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Slim Jim Baxter: The Definitive Biography

Ken Gallacher

About the Author

Ken Gallacher (1939–2003) started his journalistic career with the *Dundee Courier* in 1956, but soon graduated to *Daily Record* in Glasgow, which he joined as a sports reporter, becoming chief football writer in 1972. When the *Sun* launched a Scottish edition in the 1980s, Gallacher became its chief football writer. Over the course of his career, he covered nine World Cup competitions, and interviewed everyone from Paul Robeson, to Jock Stein and Sir Alex Ferguson.

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1 A CITY UNITED IN GRIEF

His mother and father to whom he had been so close made the long, sad journey down from Fife to join the other members of his family in the Cathedral. The cortege then made its way from Castle Street through the city streets that were lined with people paying their last respects as the cars moved slowly past them and on to Ibrox where a wreath was laid. Then the procession travelled to Linn Crematorium where another 400 mourners, Rangers and Celtic supporters alike, were united in grief at the final service. Poor Alex Willoughby, who had been such a support to his old team-mate, broke down and was consoled by Craig Watson. Finally, at the Crematorium, in a typical Baxter flourish, a tape of Frank Sinatra, one of his idols, was played.

It was entirely fitting that the cortege should have paused at Ibrox, at the stadium where he had known most success. After all, despite his friendships with Celtic players, Baxter would always insist: ‘I shall be a Ranger until the day I die – that was the best club I ever played for.’

The day following Jim Baxter's death a Scottish Cup semi-final took place at the new-look Hampden Park, now known more formally as the National Stadium, where Celtic were meeting Dundee United. At the Celtic end of the ground a banner had been draped from the stand by the Parkhead fans as they remembered, with respect, their old tormentor. It read 'Slim Jim. Simply The Best' as the supporters even went out of their way to acknowledge the unofficial Ibrox anthem. It was a straightforward, sincere and moving message and one that Baxter – who, of course, had had little time for the sectarian divides in his adopted city of Glasgow – would have appreciated. The tribute at the semi-final, which Celtic won 3–1 on their way to a domestic 'treble', was a public recognition of his standing on that issue and an indication that his Old Firm rivals respected and honoured his views.

It was also a genuine salute to one of the greatest footballers the country had produced. He was, after all, a man whose skills crossed all boundaries and whose talents were savoured by soccer connoisseurs around the world. He may never have lost that distinctive singsong Fife accent even though he had been away from the coalfields which spawned him for more than forty years, but the language he spoke on the football field needed no translation.

His tragic death at the age of 61 came after years of illness and followed a shorter spell of less than three months' suffering after he had been warned by doctors that he had only a little time left to live. As a footballer his career had been one of near-constant controversy, and that was something that dogged him even when he had long stopped playing and had had an earlier brush with death seven years before.

It was as if the arguments that so often raged around him throughout his life had been added at birth as a counterweight to the sublime skills that set him apart from almost every footballer of his generation. So many of his friends talked about the ‘imp’ that always lay hidden in him, the mischief that when let loose carried him into all kinds of trouble. It was forever there, lurking just beneath the surface, sometimes bringing with it laughter as he teased opponents on the field.

Or, at worst, anger as he swept his way arrogantly through the nightlife of Glasgow, its casinos and its clubs and its cocktail bars. And that behaviour was to continue in the other cities where he plied his trade, Sunderland and Nottingham. If these last two seem unlikely venues for a serious ‘night life’ you could always be assured that Jim Baxter would find drinking dens and gambling clubs wherever he went. On occasions, of course, he would also find trouble.

For the most part, however, when he died in April 2001, he was remembered for the soccer romanticism he championed in the years he spent with Rangers and with Scotland. There was much talk of Wembley and the two games he played there against England when he finished on the winning side each time, in 1963, when he scored Scotland’s two goals, and in 1967, when he took on the role of ringmaster as he ran the show as no one else could have done, when the world champions England lost for the first time since taking the Jules Rimet trophy less than a year earlier. Of the two games he talked most fondly of the first, but it was the second that granted him immortality in the eyes of the Tartan Army. That day Baxter had not only given them a momentous win to celebrate, he had also demonstrated that the credo he followed, one which insisted that entertaining play meant as much as victory, that individual brilliance was more meaningful than the drab uniformity that slavish tactics brought to the game,

remained as valid then as it had been before Sir Alf Ramsey and his method men had taken the joy from football.

