

Sharpy

My Story

Graeme Sharp



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About the Author

Graeme Sharp was raised in Glasgow and signed for Everton in 1980, where he won most of the game's top honours and became the club's record post-war goalscorer. He represented his country in the 1986 World Cup and later played for, and managed, Oldham Athletic before a brief spell as manager of Bangor City. Living in North Wales, he is back at Everton as the fans liaison officer.

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FOREWORD

by Andy Gray

I am delighted to have this opportunity to say a few words about my great pal Sharpy. When I first joined Everton back in 1983, I knew that I'd been a bit of a hero of his when he was younger, which just goes to show how much older than him I am! Sharpy and I hit it off straight away and we have been big mates ever since.

Sharpy is an easy guy to get on with and in our case I think it's true what they say . . . opposites do attract! He is generally a quiet family man, whereas a lot of people would probably consider me to be a bit of a nutter, but there is huge mutual respect between us: we really enjoy each other's company and always have done, and both coming from Glasgow, initially we at least had something in common. We both learned our craft in the rough-and-tough world of Scottish amateur football. It shaped Graeme and me, as well as countless other professional footballers, and the lessons we learned served us very well. Those ash pitches! Goodness me, if you took a tumble on those, you knew about it!

That was where Sharpy learned the art of being a centre-forward, although I am chuffed to bits if he believes that I contributed to his development when we teamed up at Everton. He wasn't a great goalscorer at the time, but he was a scorer of great goals. He was a very good centre-forward, but maybe he just needed to take his game forward so that he could reach the next level. He undoubtedly did so and he certainly became a great goalscorer – as his record shows beyond any doubt.

When I first arrived at Goodison, I actually played alongside Adrian Heath because Sharpy had a knee injury, but we soon forged a fabulous partnership and we had some brilliant times. We had two years of the very best football of our lives. The famous night when we defeated Bayern Munich will live with us forever and I am sure that Sharpy will go into that game in far more detail in this book. Another game that I will never tire of recalling is the 2-1 win at Tottenham Hotspur in 1985 that edged us closer to Everton's first League Championship success in 15 years. Tottenham had more home games left than we did and the match at White Hart Lane was billed as a possible Championship decider.

It was a cracking game and Sharpy and I had a rare old tussle with Paul Miller and Graham Roberts. They were a very physical central defensive pairing and gave us just the sort of challenge that we relished. We knew that we could play, but we were also fully prepared to mix it and stand up to be counted when the going got tough . . . in fact, we enjoyed it! Not many defenders looked forward to playing against Sharp and Gray! We knew that if the physical stuff started, then not many of them could live with us.

That was a special night at Tottenham and there were plenty more besides. The FA Cup final in 1984 when we both scored against Watford at Wembley was terrific.

As well as winning big football matches, we also knew how to celebrate! We had some wonderful evenings and, even now, I love getting back together with Sharpy and the rest of the boys from our magnificent team because the atmosphere between us is as good now as it was then. The reunion nights are a different class. The football's not bad either!

I was delighted to play alongside Sharpy again at Goodison Park before Howard Kendall's testimonial in August 2006. And who set me up to score at the Gwladys Street end? You've guessed it . . . my mate!

We also play a bit of golf together and we love the annual Scots against the English tournament that we take part in every year at The Belfry. A gang of us ex-professionals get together and play under Ryder Cup rules. It's terrific fun. Nobody wants to lose, I can assure you . . . especially Messrs Sharp and Gray.

During my playing career, I was very fortunate to line up alongside three phenomenal front men. I was with Brian Little when I was a kid at Aston Villa, I had John Richards later on when I was with Wolves, then Sharpy at Everton.

There is no doubt that Sharpy is one of the all-time great Everton centre-forwards and he thoroughly deserved every bit of success that came his way. He really is a smashing lad. I am great friends with him and Ann Marie, and it's been an absolute pleasure to know them.

