

Alex Ferguson

A Light in the North

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ALEX FERGUSON

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For Cathy and My Mother

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POSTSCRIPT

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Introduction

THE MOTIVATION for writing this book didn't come easily. Friends had been prompting me and I'd been pondering over the idea for quite a while. A few publishers were also encouraging me to do an autobiography but my feelings were that it was still too early for that. When someone suggested that I should simply record the story of my seven years as manager of Aberdeen Football Club, that had more appeal.

The final decision was taken on a May night in 1985, at the end of a long, hard season. The double occasion was the BP Youth Cup Final at Pittodrie and the presentation to the club of the Scottish Premier League Championship Trophy by David Letham. The game was to feature Celtic's youth team against Aberdeen's — a truly fitting climax as the senior players of both clubs had battled each other for the League all season. Now it was the chance for the young ones.

I was more excited by the prospect of the match than by any presentation. It was a time for examination of our youngsters, a time to judge progress, assess character and temperament and, more importantly, ability against more publicised opponents. And I was not disappointed. It was the best youth game I've ever seen, played with all the enthusiasm and innocence that only young players can exhibit. As both sets of players abandoned their inhibitions the game reached a frightening standard.

Celtic deservedly led 2-0 at half-time and as I walked towards the dressing room I contemplated what attitude I should take to the lads. Should I be angry or low-key? Not

for the first time the old adage that a manager really earns his money at half-time ran through my mind. I decided I wanted to know what these lads were really made of and I let them know that Aberdeen FC expected more from the talent that was sitting there. If they froze on a big occasion as youth team players then what chance had they as first team players performing in front of a crowd of 60,000 in a Cup Final against the likes of Celtic? Finally I made the point that apart from the 6,500 people at Pittodrie that night to see the future of the club, the whole of Aberdeen's first team pool were there. If ever there was a good time for their understudies to let them know just how good they were, this was it!

The second-half was incredible. Celtic took a 3-0 lead but that scoreline was now against the run of play. Our boys were playing some great stuff but just couldn't score. I decided to give our two substitutes — both 15-year-olds — a run for the experience. Suddenly everything went haywire. We got the goal we so richly deserved and the confidence of the boys soared. The game eventually finished 5-3 in our favour after extra-time.

After the young ones had done their lap of honour they were met at the dressing room by the most thunderous welcome. Every player, ground staff member and office staff worker was there to meet them, to backslap and glory in their greatest ever night. Willie Miller went round congratulating each of the lads individually, as did all the club's big names. The sight of that unity moved me. It made me realise that my seven years with the Dons was not the completion of an achievement but only the start. I now felt compelled and totally motivated to record a period of my life which has given me enormous satisfaction and sense of accomplishment, a belief that I've done something really worthwhile.

Chapter One

1978-79: Early Days

THE LAST DAY of May 1978 was not the first time I was asked to manage Aberdeen Football Club. A year previously I had received a phone call from Ally McLeod suggesting I become his successor as he had just accepted the post of Scotland manager. Naturally it was an opportunity which I found difficult to turn down but having played for Ally at Ayr United and respected him, I was able to talk freely to him. Although he was very convincing in his opinion of the club, I finally managed to explain to him that I was trying to make St Mirren, where I was manager, another Aberdeen. Well, without explaining the insanity of that judgement, I stayed with St Mirren another year before an opportunity to join the Dons arose again.

This time contact was made with me through one of the most powerful and influential sports writers in Britain, Jim Rodger of the *Daily Mirror*. Jim is a man of the utmost integrity and one you can trust with your life, so when he approached me I knew it was for real. This time there was no way I was turning the job down. Soon I was chatting on the telephone to the man who symbolises Aberdeen Football Club and who has done so much for me since that day, Dick Donald. He immediately invited me to become manager and

asked me to come up to Aberdeen the next day. I immediately accepted both offers.