It was Pele who talked about the ‘beautiful game’ and Baxter was always a disciple of that simple philosophy. It has been said that the Scot, with his talent and his sense of theatre, should have been born a Brazilian. But those who express that view do not understand that the Scots still cling to the belief, however out of date it may seem in these corporate days, that football is there to be enjoyed. Baxter was the very embodiment of that belief and he knew that and revelled in the role.

Unfortunately there was another peculiarly Scottish trait that ate away at him over the years: the capacity to self-destruct, which has damaged so many of the nation’s sporting giants. There was the boxer Benny Lynch, who became a world champion and could beat most of his opponents in the ring, but who never did learn to beat the bottle.

Then there was Hughie Gallacher, the centre forward of the ‘Wembley Wizards’, the Scottish team which defeated England 5–1 in the Home International Championship in 1928, but whose life ended in suicide. And there was the Hearts and Hibs inside forward Willie Hamilton, a contemporary of Baxter’s and the player the legendary manager Jock Stein reckoned was the most gifted he had ever worked with and whose career petered out long before it should have done and who died young after a long and unsuccessful fight against alcohol.

There were others too, less spectacular but no less tragic, who destroyed their lives in one way or another. Jim Baxter was one of them. The fall was not as swift as that of Lynch or Hamilton nor as desperately sad as that of Gallacher but, in any final analysis, it is clear that he was the architect of his own downfall and he was never one to shirk that truth while he was alive. He knew that he had made mistakes. He knew that there were areas of his life that could have been

immeasurably better if the proper career choices had been made or if he had somehow kept that ‘imp’ in the bottle and avoided the troubles he so often brought upon himself.

Sometimes in his latter years he would wonder if it might have been better for him to have had a hard taskmaster as a manager, but then he would rationalise: ‘I don’t know if that would have worked for me. When I joined Rangers Scot Symon was a good manager but there have been times when I wish some manager would have taken a grip of me and forced me to train properly and fulfil my potential as a player. Yet when I do think that, there is always a wee voice comes into my mind saying that if I had been disciplined then I might not have been the player I was. It was taking the risks, making those gambles on the field that made me different, I think.’

There is no doubt that Baxter was always different, it was almost as if he searched for that yet, from all accounts, it was something that came naturally to him. There was an extraordinary insouciance that was, perhaps, developed into a personal statement over the years, but it was a piece of his personality that was there from the beginning and that never left him. While other players suffered from nerves before a game Baxter sat in the dressing room as if he had not a care in the world. His old friend Billy McNeill remembers an international for Scotland. ‘Everyone was getting excited. Dressing rooms can be funny places before major matches because every player has his own little bits before going out on to the field. In the middle of all that was going on, Jimmy was sitting there reading a newspaper!

‘This was maybe only ten minutes before we were due to go out for the warm-up before the kick off. People are going crazy round about him and he was totally unconcerned.’

This was just situation normal for Baxter even in the most torrid atmosphere of all – that preceding an Old Firm game, the most demanding ‘derby’ game in British football.

Players who have reached the top levels of the game have been intimidated by the passion that sweeps through Glasgow before Rangers and Celtic meet whether the game is at Ibrox or Parkhead or Hampden. I recall the former Rangers manager Walter Smith telling me how Terry Butcher, then England's captain and a highly experienced player who had returned from playing in the World Cup in Mexico with England, was consumed by nerves on his Old Firm debut. He was not alone in that and Willie Henderson admits: 'No matter how many times you played against Celtic you always felt these butterflies.

