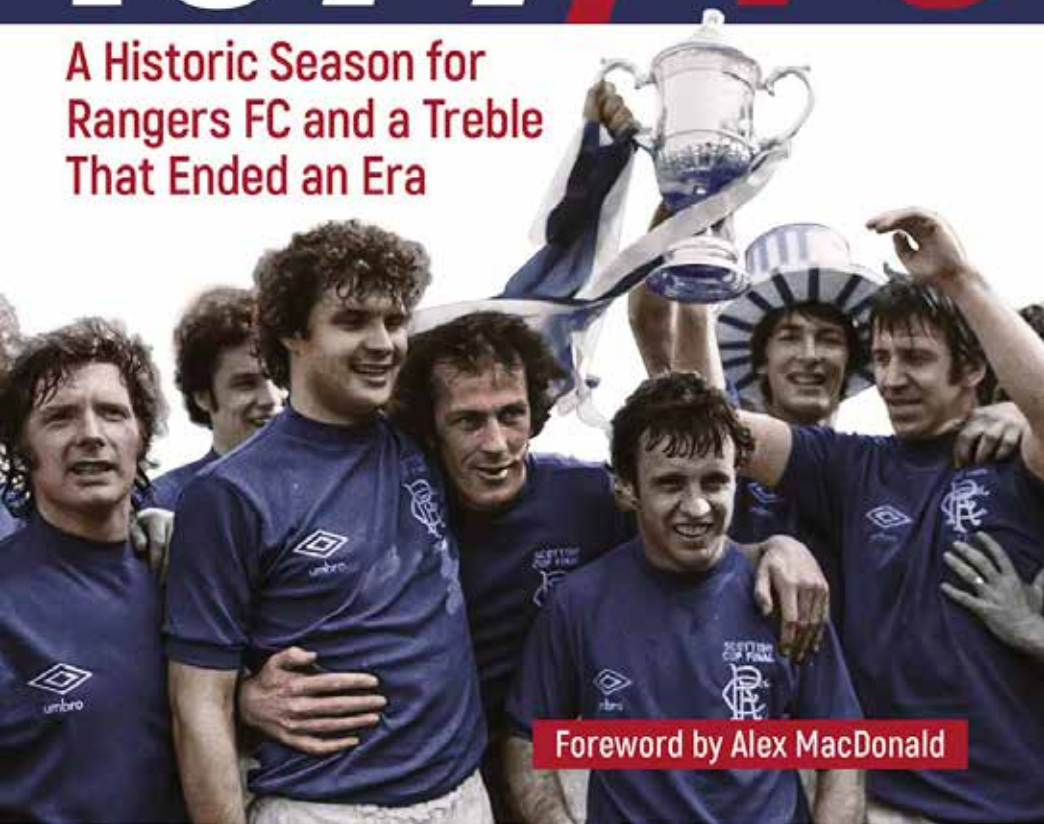


David Herd



1977/78

**A Historic Season for
Rangers FC and a Treble
That Ended an Era**



Foreword by Alex MacDonald

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Pre-Season: New Faces

AFTER THE magnificent treble success of 1975/76, Rangers looked set to dominate Scottish football with a team packed full of experienced players who had developed the winning habit. With the astute and motivational Jock Wallace at the helm, the Ibrox support enjoyed the summer of 1976 confident that the recent years of Celtic success were finally over.

But the following season was one of massive disappointment. The team slipped behind Celtic in the league race from early on, the Parkhead men no doubt boosted by the return to the dugout of Jock Stein, who had missed virtually all of the previous campaign after suffering serious injuries in a car accident in the summer of 1975. The League Cup defence ended with a humiliating 5-1 Hampden semi-final loss to Ally McLeod's Aberdeen, and in a season where several key players missed significant spells through injury, the championship challenge misfired too often with no wins in the four Old Firm meetings. Celtic ended up well clear, and then to compound the misery of all at Ibrox, they clinched the double by defeating Rangers 1-0 in a hugely controversial Scottish Cup Final when referee

Bob Valentine awarded them a penalty for handball against Derek Johnstone when it appeared to most observers that the ball had struck his knee. Seeing former hero Alfie Conn celebrate the victory in a Celtic jersey just made the day even more depressing.

There were some mitigating circumstances for such a poor season, mostly injuries at key times to important players. Derek Johnstone missed the Aberdeen semi-final loss as well as a painful Ibrox Old Firm defeat during a ten-week absence which coincided with a similar spell on the sidelines for defensive stalwart Tom Forsyth. But the team seemed to lack creative spark, relying perhaps too much on the brilliant passing and crossing of Tommy McLean. Results were hopelessly inconsistent, and with the fans starting to express some displeasure, Wallace knew his side needed an injection of fresh blood before the new season got under way.

Before the dismal defeat to Aberdeen, the League Cup campaign had featured a series of epic matches with First Division Clydebank in the quarter-final, with Rangers needing four attempts to finally knock out the Kilbowie team. The star of these encounters was Clydebank winger Davie Cooper, whose close control and dazzling skills had the international players in the Rangers defence sometimes chasing shadows. On 8 June 1977, Jock Wallace paid Clydebank £100,000 to bring the 21-year-old Cooper to Ibrox, fulfilling a boyhood ambition for the player who was brought up as a fan of the club.

