

J E F F H O L M E S

The
ALFIE CONN
Story
What's it all About?

What's it all About?

The ALFIE CONN *Story*

J E F F H O L M E S



Contents

Acknowledgements	9
Foreword by Willie Johnston	11
1. A Chip off the Old Bloke.	15
2. Kicking Rugger into Touch.	33
3. Irish Eyes are Smiling	55
4. Standing up to Authority	81
5. Striking Gold in the Camp Nou	103
6. Tam's Scottish Cup Thunderbolt	120
7. Earning my Spurs.	152
8. If the Cap Fits	171
9. Scotland Calling	191
10. Crossing the Great Divide	208
11. A Season of Two Halves	224
12. And Moving On	243
13. Gone to the USA.	251
14. Going Back to my Roots	267
15. On the March With Ally's Army.	280
16. Revving Up With the CC	289
17. My Friends: the Barça Bears	302
18. Saving the Best to Last	316
19. I Think I'm Alone Now	323

A Chip off the Old Bloke

MY EARLIEST recollection of kicking a ball was at Tynecastle when I was around three or four years old. Dad had taken me to his ‘work’ with him as the gruelling pre-season training got under way. I had little concept of anything in those days. I had no idea Dad was a footballer, and no idea that Tynecastle was a football stadium. I believed he had taken me to a park in Edinburgh and that all his mates had decided to come with us. Guys I would later become acquainted with, including Willie Bauld and Jimmy Wardhaugh. I used to love going to the park as a kid and it was even better when someone produced a football – which the Hearts trainer did that day. He passed the ball to me and I passed it back. I had a great time, but despite it being the height of summer my mum had obviously been taking little chance that her wee boy would catch a cold, so I was dressed in a big, long coat and matching scarf. Imagine how difficult it was to show off your silky skills swathed from head to toe in something that wouldn’t have looked out of place in a harsh Russian winter!

One of the few memories I have of that day is standing there on the grass and looking around at the sheer vastness of it all. 'So this is where you work, Dad?' I probably thought to myself. His place of work had the wow factor and despite being just a toddler, my interest was aroused.

When I was a wee bit older, perhaps six or seven, I started to appreciate what he did for a living. By then he had moved on from Hearts and was playing for Raith Rovers – and I equated football with a ride on an old steam train. If I was off school, Dad would sometimes take me to training with him. I'm sure it was because I was either nagging him incessantly or hanging on to his coat-tail as he was leaving the house. By this time I was well aware of where he worked and I thought it was pretty cool that he wasn't stuck in an office all day.

I loved going to see him play for Rovers on a Saturday afternoon. I was playing for the school team and understood the game a bit better – but the highlight of my day was definitely travelling to Stark's Park. In those days there weren't any bridges for cars, so you had to make your way to North Queensferry, get a ferry across to South Queensferry, and then get a train to Kirkcaldy. I just loved the journey across the Forth Bridge on the old steam train.

There was something magical about the sounds and smells of train travel back then, and I enjoyed sticking my head out of the window as we crossed the bridge, looking the way the train was travelling and watching the puffs of smoke coming from up front.

When we pulled into Kirkcaldy station we would walk the mile or so to the ground, and that 20-minute walk was always full of anticipation. Dad had to be there earlier than the others, but when we arrived at Stark's Park there were always supporters milling around and it would take him quite a while to get into the ground. I was always very proud of him being a footballer as it seemed everyone looked up to him. He had obviously dropped down a level but the adulation was still evident.

Whether or not seeing him go about his business had any bearing on me becoming a footballer I'm not sure; after all, it's the dream of most young lads to pull on a pair of boots for a living one day, or if that isn't an option then most lads follow in the footsteps of their dad regardless. Maybe where I benefitted was in having an old man who had seen and done it all before. He did guide me on my way but he was also mindful to let me carve my own path.

When I did eventually become a footballer, I spoke to more than a few people who had seen Dad play and they were never anything less than complimentary about the way he played the game or how he carried himself in life. He may have been one third of a very famous footballing trio, but just like Jimmy Wardhaugh and Willie Bauld he was also very much his own man.

Dad worked down the pit in his youth as Prestonpans was a true mining community when he was growing up. Most of his family worked down the mines too. There were about four or five pits in the area and it would have been a horrendous job, but it was all most folk knew.

