

Ally Maxwell ...the goalie playing under 'The Goalie!'



Ally Maxwell would have been damned if he did, and damned if he didn't! As a young lad making his way in the game, he decided he would prefer to be at the sharp end of the team, up front and scoring goals, and he did not a bad job too. Ultimately, though, he swapped the number nine jersey for number one, and found his sanctuary between the sticks.

He explained, 'True, I was a centre-forward when I was a kid and I managed to score a lot of goals at that age, but we still seemed to lose most games. One day, I said to the manager, "forget this, put me in goals." He did and we won the game. The rest, as they say, is history.'

Which brings me to my opening line. Instead of trying to depose Andy Goram in the Rangers side, he could have been in direct competition with Ally McCoist. Out of the frying pan and into the fire, unless Maxwell could've contributed in excess of 50 goals a season!

So, the talented keeper decided to remain between the sticks and was just 17 when he made his top team debut for Motherwell against Aberdeen – with the game indelibly etched in his mind due to an unforgettable Archie MacPherson quote.

Maxwell said, 'It really was nerve wracking. I was up against guys like Gordon Strachan and Alex McLeish, who were top class players at that time, and I was no more than a kid. Within five minutes of the start, I was still shaking like a leaf when a shot came in and I thought, 'here we go,' but it bounced straight in front of me and ended up in my arms. To this day I still have no idea how I managed to catch it, but I do remember legendary commentator, Archie MacPherson's immortal line, something along the lines of, "This team is so young the manager doesn't know if he should be taking them to Pittodrie or Aberdeen Beach to build sand castles," which is exactly what it was like.'

Mind you, one could have been forgiven for thinking Maxwell was still playing centre-forward the day he hit the bar in a match against Celtic. The former Well goalie remembers it like it was yesterday, and said, 'It was typical Motherwell weather the time we played Celtic. The wind and rain were coming at us sideways – you know, a real fine Scottish day, and we had endured wave after wave of Celtic attacks in the first half when they had the wind at their backs. In the second half, we obviously had the elements working for us. The manager wanted us to pile on as much pressure as possible and we were soon causing them all sorts of grief. I remember getting the ball in my hands and punting it down the field. It was just a bit too far and Pat Bonner had to rush from his goal to collect it. The next time I got the ball, the Motherwell fans were screaming for me to SHOOT! I thought, 'what the hell,' so I punted it as high as I could and let the wind carry it. And it did. It bounced almost in the exact spot as before and Paddy started to come out, but didn't realise how high it bounced – and it sailed right over his head and hit the bar! The fans went crazy and loved it. However, our manager Tommy McLean wasn't sharing the love and I could tell by his expression that he wasn't impressed. Because it was so windy, he wanted our strikers to have a chance to reach the ball and he told Tom Boyd to tell Craig Patterson to tell Chris McCart to tell me that I was an idiot!'

Maxwell admits he has many special memories of his time at Fir Park, although the clear highlight is the Scottish Cup win over Dundee United – despite the fact it is tainted by such an awful injury.

He recalled, 'Winning the Scottish Cup is obviously a career highlight, as it was my first major trophy as a professional football player. Winning the Premier League and the League Cup with Rangers was also fantastic and gave me the complete set, so they are all highlights.'

But there was a dark side to that Scottish Cup win of 1991, as Maxwell played a large chunk of the game – most of the second-half plus extra-time – with broken ribs, a ruptured spleen and double vision after a dreadful collision with Dundee United defender John Clark. Despite suffering such horrendous injuries, Maxwell still somehow managed to pull off a world class save from Maurice Malpas in the dying moments of added time to ensure Motherwell hung on for a famous 4-3 win.

Most folk who recall the game wonder how Maxwell managed to get through it all – including the man himself. He said, ‘I ask myself that same question every day. Not a lot of people know this but when Motherwell asked me to participate in a DVD for the 25th anniversary of the cup win, it was the first time since the actual day itself that I had seen footage of the match. I was sitting at ASU (Arizona State University) being interviewed and it brought all these memories flooding back – and let’s just say they aren’t all good.