Andy Gray

PREFACE

NO ORDINARY NIGHT

We were shattered, but elated.

Goodison Park was rocking to the sound of 50,000 celebrating supporters. As a professional footballer, it didn't get much better than this. We'd taken on one of Europe's finest teams, given them a one-goal start and then fought back to win. For the first time in the club's history, Everton had won through to a European final. The victory over Bayern Munich would soon be labelled Goodison's Greatest Night.

At the time, we were happy enough to celebrate a famous success. We didn't stop to think about how we had just been propelled towards legendary status and I never dreamed that supporters would still be eager to discuss the events of that night 20 years later. There is no doubt about it: 24 April 1985 was no ordinary night!

We'd earned a 0-0 draw in the first leg in Munich and so it was winner takes all as we approached the second leg of our European Cup-Winners' Cup semi-final. We stayed in the St George's Hotel on Lime Street opposite the city's main railway station and stuck to the same routine as every midweek match. We would train in the morning, then be ferried to the hotel in the afternoon for some sleep and some food. In those days, we'd have steak or fish for our lunch and maybe some tea and toast early evening, if any of the lads fancied it.

We boarded the team bus at quarter to six for the short journey to Goodison Park. There was nothing out of the ordinary about the journey . . . until we approached the

stadium. We couldn't get the bus anywhere near it because of the masses of fans strewn all over the streets.

The sight of so many Everton supporters took my breath away and made me realise, if I hadn't already, just what a big occasion this really was. We were carrying the hopes and dreams of so many people into this one football match. The magnificent Everton fans had never seen their team contest a European final and this was their best ever chance of it happening. We were within touching distance of creating history.

The driver somehow managed to negotiate his way through the throngs, with some help from the police and the roar as we got off the bus to walk the few yards into the stadium was incredible.

When we were in the dressing-room at Goodison, we could always tell just how big the crowd was by the noise and on this occasion we could tell the place was rocking. I swear the dressing-room was vibrating because of the volume out on the terraces and in the stands.

We went out onto the pitch about half an hour before the kick-off for a bit of a warm-up and the crowd was deafening. Goodison was already jam-packed to the rafters and I remember thinking that although some of our opponents were experienced internationals, they must surely be fazed by the cracking atmosphere. It was a perfect stage for the night of drama that was about to unfold.

We were stunned when the experienced German centre-forward Dieter Hoeness gave Bayern the lead after 27 minutes. There was no panic after their goal, but there was a worry that we'd maybe given ourselves too high a mountain to climb. Make no mistake about it: we were up against a very good team and we now needed to score at least two goals to win the tie.

There was a physical edge to the contest, but then you'd expect nothing else because this was a semi-final. We could play football as well as any other team on the Continent, but

we could also look after ourselves, or 'mix it', as we called it, when the going got tough. There wasn't a team in the world that could ever intimidate us, and we were right up for the battle and the challenge that lay ahead.

Sitting in the dressing-room at half-time, I looked at the men around me and not for one moment did I consider that we wouldn't emerge victorious. We were more than teammates, we were close friends and comrades. I had progressed through the reserve team with Gary Stevens and Kevin Ratcliffe. Andy Gray had been my boyhood hero and now he was a striking colleague. Kevin Sheedy, Peter Reid and Neville Southall were great mates of mine, who also happened to be vying for the Footballer of the Year accolade. These were men who I would have trusted with my life. We had come through so much together, but we were facing our biggest 45 minutes ever.

Although we were a goal behind, manager Howard Kendall was playing it cool. 'Keep playing the way you are and the Gwladys Street will suck one in for us,' he joked.

The second half was the stuff of dreams.

One of their defenders, Hans Pflugler, was kicking lumps out of us and I thought, I'm not having this, and started to give him some back. There were elbows flying and high tackles going in all over the place. Goodison Park was no place for the faint-hearted.