When he signed for Hearts he would do a shift down the pit and then go and train with the team. But the day he was able to give up mining would've been a great day for him. There was also a prominent paper mill at Inveresk, which was a big employer at that time. I think my dad would've been advised to keep his job in the pit by his parents in case the football didn't work out. But, boy, did his chosen career work out. Hearts had endured a barren spell for decades before the Terrible Trio clicked into gear, and once fully up to speed, Conn, Bauld and Wardhaugh helped the team win the League Cup in 1954, the Scottish Cup in '56 and two years later the biggest domestic prize of them all, the league title.

My dad was the first of the trio to join up at Tynecastle and would go on to score an impressive 223 goals in 410 games, and all from the inside-right position. Of that magnificent goal haul, 166 were scored in competitive fixtures, making him Hearts' sixth-top goalscorer of all time. Remarkable. Bauld scored 277 times, while Wardhaugh bagged 271. Is it any wonder these guys were nicknamed the Terrible Trio and that there were more than a few knobbly knees around when Conn, Bauld and Wardhaugh were due in town?

Dad joined Hearts from Inveresk Juniores – a team from Musselburgh – in 1944, when he was just 17, having joined them from Prestonpans YMCA, but it was a couple of years before he established himself in the first team, and that was the same season his two mates also made it into the first team. The first time they played together was in 1948 and Hearts

stuck six past East Fife with Dad scoring twice and Willie Bauld getting a hat-trick. Dad was just 22 and it was said that his movement and passing was vital to the success of the front three. He always maintained that Willie Bauld was the brains of the outfit, but he was being modest. I think all three became equally as important to each other and by the time they had played a few games together their understanding was already veering towards telepathy.

Around a month after Dad had played his one and only game for his country, he suffered a nasty ankle injury, which would dog him for the remainder of his career. He managed only 15 games in the following two seasons, and nine of those came in the 1957/58 campaign when Hearts won the league, and the team scored an incredible 132 goals, which is still a British record to this day. Dad played in five league games (due to yet another ankle knock), but scored four goals, which proved he hadn't lost his striking instincts.

It was inevitable though that Conn, Bauld and Wardhaugh would eventually go their own ways, and for Dad that meant a trip into the (almost) unknown as he was approached by a South African club called Johannesburg Ramblers. They had first seen Dad play during Hearts' 1954 tour of South Africa – and no wonder they wanted to sign him. He played in nine of the ten tour matches and scored 11 goals. The Conn family started to excitedly prepare for a new life in South Africa's largest city. Dad had also been offered a job and a house, so it was a good deal for us all. About a week before we were due to

leave Prestonpans my parents held a house sale, not to sell the actual house but all the contents. They reasoned that emigrating to the other side of the world would necessitate a clean slate, and so everything was up for grabs. It also makes me think they weren't planning on coming back for quite some time. Apparently house sales were perfectly normal back then, but an alien concept to me. You would be sitting in the house doing your homework, the doorbell would ring and two complete strangers would walk in, have a look around and say, 'OK, how much for your kitchen table?' Dad would name the price, they would hand over the cash and off they'd go with your table and yours truly would be left to finish his homework on the chilly linoleum floor.

It got to the stage that after a couple of days we were sitting on orange boxes eating our dinner as everything had been sold!

And then there was a snag, although not immediately. The owner of the Ramblers wanted Dad to go over to Johannesburg and sign the contract, but he refused, asking them to send the contract over so that he could run it past his lawyer. So, while he was waiting on this contract arriving he organised a going-away party in our barren household. All the Hearts players were there. I was about five or six years old and at one point I was sitting on the staircase alone with my thoughts when this voice drifted into my mind. It was the great Dave Mackay and he sat down beside me. He might have been a hard man on the park but he was such a gentle person and he asked if I was looking forward to my new life in South Africa. I told him I

didn't know an awful lot about South Africa and he told me it was on the other side of the world, which made it sound like this great adventure. When we'd finished chatting, he stood up, ruffled my hair and handed me a ten bob note, before saying, 'That'll get you some sweets for the journey over.' 'Thank you, Mr Mackay,' I beamed. He smiled and joined the rest of the grown-ups in the living room.