'It's like no other game I ever played in. Even at Hampden or Wembley, before matches against England, you didn't get the same feeling you got when you were getting ready for an Old Firm match. You used to get guys being physically sick beforehand. Davie Provan, our full back at that time, played in dozens of these games and yet he was always sick in the dressing room right before the kick off. And Baxter, he would be sitting there as if it was just another game. I think that every player felt the tension on these occasions – I know that I did – yet Jimmy was always calm. He loved these games, of course. But even allowing for that, he was on his own when it came to handling pressure. It just never got to him. Mind you, the rules that applied to the rest of us went out of the window where he was concerned.'

Sir Alex Ferguson was another who was startled by Baxter's apparent indifference before games. He says: 'There was one time when I was still playing for Dunfermline and we went to Ibrox for a league game and I was injured at the time. There was no way that I was going to be playing and so I was out at the front door giving tickets to my family and mates about twenty minutes or so before kick off.

'I turned round and there was Baxter just behind me doing the same thing. He was standing there, still with his suit on, and absolutely unconcerned, to such an extent that I

thought he was out of the team, that he was not going to be playing against us.

‘So I went in to tell our manager Willie Cunningham that Baxter was not going to be playing – but he was. It was just his way of doing things. I don’t think he had a single nerve in his body.’

Most of that attitude stemmed from his all-consuming self-belief, an inner knowledge that no matter what company he was in on the field he was going to be as good as anyone.

His skills came to him naturally, he often said that he had not practised in the manner that other players had done. He had not run in and out of a line of milk bottles with a tennis ball at his feet as the Celtic winger Jimmy Johnstone had done when he was perfecting his dribbling technique. He had not gone off on his own to play keepy-uppy – he kept that trick for the real thing, for the main event at Wembley for instance – and when he would sometimes take time out at Ibrox deliberately to hit ball after ball against the training pitch crossbar and wait for them returning to that incomparable left foot, it was not a case of practice making perfect, it was just a minor piece of showboating to impress the younger players. He *knew* he could do that and most other things he wanted to do with a ball and so the talent he was born with did not need honing during his brief period at soccer’s summit.

When he played in World or European select teams, as he did on several occasions, he was never overawed at the august company he might find himself in. Willie Henderson recalls playing with him in a tribute match for Sir Stanley Matthews when his Ibrox team-mate deliberately held up the bus leaving from the hotel as if to tell the stars from around Europe that he was every bit as important as any of them.

His problem was that, while he had as much ability as any of those who played in such games, he did not have the staying power. He peaked when he was still in his mid-

twenties and still playing with Rangers and it was all over by the time he returned there in time to mark his thirtieth birthday. There was that one glorious Wembley in 1967 that shone like a beacon through the dark years of his decline but little more to excite the imagination as he sleepwalked his way through the years with Sunderland and Forest.

His sojourn in the Midlands came just before the failed attempt to resurrect his career with Rangers when the then manager Davie White tempted him to make that journey back home. He did not need too much persuading for, just as he doubtless saw Wembley as his spiritual home, he knew deep down that Ibrox was his true football home – the stadium where he had developed into a world-class footballer – and that Rangers was the club where he had known more success and happiness than at any other time in his life. Certainly he had a major disagreement with the Glasgow giants before storming off to Roker Park when the directors refused to meet his wage demands, which were minuscule by today's ludicrously inflated standards and modest even by the salary structures of the time.

It says a great deal about the entrenched beliefs of the Ibrox board in those far-off days in the 1960s that Sunderland, a club destined to struggle in the English First Division and one with neither the style nor the substance of Rangers, could afford to give Baxter what he wanted while they refused to come even close to the money he was looking for. The rancorous departure from Rangers was the first of the poor career choices made by Baxter, and it was compounded when he left the North-East and joined Nottingham Forest. By then, though, there were few 'choices' remaining for the out-of-condition, out-of-control Scot and inside eighteen months things became even worse when he exhausted the patience of his second English club and was handed a humiliating free transfer.

It is all the more amazing that his impact on the national psyche was so immense when his time in football was so

short. When people have looked at just how brief his good times were there is a sense of regret and, often, frustration that he did not do more.