The lads at the back played some high balls up towards me and Andy and the Bayern defenders didn't care for it too much. Andy and Pflugler had a real set-to that ended in both of them being booked - an amazing statistic from that night is that they were, in fact, the only two cautions handed out by referee Mr Fredriksson all night.

Andy also had a go at Norbert Eder and left the big defender with his nose all over his face. He had to go off for some treatment and when he came back on, the first chance Andy got he whacked him again.

Bayern Munich were no angels themselves. They had players who were not averse to making late challenges, but we battered them into submission and by the end of the game they had, quite literally, had enough.

I was fortunate enough to score the equaliser in the 48th minute and Andy squeezed home our second goal to leave the Germans shell-shocked. Trevor Steven wrapped it all up with an excellent finish four minutes from time and Goodison exploded when Mr Fredriksson brought the match to an end.

The dressing-room and then the players' lounge at Goodison were transformed into party venues. Usually the stewards were keen to get everybody out of the place at a certain time so the stadium could be locked up, but that night there was no chance. People were singing and dancing on the tables. It was fantastic.

I was just so happy that my dad was there to share this moment with me. He'd been with me every step of the way from Boys' Brigade matches through to amateur football with Eastercraigs and Dumbarton, and he'd seen most of my reserve and first-team games for Everton. He always got so much pleasure from seeing me do well, as any father would, and he was a proud man that night. My wife, Ann Marie, was there too, as were other members of our respective families.

From Goodison Park, we all made our way to a place called the Lido, in Ainsdale, to carry on the party. They stayed open late for us. It was terrific in there, with the singing and the dancing, but I remember looking across the room and seeing Ann Marie's uncle fast asleep on one of the chairs. It was pandemonium all around and yet he was dead to the world. At least he had a smile on his face.

I was one of the last to leave and what a sight greeted me when I put the key in the door at my home. There were people strewn all over the place. I had to step over countless bodies to make my way up the stairs. My side of

the bed was just about the only available space left in the entire house.

We couldn't continue the celebrations the next day because we had to play Norwich City in a First Division match on the Saturday, but what a night it had been. At some point during the evening I paused for reflection and I couldn't help but let my mind drift back to the days when I kicked a case-ball up and down the streets of Stepps, a small town on the edge of Glasgow. From there to the glory of Goodison had been a long, eventful journey with no shortage of trials and tribulations along the way, but that night I knew everything had been worthwhile . . .

ONE

GLASGOW YEARS

The small village of Cardowan, just outside Glasgow, is a place with an unspectacular history. The only entry it ever gets in any Scottish timeline dates back to 1932 when there was an explosion at the local colliery that claimed several lives. But Cardowan is where I entered the world on 16 October 1960. I was actually born at home, the third son of Jim and May Sharp and a younger brother for Andrew and Richard.

The five of us didn't stay in Cardowan long after I arrived and my early childhood was spent in a place called Millerston, which is north of the River Clyde and only a couple of miles down the road from the place of my birth. We lived in a council house in Millerston until I was about 11 years old and then, like most families I suppose, my mother and father bettered themselves and bought their own place on Ballaig Crescent in Stepps, about five miles from the city centre. Our first three homes were quite close together – there is no more than three miles between them.

My first school was Stepps Primary and from a young age, I was always capable of holding my own in lessons. I was forever kicking a ball about but never to the detriment of my class work – my mum and dad saw to that. Regardless of where I lived or studied, the one constant was my love of football.

When Richard was in his final class at the same primary school as me in Stepps and I was no more than seven years old, I got called up to play in his school football team, even though he and his peers were some four years older than

me. It was my first experience of anything like an organised game of football – it was certainly the first time I had played in a strictly 11-a-side match because the games we played in the playground and outside our houses were a free-for-all with anyone and everyone joining in. I can even remember the kit that the school team wore: it was a yellow top, similar in style to the away jersey that Everton often wore in the 1970s. I only played one game at that level and then it was back to my own age group.