Now, ten shillings in 1960 was a small fortune. As I pondered being one of the richest kids in Prestonpans, I couldn't take my eyes off this crumpled brown piece of paper. This was a game changer. At first I hadn't been wildly keen on the idea of South Africa, as I had some good pals at school and around our local area, but this conversation with one of Scotland's greatest ever players had got me thinking – and with ten bob in my pocket I was ready to take on the world. I hid the money somewhere safe in my room – not from my parents or siblings, but from outside influences. Well, you never know, right? Off I went to school the next morning and told my mates that I was moving not just to South Africa, but to the other side of the world, like Mr Mackay had said. Of course, what I didn't know about our impending journey, I made up. I had my audience eating out the palm of my hand and might even have mentioned that I was now rich enough to self-finance the trip. I skipped home from school but when I walked through the front door the living room was like a morgue. It didn't help that the entire house was bare, but immediately I realised something big was wrong. Kids weren't normally party to adult

conversations in those days but we were included in this one. Dad asked me to sit down while my mum was staring at the floor. He came right out with it. 'We're not going to South Africa.' And that was that. After this bombshell announcement I was in pieces. I hadn't wanted to leave my friends in the first place but the idea had kind of grown on me, and all I could think to ask was, 'Do I still get to keep the ten bob?' Part of me thought I'd need to hand it over to help finance the hunt for replacement furniture!

I later recall Dad telling my mum that the deal had fallen through because the owners of the South African club had been adamant that he go over to Johannesburg and sign the contract. He was never going to do that without some sort of insurance policy in place, so we were staying put – in the same house in Prestonpans, just with no furniture. Mum wasn't happy but had no alternative but to accept it. I'm sure they must've spent the next week or so shopping to replace all the items they'd sold in our cut-price house sale.

By the following week, South Africa was no big deal. I was over it. It's what we do as kids and how we process and handle events in the early days of our life.

Dad had stopped playing for Raith Rovers but decided he wanted to stay in the game, and he was soon appointed player-manager of Gala Fairydean Rovers. We didn't have to move house because he would travel down twice a week for training and again on the Saturday for a game. It was just over 30 miles from our house to Galashiels but the A7 wasn't the best of

roads so it could be a lengthy journey. He would pick a couple of players up in Newtongrange and head down to Netherdale. He did well down there. The Rovers finished runners-up in the East of Scotland League to Berwick Rangers 'A' in his first season, and won the King Cup. Dad finished as the league's top scorer with 21 goals in 25 games, including two hat-tricks.

He then hung up his boots to concentrate on management but wasn't always allowed to do his job free of interference. In those days, the board had a big say in how the whole club was run, and also added their tuppence worth in many of the football-related decisions, but Dad wasn't too chuffed with that arrangement. He was more than capable of making these decisions himself, and he eventually had it out with the committee. He told them, 'Look, you brought me down here to manage the team. Let me do my job or sack me!' On the park, the season was going great guns, but all came to a head in the midweek before the title decider on the Saturday. He had travelled down for training as usual and was invited into a meeting with the board. They asked him the team for Saturday's big game, and he named his one-to-11. They said, 'But we think so and so should be playing.' He reminded them that he was the manager and that as long as he had that title, HE would pick the team – no one else. He told them that in his opinion, the guy he had in at that position was better than the player being suggested by the board. It ended in an almighty argument and Dad quit. He was a strong-willed

and very principled man, but knew he had the experience and drive to back it up. It was a shame, because he was building something special at Netherdale. In his second season, deciding to concentrate solely on management had been a great decision. He led the club to an unprecedented four trophies. He resigned deliberately on the eve of the match which clinched the league title, as the championship had already been won comfortably. His team scored a staggering 138 league goals that season and had been hailed far and wide for the attractive brand of football they were playing. Who knows what he could've gone on to achieve at Gala had there been harmony between board and manager?

He was also strong-willed during his playing career, and on one occasion, at Tynecastle, he was in the dressing room just moments before an important game against Rangers. The manager, Tommy Walker, approached Dad and said, 'Alf, just one job for you today. All you have to do is mark Sammy Baird out of the game. Nothing else.'

Dad was stripped and ready to go, but replied, 'Are you kidding?'

'No,' Walker insisted, 'just keep him quiet.'

Dad immediately peeled off his strip and started putting his clothes back on.

'What are you doing?' asked Walker.

'If that's what you're asking me to do, I'll decline. Get someone else to do it. If I'm on my game Sammy Baird will be marking me!'

Mr Walker thought for a moment and said, 'You know what – you're right!'

And Dad put his strip back on!

He wasn't long out of work when he was offered the manager's job at Raith Rovers, and he accepted. He had been in charge of Gala for two years and the board at Stark's Park had clearly noticed something special about him, but he only stayed a year and that was the end of his involvement with football.

It was work that led to my parents moving to Kirkcaldy in the first place. When Dad was at Hearts a rep from a company called Harris Brushes had visited the stadium to see Willie Bauld. He offered Willie a job endorsing and selling paintbrushes. My dad had been chatting to Willie when the rep approached them, but Willie hadn't been interested. Never one to miss an opportunity, Dad asked what the job entailed, and the rep was more than happy to chat to another member of the Terrible Trio. The players were coming to the end of their careers and in those days they needed a job when they finished playing. When Dad said he would consider it, the rep was delighted. He talked it over with my mum, informed the rep that he would take the job and was a salesman initially. He was an intelligent man, and quickly worked his way up the ladder, only too aware that football wasn't going to provide for the family long after he had hung up the boots. It was the season before he left Tynecastle and getting a job had been on his mind for quite some time.