Harold Davis, the old ‘Iron Man’ of Ibrox, is one man who remains angered at how Baxter frittered away his talents. It is easy to understand his feelings when you look at his own background. Davis was wounded while serving in the Korean War and the injuries were so severe that the Army doctors did not know if he would ever be able to pick up the reins of a proper life when he was invalided out of the forces. Not only did he fight his way back to health but he also carved out a football career with East Fife, Rangers and then Partick Thistle. He did so by sheer force of will and on the field it was his power and strength that complemented the talents of the other Rangers wing half.

He was, of course, a precocious young man who had been signed from Raith Rovers for the sum of £17,500. It must have been galling for Davis, who could not aspire to the genius now set alongside him, to see it being wasted. Even now he insists: ‘Jim had a superb gift but he seemed determined to waste the talents he had been born with.

‘That used to annoy me because while he was, without any doubt, a football genius, he was only a genius every third or fourth week when it came up his back to really play. It was as if Rembrandt had painted one or two masterpieces and then given up painting because it was all too much trouble for him. There was a flaw in Jim’s character I suppose which saw him going off the straight and narrow too often. It saddened me that he gave the public and the rest of us maybe just fifty per cent of what he had. He should have treasured that talent instead of just wasting so much of it.

‘But for all that he was one of the most skilled players ever to appear in Scotland, and while I suppose I always felt, even dreaded, that it would all end in tears, I still have this great sadness about what happened to him. What happened

to his career and what happened to him at the end of his life. Everything was just too short.'

Short as it was, Baxter had crammed more living into his 61 years than most people would be able to fit into a longer period on this earth. Much of it, so many of the excesses he took on board in his pursuit of enjoyment, the drinking and the late nights, damaged him severely but, out there on the football field, in the middle of 'the arena' as he referred to the pitch when talking to his 1967 Wembley colleague Jim McCalliog, he came magically, poetically to life in a fashion others can only dream about.

That is why his death and his subsequent funeral, some days later, silenced his adopted city. The people of Glasgow, and all around Scotland for that matter, knew that something had vanished from their lives, that a great original Scot had gone forever.

Those spokespersons for the 'unco guid', who had complained about Baxter being allowed a liver transplant seven years earlier, were surely made to realise by the extent of the public mourning that a national treasure had been saved and given the gift of life by the doctors at Edinburgh Royal Infirmary in 1994. Their carping criticisms seemed even more small-minded than they had appeared at the time as people from all walks of life came forward to say what Jim Baxter had meant to them.

So many of them simply wanted to share their memories of him with the world at large or to say how much pleasure he had provided or how he had added some stardust to their workaday lives.

In the days following his death the gates of Ibrox were festooned with scarves – significantly there were the green and white of Celtic's colours mingling with the royal blue of Rangers – and a sea of flowers appeared there as the ordinary fans honoured their fallen hero, one of the greatest players – if not *the* greatest – who ever played for Rangers and for Scotland.

On 20 April the funeral service was held at Glasgow Cathedral. One thousand mourners, all the great and the good from Scottish public life, were inside the Church, something that would have afforded Baxter, that lifelong rebel and a constant thorn in the side of the country's football establishment, a wry smile. Outside, another thousand or more, his own people if you like, stood in the street listening to a broadcast relay of the service as it took place. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, who had admitted to being in tears when Raith Rovers sold the young wing half to Rangers, was there to give the reading from the bible while novelist Willie McIlvanney and Baxter's team-mate and friend Ralph Brand spoke. McIlvanney explained later how the ever-irreverent Baxter had requested that he speak because he reckoned that the writer wouldn't let him down.

In the moving eulogy McIlvanney, referring to the short space of time that Baxter enjoyed at the top, declared: 'Brevity doesn't deny greatness. John Keats died in his twenties. People like to bring up the old idea of an idol with feet of clay in relation to Jim. That was never him. In his case, the feet were made of gold – with the left one presumably inlaid with diamonds as well. It was the rest of him that was made of all too fallible clay. But that's all right. Isn't that what we're all made of anyway?