'I consider Cooper to be the most exciting prospect in Scottish football,' explained Wallace when asked about such a hefty fee for a player who had never started a match in the top division. 'He has a bit to come yet, but obviously I am confident he will be a great buy for us.' The player himself

simply said, 'I am thrilled at the prospect of playing for Rangers.' It was a signing that excited the support, and in years to come, many would say it represented one of the best pieces of business the club had ever carried out in the transfer market. It was the start of a legendary Rangers career.

Meanwhile, Wallace had already added another talented young player to the squad towards the end of the previous season in a far less publicised move. Club scouts had recommended midfielder Bobby Russell after watching him star for Shettleston Juniors. Russell had started out with youth club Possil YM in Glasgow before being snapped up as a 16-year-old by Sunderland, who had then released him again 14 months later after he failed to settle in the north-east of England. He found a job with a whisky company back in his home city and returned to the junior game where his ability to pick a pass and to play intelligent football quickly made him stand out from the rest.

Just after his 20th birthday, Russell was invited to play in a trial match for Rangers' reserves against Dundee United and he took full advantage of his opportunity. The slim playmaker was the best player on the pitch, and Jock Wallace signed him the next day. Like Cooper, he was a lifelong Rangers supporter, although unlike Cooper he was regarded as a signing of potential rather than a player to be given the task of returning the team to the top of Scottish football.

The pre-season fixtures would see Ibrox again host the four-club Tennent Caledonian Cup the weekend before the start of the 1977/78 Premier Division, and Wallace arranged three fixtures for the team prior to this for the players to gain match practice and sharpness after their usual gruelling fitness schedule when they had returned from the summer break. The first two were to be played in the Highlands,

with Ross County and Nairn County the opposition. There would then be a midweek friendly against Dundee at Dens Park before the Ibrox crowd would get to see the players tested in the Tennent Caledonian Cup against a much higher level of opposition. The final warm-up match would see Rangers travel to Rugby Park to play Kilmarnock just two days after the Ibrox tournament.

The two-match Highland tour saw Rangers open the season on Saturday, 30 July 1977 with a straightforward 4-0 win in Dingwall, Ross County being swept aside by a strong line-up. The manager made a few changes for the second match at Nairn County just two days later, among them a first outing in the top team for Bobby Russell. The game itself was more competitive than the Saturday encounter, Nairn scoring two late goals but unable to pull back the three-goal lead that Rangers had established in the first 50 minutes. But all in attendance were talking about the elegant young unknown at the heart of the Rangers midfield, Russell having created a goal for Alex MacDonald before scoring the decisive third himself.

Russell had given Jock Wallace a pleasant problem of whether to play the inexperienced youngster once the more competitive matches started, but Wallace also had a more worrying problem when Derek Johnstone limped away from the game and was immediately ruled out of the rest of pre-season. Two days after the match gave the first sign of what Wallace thought of Russell, when the manager allowed midfielder Ian McDougall to leave the club and sign for Dundee for a fee of £15,000.

Dundee were the opposition that evening in a friendly, which was used by Wallace to give his fringe players some needed match time. Again, it seemed telling that Russell was not included in the squad, but Johnny Hamilton, a mainstay

of the midfield in both previous seasons, was included in the starting 11. Most attention was on Dundee's new face, the former Celtic winger Jimmy Johnstone having signed on at Dens Park for his former team-mate Tommy Gemmell, who was the manager at the club. The match ended 1-1, with Johnstone overshadowed by the performance of teenage winger Billy MacKay for Rangers, whose pace and direct running excited the fans who had made the journey to watch the action. In contrast, Johnstone limped off after failing to impress, with it later being confirmed that he had picked up a hamstring injury and would miss the next Dundee match.

The Tennent Caledonian Cup was in its second season, played between two Scottish and two English teams, with semi-finals on day one, then a third-place match preceding the final on day two. Rangers had lost to FA Cup holders Southampton in the inaugural final in 1976, and the Saints were back to defend their trophy, alongside an exciting West Bromwich Albion side managed by Ron Atkinson and Alex Ferguson's St Mirren, who had just won Scotland's First Division and would play in the Premier Division for the first time. The opening-day fixtures saw West Brom take on St Mirren, while Rangers were given the chance to avenge their final loss when up against Southampton.

Around 40,000 attended on the Saturday and they were treated to some excellent entertainment. West Brom got the better of St Mirren in a thrilling 4-3 win, featuring a hat-trick for midfielder Tony Brown and a winning goal by future England captain Bryan Robson. Also appearing for Albion was former Rangers hero Willie Johnston, whose explosive pace and wing magic had certainly been missed by many on the terraces since his move south in 1972 not long after his double in Barcelona helped the team to European Cup Winners' Cup glory.

This was a fine West Brom team, who were seen as genuine contenders for silverware in the upcoming English season, and many onlookers were also impressed by their Paisley opponents who looked more than capable of competing in Scotland's top flight.

