

Something

to Write Home About



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No doubt there will be many articles in the next few days listing the achievements of Burnley club legend Jimmy McIlroy as well as the memories of those who had the good fortune to have met him. The stats will show that he made the second-highest number of League appearances for the club (439) behind Jerry Dawson on 532. His 116 League goals put him two behind Ray Pointer who was second in the table, a long way behind George Beel on 178.

However, in the post-war period, the FA Cup was a vastly more important competition than it is today, so it is worth noting that between 1957 and 1962 the Clarets reached the Final, the semi-final and the sixth round three times, losing on one occasion in a tumultuous encounter with them lot down the road after a replay at Ewood. The attendance for the home game was 51,501 and for the midweek replay at Ewood 53,892. Jimmy made 50 appearances in the FA Cup, a tally greatly bolstered by five appearances in the fourth round vs. Chelsea in 1956.

Whilst a great deal is made of the burdens of playing two games a week, especially at the moment, the Clarets played 8 League and FA Cup games in February 1956 in a period of 22 days, and McIlroy played in all but one and five players played in all of them. Not surprisingly, they failed to win any of them. Jimmy made the second highest number of appearances for Burnley in the FA Cup, two behind his team mate and skipper Jimmy Adamson. He also is the third highest scorer in the competition with 13, tantalisingly only two away from top of the list, team mate John Connelly.

Fortunately, I am old enough to have seen Jimmy McIlroy play for the Clarets a number of times in 1961/62 when I was a seven-year-old lad. My first sighting of Jimmy, though, was over at Ewood

Park, February 24th 1962, where unfortunately we succumbed to Blackburn Rovers, a side at the time languishing in mid-table but eager to halt our Championship bid, which they did rather successfully by performing a double over the Clarets that season. I fully remember the massive crowds and arriving late for this fixture and watching the whole ninety minutes sat on my dad's shoulders whilst he stood on the back row on the corner of the Blackburn End. My dad didn't see a thing I expect, but even though we lost, I was made up as my hero Ray Pointer scored for the Clarets.



My parents learnt their lesson about arriving late at the ground, so for home games we would set off from Haslingden at 12.30pm so we could be at the ground with my mum and dad when the gates opened at 1.30, ensuring a spot on the fence behind or close to one of the goals – as was the case on March 17th 1962 for my first home game against Spurs. The crowd for this one was a massive 46,810 as for many, the only opportunity to see sides of the calibre of Tottenham was to go and watch them live, as not even highlights

were televised. So this really was a big game in every sense. Spurs were five points behind Burnley in the title chase, but had played two games more. The game was a 2-2 draw and I remember my parents making me very wary of the great Jimmy Greaves, goal poacher extraordinaire, who had been purchased from AC Milan mid-season and went on to score 21 goals in 22 League games for Spurs and, as we all know, scored after 3 minutes in the 1962 FA Cup Final. He scored in this fixture as well.

Shortly after this game, McIlroy was injured with 10 games of the season to go. He came back after four games out, but according to my mum and dad never did look quite fully fit and Burnley won only one of those last 10 games whilst playing some very moderate mid-table opponents such as Manchester United and relegation candidates such as Forest and Chelsea. In those 10 games with the main creator and one of the chief goal-scorers plainly not functioning fully, the Clarets mustered only six goals, with Jimmy only adding one goal away at Blackpool to add to his 14 for the season. The fall off was quite dramatic as Burnley had scored six or more in one game on five occasions previously, including away at Leicester and Birmingham. His 15 goals would put him as joint third highest scorer.

Jimmy only missed 6 games that season and they won only one in his absence, beating relegated

Cardiff 2-1 at Turf Moor. This serves to underline the significance of the contribution that McIlroy made individually to the Burnley side and, more importantly, to the successful collective functioning of the Burnley team at the time. He was the head, legs and heart of the side, the creative genius that had propelled and maintained Burnley as one of the top sides in England. Not to say Burnley were a one-man team, they most certainly were not, but if Burnley were a car he would be the engine.