'He remarked to me once that he had offended a right lot of people on the way [through life]. I hope they bear no grudges now. If they do, I would say this: As far as I'm concerned, if you didn't like Jim Baxter, it was just that you didn't know him well enough.

'He lived on his own terms, and the biggest risks he took were with himself. That's not such a bad epitaph.'

The pallbearers were all former Rangers players and had been chosen by Baxter beforehand as he made his plans for that last day. They were Craig Watson, who was ill at the time and who was to die within a few months of his old

friend, Alex Willoughby, Willie Henderson, Ralph Brand, John Greig and Sandy Jardine. The piper, who had been organised by Willoughby, came from Baxter's own National Service regiment the Black Watch and he played 'A Scottish Soldier', again at the dead star's request.

His mother and father to whom he had been so close made the long, sad journey down from Fife to join the other members of his family in the Cathedral. The cortege then made its way from Castle Street through the city streets that were lined with people paying their last respects as the cars moved slowly past them and on to Ibrox where a wreath was laid. Then the procession travelled to Linn Crematorium where another 400 mourners, Rangers and Celtic supporters alike, were united in grief at the final service. Poor Alex Willoughby, who had been such a support to his old team-mate, broke down and was consoled by Craig Watson. Finally, at the Crematorium, in a typical Baxter flourish, a tape of Frank Sinatra, one of his idols, was played.

It was entirely fitting that the cortege should have paused at Ibrox, at the stadium where he had known most success. After all, despite his friendships with Celtic players, Baxter would always insist: 'I shall be a Ranger until the day I die – that was the best club I ever played for.'

And Pat Crerand would always echo that, saying: 'Jimmy was never bigoted in the slightest, but he was always a Rangers man. He loved that club, but he never allowed that to affect his friendships with myself and other Celtic players, and I know that Celtic supporters loved him because they could recognise his greatness.'

As he had confided to Willie McIlvanney, there had been a lot of people he had offended during his lifetime but, at the end, there were more people around who remembered the thoughtfulness that Jim Baxter could so often demonstrate and the kind words he could dispense when he felt these to

be appropriate. He went out of his way to encourage young players and he did not like to see injustice.

Even when faced with troubles of his own he could take time out to tell Sir Alex Ferguson he felt that the Manchester United supremo had been shabbily treated by Rangers during his spell as a player with the club and, shortly before he died, when the Old Trafford manager phoned to speak to him, he found Baxter congratulating him on how well he had done as a manager down south, rather than talk to him about his own illness.

And when he looked back over his life with his close friends, after that fatal cancer had been discovered, they found that he would not blame anyone else for the various problems that had blighted his career and his health.

He knew what had gone wrong and he knew who was to blame, and the man who took him to Sunderland, Ian McColl, felt that there were times when they met in the years following the debacle at Roker Park that Baxter was very conscious of the fact that he should have done more there and that he was genuinely sorry that he had let down the manager who had taken him south.

There is no doubt that he had genuine regrets about the direction his life took at various times, but he was always ready to face up to the responsibility and to take all of the blame for the mistakes on to his own shoulders. However, we are left to wonder how things might have been if the Board of Directors of Rangers Football Club had realised the talent they had at their disposal and had moved out of Victoriana and handed their young left half the contract he wanted. If these men had had the modern-day vision that was introduced to Ibrox first by Graeme Souness on his arrival as manager in 1986 and then continued by the current chairman David Murray – both men Baxter admired, incidentally – then he would probably never have left the club.

It is difficult now even to attempt to come to terms with the fact that the signing-on fee Baxter wanted to stay with Rangers was around half the amount paid as a weekly wage to such present-day Ibrox stars as Tore Andre Flo. And it's even more ironic that when he returned as a player, well past his sell-by date, he was given the equivalent – in the shape of a brand new house – of what he had looked for and that whenever he met up with Davie White, the manager who brought him back, he would insist on introducing him as 'the man who paid me more money than any other manager I ever played for'.