Prior to that I had only played football in the streets of the surrounding area or in the local park. I had developed a love for the game from a very early age and I would watch it on television as often as I could – when I wasn't playing myself.

I became a member of the 190th Boys' Brigade Troop in Stepps because I discovered they had a football team, which meant I could play more organised matches. In all honesty, the other activities at BBs didn't really interest me one jot, but the fact that the football was good and, in my eyes, 'proper' was a big enough incentive for me to go along.

We had a smashing little team. We had a fixture every Saturday morning and it was my first regular football. But as I began to play more often, I was developing a hatred of losing.

There was one game at Glasgow's famous Alexandra Park where we were up against a team that was far superior to our own. We were losing 9-0 when I lost my rag completely. My dad always tried to come and watch my matches, but on the rare occasions that he couldn't make it my mum would step in and it was sod's law that she was there that day.

When the ninth goal went in, I had just about had enough. I felt that the rest of the lads weren't overly concerned about the game and had merely accepted that the opposition were much the better side. When another boy and I kicked off (again), I turned around to face my own teammates, dribbled the ball through the lot of them and whacked it past my own goalkeeper! That made it 10-0 and

I just carried on straight off the pitch and back to the dressing-room. I was so angry.

Of course, my mum was absolutely mortified and couldn't understand what I'd done! That led, not unreasonably, to my first-ever suspension. The Boys' Brigade took a very dim view of my behaviour and I was banned for the next three games.

I was only ten years old at the time and, I tell you what, it taught me a lesson because it was very frustrating getting up on a Saturday morning and not being able to play any football. I soon understood that I'd been totally out of order and realised just how important football was becoming in my life.

I am often asked if I was aware of my own footballing ability at this stage. I think people always assume that anyone who makes it to the top of the profession has been a superstar at every level he's ever played at. But I genuinely can't recall being particularly better than the rest when I was a primary school pupil. In fact, when I look back on those days now I recall there being an awful lot of very good players: it would have been difficult for any one boy to stand out from the crowd. We played in every single spare minute that we could and there were lots and lots of very good games. It was football at school playtime and dinnertime. Afterwards, it was a rush home, a quick change and then off to the local park to play again. Some of the matches would go on for hours and goodness knows how we ever kept score – if we even bothered! We all loved playing football.

We would play until it was almost too dark to see the ball, but I always knew when my time was up because my dad would come out of the house, stand at the gate and blow a whistle. It was a piercing blast and when I heard it I knew that was me done for the night! Our house in Millerston was at the top of a hill and the park that we played in was just at the bottom, so it was nice and handy for me. But once that

whistle went, regardless of the state of play, it was off up the hill to bed. There was no indication of added time for me!

It saddens me that you just don't see as many young lads playing street football any more. You often hear the sentimentalists bemoaning the fact that youngsters can learn a great deal about the game by playing football in the streets. And they are right. There are no two ways about it: if you learn to control a football on the uneven pitches provided by local parks, or even in streets and alleyways, then it can only be good.

Dad worked in the newspaper industry as a sub-editor for the business section of the *Glasgow Herald*. He generally worked the nightshift, leaving the house at about 6 p.m. and coming back home the following morning, but if he ever worked in the afternoon, I used to love going with him to his office. He'd leave me in the sports department, which was great, and I'd pore over all the football stories and pictures that came in. And there was the odd perk to his job, like the time he took me to Ibrox to watch Glasgow Rangers from the press box. In those days, journalists would watch the games from high up in the Ibrox roof. It was an amazing vantage point for someone like me, who was a Rangers fan anyway.

I actually considered pursuing a career in the media and I suppose it's quite ironic that I watch Everton now from the various press boxes in the Premiership, offering my views for the radio.