The team chosen by Wallace to play Southampton was without the injured pair Colin Jackson and Derek Johnstone, and it included both Russell and Cooper to give them both their Ibrox bow in the blue of Rangers. Inspirational captain John Greig filled in at centre-back beside Tom Forsyth in the absence of both his more regular partners, with Bobby McKean given the number ten shirt.

After the despair at how the previous season had ended, the fans hoped to see signs of a Rangers team back in the groove again, with Cooper being the player most eyes were on given his rising reputation within the game after his summer call-up into the Scotland national squad for the first time. He didn't disappoint, scoring a magnificent free kick to settle the match as Rangers roared to an impressive 3-1 win. Alex MacDonald had scored the first from a typical raking finish, with Derek Parlane also getting his name on the scoresheet. It wouldn't be the last free-kick goal those in blue would enjoy watching from the new number 11. With Russell looking like a seasoned veteran in the middle of the park, the new boys couldn't have wished for a better start in front of the demanding Ibrox crowd, and the fans went home happy with what they saw, confident the trophy would be won the next day.

Another 40,000 attended on the Sunday, but the weather had taken a turn for the worse overnight and the rain lashed down for much of the day. Southampton took third place in the appetiser for the day after a match that had just about everything. Referee Hugh Alexander showed a first-half red

card to Southampton's John Sharp, awarded both teams a penalty, and the crowd were treated to a brilliant solo goal by Peter Osgood as the English side beat St Mirren 2-1.

The vast majority of the crowd were there for the final, of course, and Wallace named an unchanged 11 just 24 hours after that fine win over Southampton. West Brom gave Willie Johnston the captaincy for the day, but the goodwill stopped at the first whistle as the game quickly became one of sharp tackling and few chances. Davie Cooper saw a long-range shot well saved by goalkeeper Tony Godden in about the only highlight of a forgettable first 45 minutes.

Rangers were slightly the better team in a very tight affair, until referee Bill Anderson gave their opponents a helping hand to open the scoring after an hour. Peter McCloy rose to gather a corner and was clearly barged by a visiting defender as he jumped alongside. The big goalkeeper dropped the ball, and there was West Brom's highly rated attacker Laurie Cunningham to smash it home. The referee signalled a goal and was immediately surrounded by protesting Rangers players, then he was greeted to a chorus of booing from the home fans. He was unmoved, however, and from that moment on there only looked one winner.

The Midlands outfit started finding holes in the Rangers defence as the home team had to push forward in search of an equaliser, and shortly after substitute Chris Robertson missed a good chance to equalise, that man Cunningham wrapped up the match when he buried a headed knock-down in the box past McCloy. Rangers were chasing shadows towards the end, and the home fans who stayed until the final whistle were relieved the scoreline didn't get any worse than 2-0. To a mixed reception, Willie Johnston received the Tennent Caledonian Cup (after an initial mix-up when he was initially presented with the smaller trophy

for third place), and the sponsors unanimously voted Laurie Cunningham the player of the tournament.

Although without a couple of important players, most in the crowd left the stadium with an uneasy feeling about the season ahead, and Jock Wallace also spoke of his disappointment after a display that saw the team well beaten. The manager also confirmed that the missing Colin Jackson may be fit enough to play some of the Rugby Park friendly the following Tuesday in the hope he would then be in contention for a place in the league opener at Pittodrie the next Saturday. With Derek Johnstone definitely out injured, plus John Greig and Tommy McLean unable to play due to suspension, it was already looking like a tough start to the new season.

Jackson successfully negotiated the Kilmarnock match, where he was mainly surrounded by fringe players and youngsters. Rangers won 3-2 with goals by Chris Robertson, Martin Henderson and young substitute Derek Strickland, who at just 17 years old was seen as a star of the future by the Ibrox coaching staff. Kilmarnock fielded a strong team, including Gordon Smith, a player manager Wallace rated highly and was watching closely. The boss didn't see his performance on the night, however, as he had jetted out to Switzerland that morning to spy on the Young Boys of Berne team who were due at Ibrox a week later in the preliminary round of the European Cup Winners' Cup.

Wallace returned, telling reporters that although he had watched Young Boys lose 4-1 to Servette, he had been impressed and they represented as tough a challenge as the FC Zürich team who had eliminated Rangers from the European Cup the previous season. The press were far more interested in a story from the other side of Glasgow, however, as Celtic confirmed their captain Kenny Dalglish

had agreed to join European champions Liverpool in a record deal for a Scottish club. This news certainly brightened the mood among the Rangers support, as without doubt the loss of their best player would weaken the Celtic assault on honours.

On Friday, 12 August, Wallace confirmed his squad of 13 players for the trip north for the league opener, to face an Aberdeen team now managed by old foe Billy McNeill. Colin Jackson was in the travelling party, and with no Greig, Johnstone or McLean to call on he also included new signing Davie Cooper, pre-season revelation Bobby Russell and young winger Billy MacKay. The build-up was now over; season 1977/78 started now.