

John May - the greatest Ranger not to win a medal at the club



John May was a bit of a player; and certainly one who could be relied on in a time of need - and there was many an occasion when Rangers came to rely on their talisman. In his first season with the club, he drove on the Light Blues to finish joint top of the league; on 41 points alongside Celtic. Rangers had a vastly superior goal difference, but in those days that didn't count, so the teams played off for the honour of being crowned champions and Rangers lost the play-off game 2-1.

In the Scottish Cup, William Wilton's side motored to the final, beating Celtic on route, but after drawing 0-0 with Third Lanark in the showpiece final, they lost the replay to Cathkin's finest.

They also lost the Glasgow Cup final to the Parkhead side. So much effort, so little to show for it.

The following season was a complete write-off; fourth in the league, humbled in the Scottish Cup quarters by Port Glasgow, and nowhere near the Glasgow Cup final. It wasn't a great time to be a Ranger - but May was never one for hiding. He consistently gave of his best, and tried to do so with a smile on his face.

Born in Dykehead, an area of Shotts, in April, 1878, he played his first competitive football some 20 miles away in Bo'ness, but he wasn't long there when Wishaw Thistle, who had a good reputation as a first-class team, came calling. His brother, Hugh, also played for 'Wishy,' as they were called, but not at the same time as John.

The elder May was just a single season at the Jags before being scouted for Paisley's second club - and on some occasions, their first! - namely, the Abercorn. May was installed as captain of the Abbies, and while the talented left-half may have been at Underwood Park for just one season, it was arguably those ten months that propelled him into the higher echelons of Scottish football. He made quite an impact in Paisley and a queue of clubs were keen to sign him up at the end of the season - that race eventually being won by Derby, and May became part of a wonderful County side.

When we talk famous Derby County managers, the conversation inevitably turns to Brian

Clough, but County's first manager, Harry Newbould, was also a big success and led his club to three FA Cup finals. May played in two of them - in 1899 and 1903. When County lost the 1899 final to Sheffield United, it was their second successive loss, and there was talk that a curse had been put on the club as gypsies had been forced to leave the land upon which Derby's Baseball Ground was built.

May would also play in the 1903 FA Cup final at the Crystal Palace against Bury, and although that too was lost, all talk of curses had long since passed! Derby were certainly one of the teams of the decade and appeared in four FA Cup semi-finals during May's time at the club, as well as achieving a third-place finish in the top division.

Many Scottish commentators reckoned that when May decided it was time to return to Scotland - after six years at County - he came back a much-improved player. Probably because he had role models such as the great John Goodall, the wonderful England centre-forward, to educate, advise and encourage him. In the same half-back line at Derby was Archie Goodall, young brother of John, who, if less brilliant than his renowned elder, bore a reputation for sagacity, tactfulness and grit worthy of his surname. International honours were almost a given for May. True, they arrived much later than they should have, because after being a standout in an international trial match at Partick Thistle's Meadowside ground in 1902 - and missing out on selection - he had to wait four years for his first cap. 'Lack of experience, perhaps,' speculated one commentator. 'If you're good enough, you're old enough,' was perhaps not too popular a phrase back then. At the time, May was a huge player for Derby, but the selectors had obviously not taken the time to properly back-check this burgeoning half-back star.

Thankfully, John knuckled down and got on with his day job. No point crying over spilt milk.

He decided to leave Derby in 1904, and once again there was no shortage of suitors. Celtic made no secret of the fact that they were keen to sign the talented and experienced left-half, but he plumped for Rangers, and never once did he baulk at the thought of following in the illustrious footsteps of club legends such as Jacky Robertson and Neilly Gibson.

Rangers manager William Wilton was a driven man, but he was also skilled in the art of signing players. He was well aware that May would not be an easy capture, so he travelled down to Derbyshire - not an insignificant distance almost 100 years ago - to tell the player in person just how much he was wanted on the south side of Glasgow. Wilton was also honest in his appraisal of the team May would find when he ventured north. The manager made no attempt to gloss over the truth; Rangers were a club in the doldrums, struggling to rebuild after one of the most successful periods in their 30-year history. They had monopolised the League championship for four years, but that successful combination had been broken up through natural wastage and transfers. At 26 years old, May was a vital part of the re-build, and he was well aware that in the short term, at least, he would have to withstand most of the pressure in the middle line until Wilton had secured his other targets.

On the day he signed for Rangers, one reporter opined, 'Contrasting you with the two great pilots recently 'dropped' by your club, I do not in fairness esteem you so artful, nimble, or so versatile as either Gibson or Robertson, but as a strenuous, fearless tackler, a judicious placer, a feeder of forwards, and, above all, as a shot for the net, you hold your own with these two eminences to whom Scotland and Rangers owe so much.

'I should add that, in personal traits, you are more than their equal, for you are not so showy, so dashy, or so bouncy, and bear yourself afield with a modest manfullness and quiet confidence which they did not display. For this reason you are a prime favourite with your own colleagues and with other players, the admiration of the enemy being, I esteem, the best tribute to your ability, and the surest warrant of your popularity.'

May grew into one of Scotland's greatest middle-line players. He was a tower of strength in the centre, and one of his greatest attributes was his splendid command of the ball. It was a great pity that the Rangers side he assisted for six years was anything but a success, because his skill and play merited at least a couple of winners' medals, but sadly there was nothing tangible to show for his time at Ibrox.

Seven days before he was due to represent Scotland against Wales in Edinburgh on Saturday, March 3, 1906, May was, as usual, present at one of his businesses - a billiard saloon in Morrison Street, not too far from Ibrox Stadium - when the unthinkable happened, and he was the victim of a brutal assault.