‘For years, I asked my family not to talk about it and if someone ever brought it up I would leave the room. Until this year, I couldn’t watch it at all, but for the DVD interview they wanted me to go through it play by play and it was very tough. There were parts of the game they replayed, and I remember looking at my wife and saying, ‘I don’t remember that.’ When you watch the DVD you can tell from my face that it still isn’t a pleasant experience for me – even 25 years on!’

The moment the cup final was over, Maxwell – and his teammates – had written their names into the history of Motherwell FC. What they achieved would never be erased, from the history books or the memories of the thousands of Well fans that attended the match.

But he said, ‘If I’m being honest, at that point I thought I’d be spending the rest of my career at Fir Park – I had zero intention of leaving Motherwell, so when it did happen it was very sad. I didn’t want to leave and I never played a competitive game for them after that Scottish Cup final. One of the big regrets is that I never received a testimonial. I signed my first competitive contract on November 1st, 1981 and left ‘officially’ in June of 1992, which is 11 years, and that isn’t including the five years I spent in the youth system at Fir Park. Yes, it was a tough one to take.’

But every cloud has a silver lining, or so they say, and Maxwell’s salvation came in the shape of an official approach by Rangers – in Liverpool manager Graeme Souness’s office at Anfield!

‘Yes, that’s true,’ said Maxwell. ‘I was on loan at Liverpool when Graeme Souness was in charge and one day I was asked to go and see him in his office. When I walked in, Graeme was on the speaker phone with Walter Smith. I sat in the office listening while they were talking, and Graeme suggested Walter should make a bid for me. I was astounded to hear Walter’s answer. He told Graeme he had already made an offer for me AFTER the Cup Final, and that Motherwell had turned it down. They certainly didn’t tell me. I had no idea! I later confronted Tommy McLean about this and he insisted Motherwell had received no such offer. Obviously, I was now on the radar of Rangers and Walter decided to monitor my situation from that point on.’

Maxwell eventually moved to Rangers for £300,000 – and that's when his big challenge began. How to depose Andy Goram as number one, although he said, 'It was never my intention to take the jersey, honestly. I knew my place. I was at Ibrox to learn and who better to learn from?

'So here is how this story plays out. Just before joining Rangers, I was offered two jobs. The first was the first-team goalkeeper's jersey at St Johnstone, which was a huge honour, but I was also offered the back-up spot to Andy with Rangers. All I could think of was that you only get one chance to play for Rangers and that it would probably never happen again. I was already friendly with Andy through the international squad and loved working with him personally, and as part of the Scotland set up. I grabbed the opportunity with both hands and held on for what was sure to be a bumpy ride!

'As I said, I already knew Andy well through working with Scotland, but I loved working with him on a daily basis. He was a mentor to me in many ways. He was and will always be 'The Goalie' to me. I loved Andy to bits.

'I was friends with most of the guys at Rangers, but other than Andy, the guys I got on best with were probably Davie Robertson, Pieter Huistra, Gary Stevens and John Brown. I had a great relationship with these guys during my time at Ibrox.'

One of the biggest differences between playing for Rangers or Motherwell is the size of the attendances. In 1992/93, the Light Blues were averaging just over 42,000 for league games at Ibrox, a huge difference from the few thousand who were turning up at Fir Park on a regular basis.

Maxwell said, 'It's a massive difference for a player. For a start, the bigger the club, the bigger the scrutiny. Normally, one end is giving you 45 minutes of abuse, while the other is, depending on the day, not as abusive. I can remember one game where the Rangers fans were in full voice (there wasn't much action at my end of the pitch) and I could feel the crowd singing underneath my feet; they were actually making the ground vibrate! There is massive pressure on you but you realise the unbelievable strength of the fans behind you and it can be a big help.'

The Hamilton-born keeper made a dozen appearances for the first team during the treble-winning campaign, and insisted it was a bittersweet experience. He explained, 'Naturally it was a big thrill for me every time I wore the Rangers jersey, but if that appearance had come because Andy Goram was injured then it was tinged with a bit of sadness, so I suppose it was something of a double-edged sword.'