Within a matter of hours I was driving the 150-odd miles to Pittodrie. As I drove my thoughts were all of the challenge ahead of, and the history behind, Aberdeen Football Club. Under Eddie Turnbull as manager they had won the Scottish Cup in 1970. Then Jimmy Bonthron took over and what a wonderful person he was. Once when we were chatting he told me he had been all set to offer me the position of assistant manager at Aberdeen while I was player-coach of Falkirk — until I was ordered off at Pittodrie in a Scottish Cup tie after an incident with big Willie Young. That and my somewhat controversial reputation of being a radical as chairman of the Players' Union managed to dissuade him. Then, of course, came that man, Ally McLeod, who succeeded Jimmy and turned the whole place upside down. Under Ally the Dons had won the League Cup in 1976. Finally, after a very short apprenticeship at Clyde, Billy McNeill joined Aberdeen as manager. Although he only stayed for a year the team had done really well, narrowly losing out in the League to Rangers and also being defeated in the Scottish Cup Final by the same opponents. Billy, of course, could not resist the call of his beloved Celtic.

So here I was about to take up potentially the best footballing job north of the border. It was obvious that Aberdeen were a respected team but for a man of my ambition that wasn't quite enough. I wanted to create and develop a side that was feared as well as respected.

In the way of all this stood one painfully obvious double-edged factor, a factor that had to be dealt with if any of my ambitions were to be fulfilled. The Old Firm. Rangers and Celtic, as historical statistics point out, were Scottish football. Every now and again a short threat to their predominance would occur but these challenges were rarely sustained. There had been the great Hibs team of the late 1940s and early 1950s with their glittering forward line of

Smith, Johnstone, Reilly, Turnbull and Ormond. There was the talented Hearts team of the 1950s with Mackay and Cumming and a front line of Young, Conn, Bauld, Wardhaugh and Crawford. The 1960s brought brief flirtations from Dundee and Dunfermline, with whom I played at the time, and Kilmarnock won the League in 1965, but the real state of play was put into perspective by the fact that Kilmarnock were the last team outside the Old Firm to win the League until Aberdeen broke the stranglehold in 1980. As far as my thinking was concerned, to win anything you had to beat the Old Firm. My ultimate aim was to have an Aberdeen so good that if any other team was going to win anything in Scottish football it was going to have to beat the Dons.

But, for a variety of reasons, events did not turn out too well for me in my first season at Pittodrie. Two aspects of my life away from football occupied a lot of my thoughts, perhaps occasionally at the expense of the team. The first was my father's illness. It was obvious that he hadn't that long to go and I was spending a fair amount of time travelling back and forth to Glasgow to visit him. The second was the prospect of the tribunal still hanging over me from my St Mirren days when the parting of the ways had left much acrimony and rancour.

Anyway, when I took over at Aberdeen I tended to follow the well-trodden path of most managers when they arrive to take over a relatively successful team: I said that I'd no immediate intentions of changing the set-up but I knew I had my own ideas and thoughts on the game. I gradually introduced my own training programmes although we did also rely a lot on the routines devised by Teddy Scott, himself something of a Pittodrie legend. All his training programmes had been built up over the years and were so varied and complete that they included almost all the exercises I would be giving the players anyway. Pre-season training, then, was a success and I was pleased with the performance and effort by the players. We rounded the

programme off with a visit to Gordonstoun — my first chance to go up there although the team had been spending time there since the days of Ally McLeod. It was an environment the players enjoyed and I particularly appreciated it for the simple reason that it was a bit Spartan: it got us all out of the way of the public attention and gave us the ideal opportunity to be together and prepare for the new season.



Jim Leighton

Our first game under my managership was a friendly against Tottenham Hotspur, who had just signed Ardiles and Villa. The two Argentinians were supposed to be playing at Pittodrie but didn't make it because of a clearance hold-up with their papers. We won 3-1 with an excellent performance. Particularly pleasing was Joe Harper's goal, a real cracker. Unfortunately Bobby Clark broke a knuckle while punching the ball clear. He was obviously going to be out for a few weeks and that made me confront my first real decision — which of our reserve goalkeepers to call in, John Gardiner or a young boy we had just brought in from Deveronvale, Jim Leighton. In training I was more impressed with Leighton, so I decided to play him in the opening competitive match of the season against Hearts at Tynecastle.