He was going about his normal duties when he noticed a group of youths, who had been hanging around one of the tables, opening a bottle of whisky, which was strictly taboo. May approached the group, and reminded them of the saloon rules, but he received a mouthful of cheek before being struck across the face with the full bottle. It was in the aftermath of the ensuing melee that he noticed he had lost several teeth.

He was taken straight to hospital, and police apprehended three youths in connection with the savage assault. At the Southern Police Court on the Monday morning, George Roy was sent to prison for 30 days, and Robert Cunningham and Peter Sinclair fined a guinea, or 21 days in jail.

May, although suffering from the effects of the assault by the hooligans, made the decision to play for Scotland, but was understandably below par as the home side suffered a shock 2-0 defeat to a severely under-strength Wales.

On his 'down time,' May liked nothing better than a leisurely stroll round the golf course in search of long, straight drives; the perfect short game, and to be at one with his putter. It was said that golf was the perfect antidote to football: the gentle pastime versus the manly, virile pursuit of the leather.

May took to golf like a fish to water. During the close season of 1909, when May was at the height of his powers on the football field, he was also proving a big hit on the golf course. In those days, most footballers holidayed in Scotland. They had a fortnight in Girvan, Ayr, or the attractive islands off the lower west coast of Scotland.

John May was a Millport man, and he enjoyed nothing better than recuperating in the main town on Great Cumbrae after a long, hard season. In July, 1909, he played a round at the course just past the 'Sheuchans' and the drinks were on the Ranger as he zipped round in 74 - which was two strokes better than the previous best round on the course. The following day he was out with the leading 'Millportian,' a Mr Robertson, and May beat him 3&2.

May's success on the golf course was toasted long into the night by his many friends on Millport, for as well as being a most successful footballer, it was said that a better fellow one could not meet on or off the park.

Much later on, long after he had called time on his career, most of his spare time was consumed playing golf, and he was playing to an excellent standard; sufficiently good enough to enter the 1921 St Andrew's Open Amateur Championship. It was set to take place on the New Course on Wednesday, July 13. As the countdown began, and excitement ahead of the event reached fever pitch, there was a major let down for spectators as May failed to put in an appearance.

John May received a benefit game in 1909. In those far-off days, players were usually awarded a benefit after five straight years of service. Falkirk provided the opposition and travelled to Ibrox.

The Rangers team included George Robey, the well-known London-born comedian, and the evening's star attraction. Robey was one of the great music hall performers of the late 19th, and early 20th century. He missed a penalty in the second half but scored not long after that, although Falkirk won the game 4-2. The game wasn't too well patronised but the player was still a few pounds better off and the punters had enjoyed themselves. During his career, May was often in demand for his views on the game, and was normally willing to impart the knowledge he'd gleaned over a sparkling playing career. On one particular occasion, and as one of football's great thinkers, he came up with some suggestions to change several laws of the game which he felt would make it better, and flow more.

He said: "I do not admit that the offside rule is a farce altogether, but there is no doubt there is room for improvement, for example that no player should be offside in his own half. I consider the rule the only consolation a team have to help to strengthen them when they are deprived of the services of one or more players during a game - by adopting the one-back game.

"I think it would be a good idea if the rule only came into force when there were one or more players off the ground, and to do away with it when both teams were at full strength.

"There should be something done to stop the waste of time over the goal kick. We (the Rangers) had an example of that when playing against Clyde. Newbigging was about to kick off when Brackenridge, of Clyde, walked right in front of the keeper and would not

move until the referee ordered him six yards back.

“What ought to be done is that no opponent should approach within the 18 yards line at a goal kick, which would make the distance 12 yards instead of six.

“I do not see why there should be any difference between a goal kick and the kick off from the centre of the field. The rule there is that ‘no opponent shall approach within the ten yards circle until the ball has been played in the direction of the opponents’ goal’. My reason for making the distance eighteen yards is that the eighteen yards line would save another line being drawn on the field of play.

“I also quite agree that a foul throw-in should only be penalised to the extent of a throw-in to the opposite side instead of a free kick.”

He also hailed Rangers teammate Alec Smith as the greatest left winger he ever saw, and that was quite something coming from a man who had played the game for 20 years, and on both sides of the border.

When the midfielder left Rangers he joined Morton, as did his Ibrox teammate James Stark, a commanding centre-half. Both teams couldn’t agree on a transfer fee for the duo, so it was taken to arbitration and, at a second sitting, the fee was reduced from £300 to £275 for each player. £550 was a lot of money for a club like Morton to pay but they were gaining two international players who would give them a combined service of 10 years.

May had an excellent career in football, and also played to a very good level for the Clydesdale Cricket Club. He wasn’t alone in this, as many pro footballers signed for cricket clubs in the summer months when football closed down.

On one occasion, and like his fellow pro footballers who enjoyed donning their whites, May was relieved when the Marylebone Cricket Club ruled on a case where a footballer was being penalised by his club for also playing cricket. The MCC statement said, ‘A cricketer’s status as an amateur is not affected by his being an amateur football player.’ The ruling was important to players like May and RG Campbell, through whom this question of status had been raised.

A leading newspaper commented, ‘We support the MCC ruling, for whilst it is possible for a player to derive wages as a professional footballer, it is impossible for him to secure wages or pecuniary benefit of any kind as an amateur cricketer, according to cricket law.’ On the field, May had been well known for his leadership qualities, and driving his fellow players forward when in need of a goal. However, when he passed away in 1933 - aged just 55 - those who paid tribute to the former Ranger spoke of him as quiet and unassuming, and lamented the loss of a true friend.

At the time of his death, he was heavily involved in business, running an electrical firm as well a billiard saloon in Maryhill Road. He passed away in the Western Infirmary and

left behind a wife and grown-up family.