After signing on the dotted line, Maxwell was quoted as saying Rangers were the biggest club in Britain, but did he really say that, or was he misquoted? 'Having

just been at Liverpool, which was one of the biggest clubs in Europe, and who just happened to make a habit of winning, and seeing both stadiums and both sets of fans, it was easy to see why Rangers were one of the top clubs in Britain. At that time, I saw some of the biggest clubs at their peak and Rangers were right up there.'

When exactly, if at all, did he realise the 1992/93 squad was a bit special? 'Just really with the way the day to day things went. We trained hard and played hard, that was generally how we did it. It wasn't talked about. It was the way it was, and that's special.'

'Walter and Archie had a great way of bringing new players to the club that would be cohesive to the players already there. That is a very special talent in itself – retain your core and make additions that compliment those core players. That's why we were special. McCoist and Durrant were such huge personalities, and bringing in a new player that didn't get on with those guys could potentially have been a disaster. But it wasn't. It was a great time to be at Rangers.'

The season after 92/93, Maxwell was playing in goals for Rangers against Celtic at Parkhead when he was the subject of an unprovoked attack by a pitch-invading Celtic supporter. I was wondering if there was more pressure on Old Firm players, or was it just business as usual? He answered, 'Being a goalkeeper, no matter what club you play for, brings enough pressure to last a lifetime, but playing for Rangers at such a young age definitely added to it! Mind you, if you are attacked on a football field and you have someone like John Brown looking after you, well, it certainly makes it a little easier to handle.' Maxwell played in 10 of the last 18 games of season 1992/93, which was no doubt a case of Walter Smith utilising his squad to the max. The player agreed, and said, 'I think so. He was rotating the squad to ensure we had fresh, fit players in most games. The good thing was that everyone had to compete for their starting jersey, which meant competition for places was healthy.'

One of the highlights of a great season was definitely the run in Europe, which saw Rangers go undefeated in 10 European Cup/Champions League matches. But was there a belief among the players that they could actually win the competition?

Maxwell said, 'There was a belief about the place that we could win any game we played, but we weren't allowed to look too far ahead. Everything we did was geared up to focussing on the task in hand, then we would look no further than the next game.'

'Our European run that season was incredible, and once again there were mixed feelings about how it all ended. We knew we had just been on the most incredible ride, but going so close and missing out meant there would always be that disappointment there.'

While Maxwell was at Motherwell, he worked under legendary Rangers boss, Jock Wallace, and cited the great man as a big influence on his career. He added, 'Jock was a legend, there is no doubt about that, and the players had a lot of respect for him. He was just old school; he was strong and everything with him was black or white. As a young guy, that was what I needed. You did as you were told, you respected your coach and he led by example.'

'Best story I have for you gives an insight into how Jock was in the dressing room – and it goes like this. We were getting a half-time team talk and our goalkeeper had just lost a soft goal. The ball had trickled through his legs, and he apologised to big Jock, saying, 'Sorry boss, I should have kept my legs closed!' To which Jock replied, 'Naw, son, yer mother should've kept HER legs closed!' It's a true story.'

When Maxwell signed for Rangers, he admitted it was a relief to finally have Ally McCoist on his side. He said, 'It definitely gave me a bit of respite because I have never had a player from the opposition team make me laugh so much as him.

'I remember we were beating Rangers 3-0 at Fir Park in the season before I moved to Ibrox. During the game, Rangers were awarded a corner and Motherwell were up 3-0 at this point and he comes up to me and says, immediately before the corner is taken, 'Maxie, I can't believe we're losing, I'm playing really well!' Then I come to Rangers and think, 'thank god he is usually up the other end of the field.' He is just one of these guys that makes you laugh. Coisty is hilarious.'

Maxwell added, 'I would sum up my time at Ibrox by saying it was such an honour and privilege to play for Rangers. I was given a chance to work with some of the best coaches, players and staff around. Not to mention the fans, who were absolutely magnificent with me.'

'I moved on to be the Director of Goalkeeping for SC del Sol in Phoenix, Arizona, which is a youth development programme. I was also a coach for the Women's Arizona State University Soccer Programme and a Regional Advisor for the United States Women's National Soccer Team.'

'I always liked to keep busy.'