If only the purse strings had been loosened earlier the Jim Baxter story might have had a happier ending. Not that he would thank me for suggesting that, because in public he would never own up to having any real regrets. More than once he famously stated: 'I look on myself as one of the luckiest guys in the world because I came out of the pits and was able to meet so many people and to live, at times, like a millionaire. I may never have been a millionaire but I always wanted to live like one and I've done that.'

That from a man who went from earning a few pounds a week sorting out coal from the stone at the pithead to just a few pounds more playing for the juniors. That from a teenager who believed he had hit the big time when he received a signing on fee of £50 which allowed him to buy his mother a washing machine. From there via a three-year apprenticeship in the senior game at Raith Rovers Baxter moved almost effortlessly to the legendary status that is afforded only the true greats. Forget how short-lived his time was in the spotlight and think instead of the indelible impression he made on the football history of his country, which is what every Scot did on the day he died.

2 ESCAPE FROM THE PITS

Baxter’s own swaggering virtuoso performance that day convinced the usually cautious Ibrox manager Scot Symon that his maverick talents could transform the Rangers team. The game was on 29 November 1959 and, subsequently, when he was signed some six months or so later, Symon revealed to him: ‘When I watched you that day I knew that I had to sign you. You ran the game, the whole show. You controlled everything and that was in a Raith Rovers jersey and I wondered just what you would be capable of wearing a Rangers jersey.’

That was a question that would soon be answered after the transfer formalities were concluded. What remains a surprise, even allowing for Baxter’s extravagant skills, is the determination Symon displayed in his efforts to clinch the transfer on the very eve of a Scottish Cup Final against Kilmarnock.

When Raith Rovers first began to play their new signing from the Fife Junior side Crossgates Primrose there was little to suggest that he was going to become the greatest Scottish player of his generation.

Jim Baxter arrived at Stark's Park with little fanfare. He had served his apprenticeship with the juniors – which was the normal route into senior football at that time. He had been invited to play a trial game for the reserves and had come through that impressively enough to be offered a contract by the club.

Ironically that first game had been against a Rangers reserve side and Baxter had been forced to ask for time off from his shift at Fordel Colliery to allow him to make the kick-off. Back then Saturday morning was part of the working week and in the case of those who worked in the mines the shift did not finish until 1.30 p.m. Baxter had to request that he be released at midday to enable him to get to Kirkcaldy for a trial that was to change the course of his life. Until then the slim fresh-faced youngster had had little ambition to become a professional footballer. Indeed, not too long before he had stopped playing the game altogether. Typically, and his later life would bring repeated acts of a similar nature, he had become fed up when the youth team he was playing for had become 'too organised' for his taste.

He would often recall: 'They started to get themselves blazers and flannels and they wanted to have properly organised training sessions. That was not for me.'

And so Cowdenbeath Royals, as the team was extravagantly titled, became the first victims of Baxter's lifelong fight against authority. Before playing for that team he had played for Hill o' Beath Primary School team and

after that – at fourteen years old – for Cowdenbeath High School. He won his first medal in a competition for Fife schools, the Dick Cup. But his talents went unnoticed as far as Scottish Schools internationals were concerned and when he left school he had a brief flirtation with the Royals and then dropped out of organised football for almost a year, simply playing in rough and ready matches with other lads from the miners' rows.

These were games that were never really organised, sometimes with as many as twenty-a-side playing. When there was a shortage of players – which was not too often – they would play across the pitch in six or seven-a-side teams. Anything so long as they were able to kick a ball about and proper organisation, of course, was absent, which suited the young Baxter perfectly. In these surroundings he was allowed to express himself and was learning to avoid the tackles that flew in his direction from older and stronger players. He realised that was essential if he was to survive and, while the structure which had taken over at Cowdenbeath Royals had brought him some disillusion, he had also suffered in training when he had been injured by more senior players in a practice match, and that, too, had helped make up his mind to stop playing for the team.

Again he would sometimes reminisce: 'At that time I didn't miss football the way you might think I would. We used to play on a Sunday. A whole gang from the village would get together and we would play locally for fun. I knew I had skill because the opposition players found it difficult to take the ball away from me. Even my own team-mates couldn't get much of the ball at times – which didn't always please them. But it was when that ball was at my feet that I loved the game.'