Watching the video of the Cup Final, Jimmy also looks strangely lacklustre, and you would struggle to pick him out as Burnley's all-time greatest player on that day's performance. So after a season of great promise for McIlroy and Burnley, the League and Cup double slipped away as Ipswich powered past the floundering Burnley on the home straight, their side unencumbered with a long Cup run or international call-ups and the consequent fixture backlog. From 31st March, Burnley played a total of 11 games in 31 days, one every three days, including playing Blackpool home and away on Easter Friday and Easter Monday having travelled to Sheffield United on the Easter Saturday, i.e., three games in four days. The days when rotation was not permissible, the same eleven took the field, except that Ian Towers stood in for Gordon 'Bomber' Harris for two of those games. Jimmy Mac played in them all.

The disappointing end to the previous season did not deter me and my mum from buying season tickets for 1962/63 season, and as long as Jimmy Mac was in the side hope sprang eternal for another title tilt as well as another Cup run. However, the 1962 season began with a bit of a setback when the Clarets were thoroughly outplayed by Everton and lost the opening game of the season, 3-1 at Turf Moor. Everton went on to win the League but after this shock opening, normal service was resumed at Turf Moor. I saw my first Jimmy Mac goal in the 2-0 win vs. relegation bound Leyton Orient, and the second and also the last goal Jimmy ever scored in the League at Turf Moor in another 2-0 win, this time vs. fifth-placed Wolves.

The previous week, Burnley had beaten newly-promoted Liverpool away at Anfield, Harry Potts noting that: "...a wonderful run by McIlroy paved the way for the first by Ray Pointer." These wins kept the Clarets very much in the title hunt as, at the start of the day vs Wolves, they were in a group of three teams at the top of the table – Tottenham, Everton and Burnley – separated by only one point. The following home game was a big one vs. top of the table Spurs, who were defeated 2-1 in front of another bumper crowd of 44,478. In the programme notes, Harry Potts congratulates McIlroy on receiving his 50th Northern Irish cap, and on his selection for the forthcoming European Nations Cup fixture against Poland.

Opening-day aside, the Clarets remained undefeated at Turf Moor until the New Year, winning most fixtures and biffing Sheffield United 5-1. Away from home they had won 5-2 at Old Trafford, where Connelly scored a hat trick and Jimmy also chipped one in for good measure. In mitigation, United were a struggling team that season, although they did beat Leicester in the FA Cup Final, the Filbert Street boys being favourites, having a good team at the time and finishing 4th, just below the Clarets. By the turn of the year, the country was beginning to feel the icy grip of winter. The Clarets rounded the year off on a snowy late December day (orange ball and blue lines) by tanking Sheffield Wednesday 4-0 at Turf Moor, leaving us all looking forward to the New Year.

With just less than half of the League season to go, Burnley were very much in the hunt for the title and with a plum FA Cup draw, a re-run of last year's Final at White Hart Lane and a chance to extract revenge.



In Harry's programme notes, all appeared to be well in the Claret firmament. He tells us that: "We are at present in a similar placing to the one we occurred in relation to the leadership race twelve months ago. I am satisfied that our team is one of the best in the country and therefore quite capable of making a strong bid for honours." In the next paragraph he tries to explain away the defeat and double that Everton inflicted on the team at Goodison Park but notes that, guess who, Jimmy McIlroy scored "the best goal of the game."

Sheffield Wednesday was to be McIlroy's last League appearance for Burnley as, due to the Arctic conditions, the league programme did not resume again until March 2nd, away at Sheffield United. However, it was not the master's farewell, as having sensationally seen off "Bank of England" Spurs 3-0 in a twice-postponed FA Cup tie at White Hart Lane, next up were the rapidly improving Liverpool at Turf Moor on January 26th, an "all ticket" match in front of 49,827 with Scousers everywhere.

