed to beat us that year. I played in all four international games, as did Bobby Watson, later of Motherwell and Rangers, who was our captain. Another team-mate, Denis Setterington, also went to Ibrox so it was a really exciting time for us all.

I’ll never forget being called up to the stage at the annual Denny High School awards ceremony and being handed my Scotland Schoolboys’ cap by the headmaster. It was a fantastic moment and one that I lapped up every second of. Once again, my proud parents were there to support me.

Because we were such a successful team, there was always a posse of scouts at our games, and I was asked down to Manchester United. The moment I was told that United wanted to see me was incredible. Suddenly, the reality kicked in. Young Totten might just have a future in this game after all. What was it I’d told the headmaster?

Manchester United weren’t offering a trial, as such, because the scouts had given a detailed report on each of the players. They wanted to sign me. I remember flying down from the old Renfrew Airport with my mum and dad, who had never been on an aeroplane before, and the first thing you see as you’re taking off is a big cemetery, and we all sort of gasped. When we got to Manchester we were well looked after by a guy called Jimmy

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Murphy, Sir Matt Busby's trusted assistant. He took us to Old Trafford, and said, 'There is someone I want you to meet.' We walked round the corner and there was Bobby Charlton, probably one of the greatest players in the world at that time. I was only 15 and was totally in awe of this guy. He was by himself and was standing there rattling a ball off this wall, right foot, then left foot etc. It really was a case of practice makes perfect. He stopped though when I asked for his autograph, which he signed on Manchester United headed notepaper. He was the perfect gent – and I still have that autograph to this day.

But it wasn't just United who were keen on me. I had a few clubs, and next stop on the 'Totten Roadshow' was Birmingham City, and then Middlesbrough, and I visited these clubs with my dad. Middlesbrough wanted to sign me there and then, and I was told Arsenal were also keen, but next up was Liverpool, and as I was to meet the legendary Bill Shankly, I thought it might be wise to hold off from signing a contract at Ayresome Park – and I'm so glad that I did.

Meeting 'Shanks' was an incredible experience. As soon as my dad and I arrived at the front reception at Anfield we were ushered in to see Mr Shankly. He was a real character. He stood out straight away, and just like Jock Wallace, he had an aura about him. He must have made an instant impression on me because I chose a Second Division side over top-flight clubs such as Manchester United. He had so much enthusiasm and sold the club to my dad and I in an instant. He would say, 'This is a special club and we are going places,' and of course he was 100 per cent right. When he went to Liverpool, the likes of Bob Paisley and Joe Fagan were already there. He didn't take his own people, like David Moyes did when he took over at Manchester United, he slipped into the way of working they had at Anfield and continued that great continuity they already had at the club, and that would be the way of it for many years to come.

I was so impressed by him and the whole set-up at Liverpool, and they wanted to sign me on the spot. He showed me around and

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took time out with me to explain all about the club, and when he mentioned signing me, my head was all over the place. Suddenly the offer from Middlesbrough – and other clubs – was pushed to the back of my mind, but I asked for time to think about it and my dad and I headed back up the road to Dennyloanhead.

I spoke to dad at length about all my options. There were no agents or advisors in those days, so my dad's was the only opinion I really valued. He guided me not only in every aspect of my career, but also in my life. We spoke about Arsenal and Manchester United being in the top division and United's manager, Sir Matt Busby, who was also a living legend. They had some fantastic players at the time so it was a really tough decision, but Shankly had impressed me. There was something about him that attracted me almost instantly and I had more or less made my mind up. While my dad had a say in the matter, he made it clear that ultimately the decision was mine, as I was the one that would be tasked with making it happen.

But it was such an exciting time because we regularly had scouts at the door wanting to sign me or asking me to come and take a look at the facilities of the club they were representing. It was that feeling of being wanted, which was fantastic, that I'm sure played a part in me realising that all I wanted to be was a professional footballer. When that level of interest is shown in you, then you start to realise that you must have something to offer.

While mum and dad and I were down at Old Trafford, we were given a tour of the ground, and even then it had the most fantastic facilities. After that we were taken to the cricket, and then off to the pictures to see *Guns of Navarone*, which has stayed with me to this day. It was all part of the buzz and I'll never forget it.

But I had made my decision and went back down to Liverpool a couple of weeks later and put pen to paper, which was an incredible moment in my young life. I went down myself this time and remember leaving Central Station, in Glasgow, and being waved off by my parents and a lot of family and friends. That was probably when the enormity of the whole situation kicked

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in; when I realised that all my family had travelled through to Glasgow to see me off, I knew it must be something big.

At that time, Dundee and Falkirk were also interested in me, which was fantastic, and to sign for the Bairns would also have been a great honour, but they wanted to give me a job as a draughtsman at a company called Alexander's. They wanted me to stay part-time and turn pro when I was 21, but I wanted it straight away. My only ambition at that time was to be a professional footballer. I couldn't wait, so Falkirk's offer was a non-starter. Looking back, I reckon I made the right decision. I wouldn't change anything about my career. I've been very fortunate with what I've done, who I've met and the places I've been. But I had just agreed to sign for Liverpool, and it was game on.