He then moved to the Derby-based paint firm, Joseph Mason, and headed up their operations in Kirkcaldy for a while. He was good at what he did and had a tremendous work ethic.

When it came to my football development Dad was never pushy, but very hands-on and keen to help me improve. I loved that he was normally already home when I got in from school and I couldn't wait to get out the back garden. I wanted to play football non-stop. I was hopelessly obsessed. He would teach me how to trap the ball and how to move it and I enjoyed that. We had a big wall in our backyard, and he would hand me a tennis ball, and I would kick that wee ball against the wall, control it, move it on to my other foot and do it all over again. And I would ask, 'Why a tennis ball?' And he would say, 'If you can control a tennis ball then a bigger one shouldn't be a problem.' Wisdom. It definitely helped me a lot.

He didn't ever speak about the rough and tumble side of things as that wasn't his style, but he was still a tremendous worker. Along with Bauld and Wardhaugh, it was like a sixth sense these guys had. Every time my old man got the ball, he knew exactly where the other two would be, and vice versa. The Hearts Terrible Trio. He didn't even have to look. My dad was inside-right, Wardhaugh inside-left and Bauld was centre. They were revered by supporters at the time but even as the years passed I would always meet someone that had been a big fan. Away from the football, Dad was also the best of friends with Willie and Jimmy, and they were often round our house.

They remained pals for many years and would play golf together regularly at Ratho Park.

They reckon that at one time Dad had the most powerful shot in the country – the original Cannonball Kid. I saw shades of that in the back garden, although I'm sure he 'took the edge off it' so as not to hurt me. I didn't have a particularly powerful shot, but apparently the majority of his goals came from outside the box. A lot of that was down to him practising for hours with a tennis ball, and he passed that on to me. Dad was stocky and muscular, and he had fantastic technique. Goalkeepers simply didn't save a Conn (senior) piledriver.

At the start I liked playing as an inside-forward, getting upfield and both making and scoring goals. I was a number eight. People often say they loved my style of socks at the ankles and the long hair, but my playing style changed down at Tottenham. I was more or less given a free role, and I played wider, but with the freedom to go wherever I wanted.

I probably suffered more than my fair share of injuries throughout my career and I know that Dad also had a couple of really nasty ones. A couple of ankle injuries he sustained in the latter part of his career meant he was never the same again. He still had the guile and the craft but the body wasn't as mobile and flexible. Personally I don't remember too much about those but I do recall the broken jaw he suffered in a feisty Edinburgh derby match with Hibs. I was five, and after the game, we all went up to see him in hospital and he looked awful. In order for the doctors to wire up his jaw, he had to have two teeth

extracted so that they could get fluids in. They had a special cup and they poured it into his mouth through the gaps in his teeth. He couldn't talk, and therefore he couldn't give me a row for anything, so I was probably quite happy!

When he signed for Raith Rovers it wasn't a case of him desperately trying to prolong his career. He still had value to the team, otherwise he wouldn't have signed. He was as honest as the day was long and knew exactly when it was time to hang up the boots.

When he died in 2009 it had a profound effect on me. He was the first member of my family to pass away and it hit me hard. He was 82 and had had a mixture of a hard life and a good life. I was very close to my parents up until my career took off and then I was away living the good life at the likes of Rangers and Tottenham. I was always away from home, even though I technically still lived with them until my mid-to-late teens. I'll never forget the time I was told that Dad was really ill. He was in hospital in Dunfermline and thankfully I made it up in time to see him before he passed. I was completely overcome by grief and didn't really know what to say to Mum, as she had just lost her soul mate. I was very close to Mum when I was growing up, and her passing in January of 2024 also hit me hard.

When I officially 'moved out' of my parents' home, it was to get married to Sue, but I still made a point of getting home to Kirkcaldy when I could and would sit for a couple of hours telling them all my news – well, the news I wanted them to know! I mean, who tells their parents everything? Over the

years I've had a lot of people tell me that I was born in Kirkcaldy – because they saw it on the internet! I can assure you I'm a Prestonpans laddie born and bred.

But you know what, even though my visits back home were only a couple of times a month, I always knew that Mum and Dad had my back. That's not something a parent tells you, but more of a feeling, and something that is either there or it isn't. That was a great comfort to me.