Like most 'Gers supporters, I went to watch them as often as I could, although my own playing commitments made it more difficult as I got a bit older. One of my proudest days was travelling to Easter Road in Edinburgh, home to Hibernian, to watch my team play. My brother Richard was in the Rangers side that day and although it was the only senior first-team appearance he ever made, he is still able to say that he played for the club we all loved.

Strangely enough, my dad was not a big football fan until we started to play ourselves. Andrew wasn't interested either, but Richard and I would go to games whenever we could. My dad took me to Parkhead when I was only six years old to see Rangers take on Aberdeen in the semi-final of the Scottish Cup. We were in the Jungle end, which was absolutely jam-packed by the time we got there. I couldn't even see the pitch, so my dad hoisted me onto his shoulders and kept me up there for the entire 90 minutes! Thankfully Rangers won and went on to beat Celtic in the final.

My favourite player then was a little winger called Willie Henderson. He was only 5 ft 4 in. tall, but what a player he was. He had unbelievable skill and made over 400 appearances for Rangers. I think I took to him more than the others because I used to watch Rangers from a vantage point on the halfway line opposite the main stand, so I would always see Willie really close up. In fact, before I was a centre-forward, I played wide left, so I had an affinity for the wingers anyway. Ironically, Richard's favourite player was the big centre-forward Colin Stein. Many years later during my testimonial year at Everton, Willie Henderson came down to speak at one of the dinners my committee had organised, which was a great honour for me.

Since I was playing every weekend, I wasn't an Ibrox regular, but if ever there was a midweek fixture then my dad would take me - until I reached a certain age when I was allowed to go on my own . . . although never to an Old Firm game! I had to be a lot older to run the gauntlet that was a Rangers versus Celtic match. In those days, these games could be absolute mayhem. There was a genuine hatred between the rival fans and skirmishes took place all over Glasgow on Old Firm days. They were violent confrontations and I would imagine the scenes were similar to those on the streets of Belfast in the 1970s.

Even as youngsters we were always aware that there was some sort of religious divide in Glasgow. Some of my friends from the local area went to a different school, St Josephs, because they were Catholic and the rivalry at our football matches could be quite fierce. It was as though we were playing out a Rangers versus Celtic match – Protestants against Catholics. They were matches that we all desperately wanted to win, even though we were only primary school kids. When we played at St Josephs, we would change into our kit at our own school and walk the five-minute journey to get to their pitch. Whichever team was at home had tremendous backing because the rest of the pupils were allowed out early to watch the game. It was incredible and, don't forget, I'm talking about seven- and eight-year-old children. But once the game was over and the two teams had gone their separate ways, we would meet up in the usual way for a street kickabout.

There was rivalry, for sure, but there certainly weren't any grudges and I don't recall there being any real problems. Not from my point of view, anyway, although there were undoubtedly some people in Glasgow who took the religious rivalry a step further.

From Stepps Primary, children had a choice of senior schools, dependent largely on how they had performed, and so I moved on to Coatbridge High, a good school with an excellent reputation. My parents were pleased and it was an early indication to me of the value of a good education.

Mum and Dad always taught us three boys what was right and what was wrong and although we were encouraged in everything we did, we also had to toe the line. For example, we were never allowed to play out on a Sunday. If it was sunny we could maybe kick a ball about in the back garden but that was it. There was no playing in the park or the street. It would drive me mad. I used to go to Sunday school to relieve the boredom, although I hated it because I would

see some of the other lads playing football. In the end, I stopped going.

Once I moved to Coatbridge, I found myself amongst some more very good footballers. The school kids came from all over the Lanarkshire area and there was always speculation amongst us about who would get into the team. I knew that the competition would be stiff because I was always aware of the best players from other districts, whose names would be bandied about, and there were some excellent boys at Coatbridge. I just went along to the training sessions with the intention of doing the best I could and, although this might sound big-headed, it soon became apparent that I was the best player in my year.