On a freezing cold day on an ice bound pitch the Clarets were held to a one-all draw by Liverpool. I specifically remember the vast banks of snow on either side of the road coming over via Crawshawbooth, Dunnockshaw and past Clowbridge reservoir, as well as Gordon Harris hitting the foot of the post and the ball rebounding straight into the arms of the beaten Tommy Lawrence on his hands and knees on the goal line. Unfortunately, Jimmy was unable to impose himself on this game and therefore his last performance in front of his adoring fans was probably not his best.

Due to the weather it was almost a month before the replay took place, and it went to extra time before Burnley were knocked out by a 119th minute penalty converted by Ronnie Moran. This was to be Jimmy Mac's farewell. Maybe if Adam Blacklaw had saved that penalty, Jimmy Mac's Burnley career might have been prolonged by a few more days or weeks depending on where and when the replay could be staged.

As it was, shortly after the Clarets' FA Cup exit came the bombshell that McIlroy was to be sold to Stoke City for £30,000, in today's money equivalent to just £600,000. Burnley fans were staggered, upset and angry at what had happened. For the club to sell a man who had turned down lucrative offers everywhere, had played the second highest number of games for the club ever and was totally idolised by all supporters was utterly unimaginable. To be flogged off like a piece of Bob Lord's meat was more than many could bear, indeed I have just been talking on the phone to another Claret whose father never went to Turf Moor again after Jimmy Mac was sold. For myself I was devastated, woe begotten and even now I can feel my blood start to boil.

It was callous to the nth degree. Imagine United selling off Bobby Charlton in the same way or Liverpool treating Steven Gerrard similarly and you would get the picture. It was also an act of gross stupidity as it made no sense either financially or in terms of the team's capability. The excuses in the programme following the sale for the game vs. West Ham United were nauseating and made it even worse. Harry Potts tells us that for some time Mac had been falling below the level of effectiveness the club had a right to expect, standards were not being met, he was no longer consistent, i.e., consistently brilliant, but actually for most of us being pretty good and brilliant now and again would have been okay.

Towards the end of the season, Robson, Bellamy, Towers and Peter Simpson all wore the number 10 shirt, which just about says it all about the official club line – they replaced a genius mainly with journeymen. The effect was not felt immediately as the side went on to finish third in the table, but gates began to dwindle noticeably. From the 25,000 or so for a regular fixture, attendances started to fall below 20,000 on a regular basis. The following season, thousands, including us, did not renew their season tickets, and towards the end of the 1963/64 campaign, gates were heading rapidly downwards towards the 12,000 mark.

With McIlroy in the side, along with an ancient Stanley Matthews, Stoke achieved promotion to the First Division. Just to give you some idea of the level of desertion that occurred, in the home game prior to the visit of Stoke City in March 1964, the gate vs. Leicester City was 12,664. For the visit of Stoke City it rose to 26,868. The following home game, a local derby vs. Bolton, attracted 12,554 spectators. It would be a very crude extrapolation to say that Bob the Butcher had halved the Burnley gate, but you can draw your own conclusions. In the previous October, me and my mum also went to Ewood to watch Stoke as McIlroy was playing there. 30,517 were on for that one. Their next fixture vs. Fulham, 13,610 turned up. McIlroy scored 9 goals for Stoke that season, two less than Burnley top scorer, Lochhead.

Those gate figures show the total adoration that Burnley fans had for Jimmy. Probably he loved the town maybe even more than we did, certainly more than those of us like myself, who chose to exile themselves from the locality. This is also indicated by his choice of abode on retirement, as well as his refusal to accept lavish blandishments and enticements to seek better rewards elsewhere.

His passing today is a sad occasion but we are given to understand that he had been ill for some time so maybe it was a blessing and a release for the man himself and his family. However, anyone who saw him play will never forget Jimmy Mac. Hopefully a little bit of his spirit lives on in all of us.

Igor Wowk, August 20th, 2018.