It was a wet day with bad conditions for goalkeepers. The ball would be greasy and come shooting off the surface. The boy had an excellent game and gave a superb display of handling, an attribute that has subsequently become a hallmark of his game. He also proved himself to be brave and strong and there was no doubt in my mind after that match that this was a goalkeeper of the future. We won, despite losing the first goal early on and being under a lot of pressure for most of the first-half. But sometimes fortune plays the right part in events. We scored a lucky goal when a long shot from Steve Archibald skidded in underneath the goalkeeper's body. From there we went on to a convincing 4-1 victory and a good start to the season.

After that Tynecastle game our run of success continued until we had gone seven matches in a row without defeat. But to some extent that very success helped me to shy away from making important changes in the way the team were playing. I was seeing signs of weaknesses on the park which did not convince me that this was a real title-winning team or a particularly successful side. The one area which worried me most was the way the team seemed to like to

defend in depth, with almost everyone in their own penalty box. It was ultimately negative and potentially suicidal. I was looking for them to defend further up the park, for the midfield men to move out against opponents and not pack the penalty box. Packed penalty areas often meant conceding penalty kicks under stiff challenges from the opposition.

I saw those weaknesses but the combination of our successful run and my personal problems at that time allowed me to let them pass. The one thing I needed, I kept telling myself, was just to get through that first season and then to have time to recharge, to gather myself, to sit down and analyse both myself and the team. Win or lose, a manager must always look at himself and ask, 'What was my contribution?' I think I can honestly say that my contribution that season was less than it should have been. It seems strange to say it now but the Alex Ferguson of that season was not the same Alex Ferguson who had been with St Mirren or East Stirling or who was manager at Pittodrie in subsequent years. I did not make the right decisions, nor did I make them early enough. Two particular lessons I learned that year, however, did stick with me after the season was long since over.

The first occurred on our first match with one of the Old Firm under my management, a League match against Rangers at Ibrox, just after we had lost our unbeaten run to Marek Dimitrov in the European Cup-Winners' Cup over in Bulgaria, where Willie Garner had broken his leg, and after we had suffered our first domestic defeat of the season against Hibs at Easter Road. I remember it was a windy, dirty day in Glasgow as we played in front of a Copland Road stand which was still under construction. At the end we lost to a penalty kick awarded by referee Hugh Alexander — one of many controversial decisions given in that game. But before the game I had been listening to some of the Aberdeen players in the dressing room. They

were talking about slowing the game down, taking time at throw-ins and free-kicks so that the notoriously fickle and impatient Ibrox crowd would turn against their own team if they didn't score. I just couldn't understand that philosophy. I wanted to go to Ibrox to beat them. How about letting them worry about us? It was an attitude that disappointed me and I mentally pencilled that in as something that would need to be sorted out.

A second lesson began to be learned that year over the two legs of our second round European Cup-Winners' Cup tie with Dusseldorf. One of the early mistakes I made as a manager was made there *after* the first-leg game which we lost 3-0. We came back to the hotel after the game and I expected the players just to go to their beds. Instead a lot of them went nightclubbing — a jaunt I made sure was never going to be repeated, especially midweek with an important match coming up on the Saturday. Almost predictably, we came back after the Dusseldorf game and lost at home to Hearts. Stuart Kennedy was taken off injured in the first few minutes and we were caught short of adequate defensive cover. I ended up having to play Dom Sullivan at right-back, where the lively and elusive Denis McQuade gave him a real hard time. Towards the end of the game McQuade cut in and hit a screamer of a shot 30 yards into the corner of the net to beat us 2-1.

That was a black period. There were all sorts of stories and rumours about the town about the players not accepting me. In fact I remember the local paper speculating the morning after the Dusseldorf return match about things not being quite right at Pittodrie, how the players were not responding to the manager. It carried interviews with supporters about their attitudes to what was going on, as well as interviews with the chairman and Willie Miller. Quite frankly it was disappointing. It made me a wee bit more resilient because if nothing else I react to adversity.

It made me grit my teeth and that saw me through a bad period.

In that return match with Dusseldorf I was keen to put Gordon Strachan into the team but rather than create even more controversy at a difficult time I played Dom Sullivan from the start of the match. I did decide to bring Bobby Clark back in as a gamble despite the fact that he had played the night before against Arbroath Reserves. As usual, Bobby didn't let us down. In fact it was an excellent Aberdeen performance. We managed to beat Dusseldorf 2-0 and still missed all sorts of chances, hitting the post, hitting the bar, hitting everything but the stand. We still went out 3-2 on aggregate.