Once again I was part of a very good side. There were some great players in our team. Davie Brand went on to play for Airdrie and two boys, James Sexton and Peter Shields, had trials for Ipswich Town.

We played on a Saturday morning and the teacher who took the team was called Paddy Gardner. He was terrific and had a great influence on me. And I felt he was the best choice to take the school team because he loved his football so much. He had so much enthusiasm that it couldn't fail to rub off on the young lads in his team.

I was playing well and I started to acknowledge that perhaps I did have something about me and that a career in the game might not be such a bad idea. Playing for Coatbridge got me noticed by the district selectors and then the Lanarkshire county side called me up. I went for county trials without actually getting a game, but I was soon playing on both Saturday and Sunday.

The amateur football scene in and around Glasgow was famous for the strength of its football teams and for the number of players it produced. Drumchapel Amateurs, Eastercraigs, Harmony Row, Celtic Boys Club, Celtic Amateurs: they were all good clubs with reputations to match.

The team that wanted me was Celtic Amateurs, which was a Sunday team. My brother Richard played for them for a while. They had two teams – Under-16 and Under-14 – and I initially played for the younger team.

Unfortunately the club disbanded, although I was very quickly offered a trial with Eastercraigs. I was delighted because they were one of the best amateur teams around. The problem was that they played on a Saturday afternoon, which meant two games in one day for me. It was Coatbridge in the morning and then Eastercraigs in the afternoon. I loved it at first – the more football the better, as far as I was concerned – but it soon became apparent that it was too much for a young lad to take on board. Something had to give and I eventually told the school that I couldn't play for them. I figured that the good-quality amateur football I was getting with Eastercraigs was far better for my development. Coatbridge weren't happy about it and told me that they were prepared to invoke a rule that stated if a boy doesn't play for his school team then he is not permitted to play for anyone else. It got a bit messy, but I stood my ground and eventually got my own way. However, there was a sting in the tail because although they agreed to let me play for Eastercraigs, they asked me back to help them win the final of the Scottish Schools Cup. It was to be played at Lesser Hampden, which is adjacent to the main stadium. My first reaction was to refuse because it wouldn't have been fair on whoever had to miss out to accommodate me, but Coatbridge were insistent and I reluctantly agreed. I played against John McDonald that day, who went on to have a good career with Rangers. We beat the opposition and I scored a hat-trick. It was my last game for the school, so at least I went out on a high! Even so, I actually didn't feel overly pleased about the whole thing and tried to give my medal to the boy I had replaced. He was gutted at missing out after playing in all the previous rounds, and he didn't want the medal.

Back at Eastercraigs, Bernie Slaven was a teammate. He went on to play for Middlesbrough and the Republic of Ireland. Maurice Johnston also played for the club later, as did John Hannah. John never made a living out of football, but he's done OK for himself and is now a famous actor after getting his big break in *Four Weddings and A Funeral*.

We played in a very good, tough, competitive league, the best league in the region by far. All the teams were from Glasgow or the surrounding area and you would always see scouts from clubs from all over Scotland and England watching the games, looking out for players.

I owe a lot to the coach, Bill Livingston, who was always encouraging me to continue with my studies whilst still taking my football as seriously as I could. He looked like Compo from *Last of the Summer Wine*! He wore a similar cloth hat and wellington boots and was a fabulous man. He is an Eastercraigs legend! His training sessions were strict, but everything he did was designed to benefit young footballers. Bill was the man who persuaded me to play up front as I'd primarily been a midfielder when I first joined Eastercraigs.

A lot of our games were played on a famous arena in Glasgow called '50 Pitches' which was, quite literally, a massive expanse of land with 50 football pitches marked out. It was a truly amazing sight when they were all being used. The area is not too far away from Ibrox, but, like a lot of open ground in the cities these days, the space has been developed and there are only a couple of the pitches left now.