When I would eventually move to Celtic I know they also got a bit of stick, and that they felt that too, which made me sad, but on a visit home they both said to me, 'You're a big boy and you've made your bed, so lie in it.' That was their attitude, but equally they were supportive. It was my decision, and while Mum didn't have any interest in football, Dad had obviously filled her in regarding the implications of such a move. Mum never watched me play, but Dad made a point of coming to watch me every time I made my debut for a new club. He didn't make the European Cup Winners' Cup Final but was at both the League Cup Final in 1970, and the Scottish Cup Final three years later.

It'll be no surprise to anyone that out of both my parents, my dad had the bigger influence on me. He had been there and done it and knew that he could help shape my career in some ways. He knew what was in store for me and could foresee the pitfalls. And even though he had always been an Edinburgh man, he knew exactly what would happen when I joined Celtic. He didn't try to talk me out of it but he wasn't daft. He knew of

the backlash that would've befallen him had he moved to Hibs at some point in his career. He was a guiding light throughout my life, without ever being pushy. When I was 15 or 16, and all my pals would be going out on a Friday and Saturday night, down to youth clubs etc., I would be stuck in the house – and that was tough. But that came from my old man. He would say, 'If you want to be a success, you need to make sacrifices – and it starts now.'

I would always counter with, 'For goodness sake, Dad, it's Saturday night and all my pals are going out,' and he would say, 'It's completely up to you Alf, but if you want to go out you won't make it in football.'

And I did make that sacrifice but it was tough at first, especially as we would meet up the next day and they would all be talking about what they'd got up to the night before and I felt completely out of things. Looking back, he was 100 per cent right, because I know that if I hadn't made those sacrifices, I definitely wouldn't have made it to the standard I did. That required a fair bit of dedication.

It's changed days now. It's the case for many that if they screw the nut and sign a two-year contract they're made for life. Kids are getting too much money now and it definitely affects them. At Dundee United Jim McLean would give a decent wage but good bonuses, and then there was a hunger and desire to achieve great things so that the bonuses would come your way. I'll always maintain that a minimum wage and an attractive bonus is the perfect incentive. Nowadays,

some of the younger players are getting £200,000 a year before they kick a ball. Where's the motivation to go on and achieve something really great in the game? Unless you're naturally a super-motivated individual, then it ain't going to happen.

I like to think I grew up with two parents who tried to teach me and my siblings right from wrong. They were both fantastic role models, and that was mirrored in the number of people who always stopped to talk to them. It was probably more my dad, as he spent an awful lot of time in our front garden – but he wasn't sunbathing or lounging around. I remember when we moved into our first house in Prestonpans he spent days digging up the front garden. All these people would be asking him what he was doing, and he would reply, simply, 'potatoes'. When they asked, 'In the front garden?' he would say, 'Of course, it enriches the soil and gives you better grass.' I still don't know if he was telling the truth, but I think he did it to save a couple of bob. He was a resourceful man that never forgot himself. He was a huge star of Scottish football in his day, but he remained grounded, approachable and made time for anyone who wanted a quick word about Hearts, football in general or current affairs.

He was self-taught, read books and learned by error. He planted all these seeds and when the time was right we had our own crop of Maris Pipers, if they were around back in the day. He would grow all his own vegetables. When we moved into our next house his impressive vegetable patch took up half the garden. The other half was for football, of course. We had the most amazing carrots, turnips, cabbages and, of course, our

Prestonpans-wide famous potatoes. I was a happy kid. Before we got our house with a garden we had lived in a couple of flats. The first was up above a petrol station, and we paid rent like everybody else. I must admit, it was a nice feeling when we got our first council house with a garden. It was just the extra space it gave us, and the garden allowed Dad and I to go out and play football.

I also had lots of pals growing up and we would be out getting up to no good; not really bad stuff, but just general mischief. Football was king, though, and the boy with the ball was always guaranteed a game, and we would play wherever we could – on a vacant patch of grass, preferably, or on the street if that was all we had. Like everything else, I lost touch with all my pals when I moved away from Prestonpans.

When I was a kid I was a delivery boy for a local butcher. It was a Saturday morning gig and would give me an extra couple of bob. My pal's dad owned the shop and a few years ago he appeared at my door one day and said, 'John Gilmour!' We had known one another from school and had a great catch-up. Moments like that transport you back to the days when you were just starting out in life, and it's nice to wallow in nostalgia occasionally, but probably best that as far as the future is concerned, you don't know what's round the corner.