But our experiences that year taught us a few lessons about Europe — about patience, about playing away from home and not giving the ball away. We started to learn, there is no doubt about that. Perhaps more important was that the European stage had allowed me to introduce Gordon Strachan and he was marvellous.

Of course there are also other highlights that season. We had a marvellous tactical performance against Celtic in my first confrontation with Billy McNeill's team. The fact that Billy had been manager at Pittodrie before me helped to introduce an intensity which was at times unhealthy. He always took defeat badly and so did some of his players and that led to some heated confrontations in the tunnel after our games. That was a pity because the fact remains that we were in the game to win too. But it's now a fact of life they have to recognise as part of the Scottish football scene — Aberdeen are here to stay.

Before that first clash with Celtic I had sent Pat Stanton to see them play in a midweek match while we were at Hamilton in a League Cup tie. Pat felt that the young left-back, Sneddon, lacked experience and could be drawn towards the ball, and that the centre-backs McDonald and Edvaldsson did not like to get out to wide areas. Pat had

played in that position and knew what he was talking about. Now, before that game I had dropped Dom Sullivan from a few matches because he would not conform to the way I liked a midfield player to play, but I felt he could play a part in this game because of his stamina and his ability to make runs off the ball. He would be useful in playing against Tommy Burns. We decided to play Gordon Strachan out wide and forward to try to draw Sneddon towards the ball and to let Archibald run into the areas behind Sneddon, against Edvaldsson or McDonald, with Joey Harper operating through the middle. We won 4-1 and could have scored two or three more. It was a good start for me in my confrontations with Celtic and also good for the sport in that after so many battles with Big Billy as a player, here I was rekindling the rivalry.



Pat and I

We also reached the League Cup Final that season. On our way there we met Ayr United who were now managed by the irrepressible Ally McLeod. We played them at Somerset Park and Steve Archibald was sent off by referee Brian McGinlay after an incident involving the Ayr goalkeeper. I always felt that Brian McGinlay was not one of Archibald's greatest fans. Steve never got an inch off him and this led indirectly to a confrontation between Brian and myself later

on in an incident at Easter Road the day we won the League — a confrontation that earned me a year's ban! After the sending-off we managed to scramble a 3-3 draw and then beat them 3-1 at Pittodrie in the return.

In the semi-final of that League Cup we beat Hibs, who were managed by Eddie Turnbull, another former Aberdeen manager. It seemed I was having my share of confrontations with my Aberdeen predecessors, but Turnbull was very different from Ally or Big Billy. I didn't like him at all. He was a sour individual and I was delighted with our 1-0 victory over his team at Dens Park, even if it did go to extra-time. Mike McDonald, their goalkeeper, was unbelievable in that game. He put up the shutters all night, saving shots from Joey Harper twice and then a great header from Neil Cooper (not the one who's with us now, but the one who went to Barnsley and then St Mirren). Eventually, towards the end of the first period of extra time, when we were shooting down the hill again, Stuart Kennedy hit one of his high crosses which big Mike palmed into the net. I couldn't believe my ears when after the game, in the Dens Park boardroom, one Hibs director said McDonald would never kick another ball for them. He was almost true to his word and the big goalkeeper never played many games for Hibs after that.

The League Cup Final itself was postponed until 31 March, by which time we had progressed to the semi-final of the Scottish Cup by way of Hamilton Accies and Ayr United, who were then managed by Willie McLean. In the quarter-finals we were drawn against Celtic. In the Pittodrie game I witnessed possibly the best goal I have ever seen as manager of Aberdeen – scored by the hero of the Aberdeen support and a legend among the Dons fans, Joey Harper. Celtic had just scored, a Burns header, before half-time. We centred the ball and it was rolled back to Kennedy, who knocked it up towards the penalty box. Wee Joey, going down to the Paddock end, running from the South Stand towards the Main Stand, took this ball over his shoulder on

the volley from about twenty yards and it roared into the net. It was a helluva goal, one whose equal will not be seen for a long time. But that was typical of Joey, a player who could score out of nothing.