We weren't playing on grass, by the way! The pitches were all made of ash. I tell my son, Chris, how spoiled he was playing his junior football on grass! You can only imagine what state we'd be in after 90 minutes – my dad used to make me scrub myself with a wire brush in the bath before he'd let me anywhere near my bed sheets. We went through a lot of Dettol in those days because we picked up

so many cuts and grazes from the pitches. We were so delighted every time we reached any sort of cup final because they were played on grass. That was a big enough incentive in itself, let alone the chance to win a trophy.

But I loved it. For the first time, I was involved with a football club that had a structure to it. We trained twice a week and, although we were strictly amateur, the approach and the organisation of Eastercraigs was very professional. They had high standards and they fully expected all their young players to adhere to them. There was a discipline, too. Your boots had to be clean when you turned up for training and matches and you had to be properly attired at all times. We even had our own Eastercraigs FC sports bags for our gear. They wouldn't stand for unruly behaviour or foul and abusive language on or off the pitch, and they were great for me.

The training was very hard, though, and it was too much for some lads. A few of the pals I had played alongside in the street games and at school came along for trials, but most of them couldn't handle the toughness of the training and simply packed it in.

We did a lot of physical, non-football training, like running and weightlifting, and, there was no doubt about it, you had to be dedicated. I gave up quite a lot to make it as a player with Eastercraigs. I was training and playing while my pals were doing the sort of recreational things boys normally do between the age of 14 and 17. I'm not saying that I thoroughly enjoyed it all the time, but I knew that it had to be done and that sacrifices had to be made if I was to achieve my dream of being a professional footballer.

My dad always made sure that my education came first, but he knew just how beneficial playing for a team like Eastercraigs was for me. He spoke to the club and explained that he wanted my studies to come first and, to be fair, they understood that if I had exams to take or to prepare for, then I would miss the odd training session.

The manager was an older man called John Murray and he had a good group of lads. Most of the boys came from the inner areas of Glasgow, like the Gorbals, Castlemilk and Easterhouse, so the competition was tough . . . in every sense of the word! Football was a way out for a lot of the lads. Some of them inevitably came from rough and tough backgrounds, but the discipline that the likes of Eastercraigs instilled did a lot of them the power of good. Not all of them, obviously, but the amateur football clubs in Glasgow helped a lot of youngsters over the years.

Some of the other teams in the league didn't have our discipline ethic, but we were encouraged to always maintain our standards, even in the face of provocation. Many of the opposing teams did provocation very well, so it was a very good learning process for me.

We were a fine side, but so were most of the others and there weren't too many convincing victories for any team in the matches. They were generally very close, hard-fought affairs, though I did manage to score five goals in one game when we thrashed Celtic Boys Club, of all teams.

It saddens me that the amateur game in Scotland just isn't the same any more. The leagues provided an abundance of footballers that went on to have good professional careers - many of them even went all the way through to the full international set-up. At the moment, the Scotland team isn't doing too well, although things are certainly looking brighter under Walter Smith, and when I hear people discussing the connection between underachievement at that level and the dearth of good amateur football teams, I find it impossible to disagree.

It's not just in Scotland, either, that amateur football is struggling. It's the same all over. There are too many other things for kids to do with their time now. But it was definitely the way forward for me and for countless others.

As I progressed through the Eastercraigs teams, I established a reputation for myself as a bit of a goalscorer

and I was invited to go for trials with Aston Villa. I went down with another lad and stayed at the club hostel while I was training, but I didn't enjoy it. Brian Little was a Villa player, as was Gordon Cowans. In all honesty, I can't recall too much about my time there – other than that Little used to bring his dog to training! I suppose Andy Gray must have been there, too, because it was 1976, although I have to say I don't remember seeing him! He must have been away from the club that week because even if I didn't see him I would have heard him!