At any rate, we had our 1-1 draw. I now had to decide for the replay whether to play Alex McLeish who played in the first match or Doug Rougvie who missed that game through suspension. I opted for Doug because he was more aggressive. I felt sure he could frighten one or two of them down at Celtic Park. The atmosphere was going to be electric. Alex was young so I opted to use him on the bench.

We got off to a great start in front of a crowd of 50,000, and were 2-0 up before the game had gone on too long. We scored a goal from a free-kick. Duncan Davidson rolled it in. Then goalkeeper Latchford dropped the ball and Steve Archibald scored with a header off a Harper cross. We were on our way. Dom Sullivan was carried off with a shoulder injury following a clash with a Celtic player and I brought on Alex McLeish to man-mark Tommy Burns. He followed him everywhere. He really made a tremendous contribution that night. The game was hectic, there were cans thrown on the park and I remember the scenes were unbelievable but we managed to hang on to a 2-1 win. It was a great moment. Unfortunately there were a lot of incidents inside the tunnel, with the players fighting and officials arguing. Quite frankly, Celtic took it badly. I was really disappointed. It detracted attention from the result but we still managed to celebrate a marvellous victory that got us through to the semi-final.

Before the semi-final could be played we came up against Rangers in that famous League Cup Final. Sullivan still wasn't fit so we played a midfield of Strachan, McMaster and Jarvie. If Sullivan had been fit I would have played a four-man midfield with Strachan, Sullivan, McMaster and Jarvie, but Sullivan's natural replacement, Scanlon, was talking about leaving for America at that time. He had come to see me when we were going through the last

preparations for the game and said he didn't want to play, that he was not in the right frame of mind. I was raging. I was really angry with the player but these things happen. I got to know Ian and understood him well. He is not a complex person. He is a little bit nervous and a little bit worked up at times, though basically he is a nice lad and one I have a lot of time for. But as I later found out, he was at times a luxury and one of the most frustrating characters because he had a great balance and could beat a man and turn him inside-out. The thing was he would end up not getting the cross in. It was infuriating and frustrating to me as a manager to watch. He would draw back that beautiful left foot of his and you would be looking for a most delicate and brilliant cross to come in and then, all of a sudden, he would throw the ball back on his right foot and of course all the strikers had to stop and check. They just wouldn't know when the cross was coming in. He was a tremendously talented player and he could get a goal through but I was really disappointed in him on that particular occasion. It put me under a lot of pressure as I didn't have a lot of options. I then decided to play Duncan Davidson along with Steve Archibald and Joey Harper.

In the very first minute of the game a controversial incident took place. One deplorable thing about the game in Scotland is the tackle from the back. In that first minute Derek Johnstone who started the match at centre-half made the most disgraceful tackle on Steve Archibald. Effectively it was the end of Archibald, but in the Cup Final no one is going to get sent off or booked within sixty seconds. Because Ian Scanlon was out at his own request, I was faced with having to play two defenders, Alex McLeish and Neil Cooper, and although I had signed Mark McGhee a few days before the Final I felt it was unfair to use him. Archibald struggled on but he was severely handicapped and this was a major blow to us in that particular game.

It was quite an even match. Rangers were perhaps more on top in the early part of the first-half, but we never had any serious problems. In the second-half we scored with about 25 minutes to go and were looking good, and there was a chance just after that when we could have been two up. For a minute I started to think, 'Is this going to be my first trophy? Are we going to beat Rangers in a Final?' I found myself doing a strange thing – I started to pray. Teddy Scott turned round and saw me and said, 'You don't need to pray, son. We've won it, they are never going to score.' That was the way it was looking. Then Alex Miller got the ball out on the far side of the park at the main stand. We were sitting in the dugout, one of the most difficult places to see from in the whole of Hampden — particularly annoying when your team is under threat. Miller was not the type of player who was going to beat anyone or get to the byeline or do anything brilliant. He was a steady, average player and our left-back, Charlie McLelland, who should have known better, dived at him in a no-man's area where it wasn't going to matter. Alex Miller caught him out and squared the ball to Alex MacDonald. Now just prior to that Bobby Clark had gone down injured and our physio was waiting for the game to stop so that he could get treatment. But before the game could be stopped MacDonald hit a shot that spun off John McMaster's ankle and the ball flew into the far corner, leaving Bobby Clark grasping thin air. It was a terrible blow which in effect lost us the Cup. Although it was only 1-1, Bobby Clark was really toiling, Archibald was struggling, and we were rolling on towards the final minutes. Rangers next scored six minutes into injury time because of the incident which I will now talk about.

At the particular period when we were up 1-0, Rangers never looked like doing anything. Billy Urquhart from Caley was taken off with Johnstone coming up from centre-half as a gamble against Doug Rougvie, who had just been booked by the referee for an obvious challenge on Davie Cooper.

While we were attacking, and the referee had his back to the incident, something happened involving Johnstone and Rougvie. I remember that Ian Foote came out in the newspapers after he retired from the game saying that he saw Johnstone being pole-axed and punched in the back. I don't believe him. As far as I am concerned, there is no way that he saw the incident. I have seen it on video and the STV copy of the film and there is no way he could have seen anything. I am convinced to this day that Johnstone played to get the foul and made the most of it. He had a reputation for going under defenders when the ball was in the air and I am sure that he came up against Rougvie and Rougvie shoved him out of the road to go for the ball. Johnstone played it up as much as he could, knowing that Rougvie had been booked, and he went down.

Now to begin with his back was being treated, then it was his neck. He lay there for fully five minutes to get treatment. In essence this cost Rougvie his place in the game. To be sent off in a Cup Final is a terrible blow to any player, particularly when it was an unjustified sending off. I did not see the incident, I cannot claim to have seen it, but what I do know is that the referee did not see it either. I don't believe for one minute that he saw Rougvie and Johnstone clash.

After the game I was raging. I felt something must have happened. But when I verbally attacked Rougvie about it, all the players went to his defence and the boy sat there crying and swore on his mother's life that he did not touch Johnstone. 'Johnstone backed into me,' he said, and I pushed him aside to go for the ball because I didn't want to be involved with him.' He knew that he had been booked, he didn't want any more incidents and he was trying to be as careful as he possibly could. He said that Johnstone definitely conned the referee. I believe him. We tried to console him and get him sorted out a little by mumbling platitudes about things being sent to try us, how you've got

to show your character and overcome adversity. Inside we were all sick.

That certainly was a day which Doug Rougvie will never forget. I was talking at the press conference afterwards and I said to Pat Stanton, 'For goodness sake, don't let Rougvie out of your sight, because if he gets out there and sees Johnstone, God help him.' Certainly that would have happened if Doug Rougvie had got his hands on Derek Johnstone that day ... put it this way — Rangers would not have been able to sell him to or buy him back from Chelsea years later.

That was a terrible climax to my first Final as a manager. With 30 minutes to go I felt we had won it and 30 minutes later we were out and we were down. It is a true saying that when you're playing the Old Firm you've never won till the final whistle.

There is no doubt also that finals and games that really matter are the measure of the man. I think it is fair to say that once we got our first success in beating Celtic at Celtic Park that season we improved beyond doubt. For many of the players that certainly was the most important game of their lives because it proved to them that they could beat the Old Firm and they could beat them in front of an atmosphere which was at the very least intimidating. It was the measure of them, it made them men and it made them players of real note. It stood them in good stead in years ahead.

At the end of the day the total summary of my first season as manager was this. We amassed 40 points in the League and ended up fourth but still managed to qualify for Europe. We made it to the League Cup Final and the semi-final of the Scottish Cup.

As I said, the season couldn't come to an end quickly enough. I was desperate to go and re-think and analyse, to assess myself and where I was going and how I should go about it. I knew what I wanted, there is no doubt about that.

There was nothing wrong with my ability as a manager. Winning the League did not make Alex Ferguson — what made Alex Ferguson and brought me success at Aberdeen was getting a summer break. Going away to re-think. Coming back into next season. But never once did I doubt my own ability.

Certainly one of the outstanding individuals in the Aberdeen set-up in my first season was Bobby Clark, who in his way was a legend. The fact that he was one of the few who had the proper recognition from the support in his testimonial game, when there was a full house to watch the select game, was proof. It was good to see because he had been a great servant to the club. Bobby is a thoroughly dedicated professional. He never gave a minute's bother and he was one of the players who supported me in my early days at Pittodrie. I will be ever grateful to him.