I trained with Villa for a week, then went home to Glasgow and never heard another word from them. I wasn't overly concerned because I genuinely didn't enjoy being at the place and it didn't put me off because I was constantly being linked with other clubs. I always thought my chance would come again. Of course I was envious of the lads who were signing schoolboy forms for this club or that, but I just knuckled down and got on with things. I was still at school, don't forget, so there wasn't time for me to mope about and dwell on what might have been.

Anyway, Bill Livingston told my dad that it wouldn't be long before a professional club came in for me. Rangers were interested, but my dad was adamant that I wasn't going there. He felt that I wouldn't get a proper chance; that I would get lost in the system. His opinion had been formed after my brother's experience there. If anything, Richard probably had more natural ability than me. He signed for Rangers because he idolised the club but, although he did well for the reserves, he never got the chance he deserved. My dad decided that the same thing wouldn't happen to me.

Anyway, I was 17 years old when I went with Eastercraigs on an end-of-season trip to America. It had been a terrific trip for a group of young lads. We'd won all six of the matches that we'd played, we'd seen New York and Philadelphia and I was dying to tell Dad all about it. My dad collected me from the airport when I returned, but he did all

the talking. 'We're going to the North British Hotel in George Square,' he said.

'Why?' I asked.

'We're meeting Dumbarton,' he replied.

TWO

DUMBARTON DAYS

Although the actual approach from Dumbarton came somewhat out of the blue, I don't suppose it should have been that much of a surprise because during the previous season Alan McKay, a scout from the club, had been at virtually every match that Eastercraigs had played. He was a regular face on the amateur circuit and it transpired that he had been having regular conversations with my dad and had hinted that Dumbarton were very keen to sign me.

So my dad and I went to the North British Hotel to meet Alec Wright, who was the club's general manager. I was hardly involved in any of the discussions: it was mainly Alec and Dad thrashing out what was best for me. They agreed that I should put pen to paper on a two-year deal as a part-time professional for the princely sum of £35 per week, with a signing-on fee of £750, which my dad negotiated for me. It was that simple.

On 10 July 1978, I received an official letter from Dumbarton Football Club confirming my registration as a professional footballer with the Scottish Football Association. The club were in the First Division at the time, the structure having changed in Scotland following the introduction of the Premier League. I was 17 and was still at school after deciding to stay on for an extra year to do Highers. In all honesty, though, it rapidly became a waste of my time. My heart just wasn't in it. I now knew exactly what I wanted to do with my life and I really thought I'd taken the first important step. My attention was now switching to Boghead.

(Dumbarton was a great little football club, but it had the most unromantically named ground anywhere in Britain!)

The school didn't view professional football as a suitably secure career for a young boy and, to a certain extent, they were probably right. The careers teacher even arranged a job interview for me with the Royal Bank of Scotland. It was the only interview I have ever attended. I didn't want the job and I think the guy at the bank could tell - I didn't get it. I was determined to make it as a professional and was putting more into my football than my schoolwork, though at the end of the academic year I still managed to pass my Higher exams. To be fair, most of the teachers took a genuine interest in my career and would always ask me on the Monday how I'd done. It was strange when I broke into the first team because the staff at the school would tell me they'd read about me in the papers!

And so I duly reported for pre-season training with Dumbarton in the summer. We trained on a Monday and a Thursday because the club was still predominantly part time. From the family house in Stepps, I had to get a bus into the centre of Glasgow and then walk through to Queen Street station to get a train to Dumbarton. It was about an hour there and an hour back, but I didn't mind one bit.

I was a bit insecure when I first went along to Boghead. I really didn't think I had any right to be there amongst some of the senior professional footballers who had played at the highest level and were winding down their careers. You must remember this was my very first experience of open-age football. Up until then, I had always been amongst lads of a similar age to me and now, suddenly, I was pitting my wits against some wily old pros who had forgotten more about the game of football than I thought at that time I would ever learn.

Pat McCluskey was in the Dumbarton team when I first joined the club and, in my eyes, he'd seen and done it all. He'd played hundreds of games for Celtic alongside the likes