Soon one of his mates from the village decided to start a youth club and organise a football team at the same time. Thus, Halbeath Boys' Club came into being and Jim Baxter's career began to take shape, though the manner of his

comeback was more than a little accidental. He left school, worked for less than a year as a cabinet-maker's apprentice and then, in common with so many of his friends, became a miner against his parents' wishes. But there was more money to be made in the pits and that is what drew the youngster into the industry that dominated the area of Fife where he had been born and had grown up. It was almost inevitable that he became a miner despite the opposition from his mother and father.

What was not inevitable was his return to football. But Malcolm Sinclair, a boyhood friend, was instrumental in luring the teenager back into the game with Halbeath Boys' Club.

Malcolm, eighteen months older than his neighbour in the miners' row at Hill o' Beath, smiles now at how their relationship began with a mutual enmity.

'The problem when we were at the primary school,' he remembers, 'was that Jim went to the Protestant school and I was at the Catholic school; we used to play football against each other and we fought all the time. Then, when we were about twelve, we started to play football together and we became more and more friendly and that kept up when we left school. I started work as a butcher before going down the pit and Jim was a cabinetmaker before he also became a miner. And we would play in these games every Sunday on the park beside the rows, and when we played together I would pretend to be Willie Bauld because I was a Hearts supporter and Jim, who was Hibs daft back then, was always Gordon Smith. Anyhow, after he had stopped playing for the Cowdenbeath Royals, Halbeath Boys' Club got a team up and the lads who ran it, Bert Murray and Tom Cochrane, asked me if I could persuade Jim to play again. He had turned them down so often and, because I was his pal, they thought I might have some influence over him. I was not as sure because he could be stubborn and when he was injured training with the Royals he wasn't too happy and, to be

honest, he seemed content just playing in the Sunday kickabouts.'

However, Malcolm Sinclair decided that he would make an effort and one Saturday morning he set off on his mission to get Baxter to turn out for Halbeath, his local team. His recollection is that he found his friend playing cards in the Hill o' Beath Institute. Which, given his later lifestyle, has more than a ring of truth to it!

'I knew he would be there, in the Institute, and I knew where I would find him there – in the card room,' he says, smiling. 'He was playing brag [a form of poker which was the major gambling game, along with pontoon, for working-class Scots]. I asked him straight away if he was going to play for Halbeath and he said that he was finished with football and that he had told the lads at the club they were wasting their time.

'I had half an hour to spare and I thought I would hang around with him and see how the game worked out – I still can't tell you why I did that. So the game went on and it became a wee bit serious until Jim eventually put the last of his money down on the table and asked to see the other lad's cards.

'He turned over three aces and that was it. Jim was skint and he turned to me and asked where the game was. I told him the match was going to be played at Kingseat and he just said: "Give me two minutes until I get my boots and I'll come with you."

'The next thing we were walking across the Hill o' Beath for nearly two miles in one and a half inches of snow to get to Kingseat. He played that day and he kept on playing, and after six months Crossgates Primrose came along and signed him and soon he was playing with them regularly, and after that he was with Raith Rovers. It was a strange thing the way it all turned out and, to this day, I believe that if Jim had turned up the three aces and won the hand of brag then Rangers and Scotland might never have had him

playing for them. That's just the way he was. A turn of the cards changed his life.'

Of course, when Crossgates Primrose saw him play for his newly organised team and signed him there was another few bob available for his card schools and a handsome signing-on fee of £50 which was more money than Baxter had even seen in his life up to that point.

It was then he realised that football could kick some extra money into his pockets to add to the seven pounds a week he was collecting as he 'worked the tables' at the pit, sorting out the stones from the coal. He was never slow to admit that it was the thought of the extra cash that lured him into the game, rather than any dreams of glory. These came later in his life when he began to realise for himself the gift he possessed.

When Raith Rovers offered him £3 a week and then increased that to £9 a week when he was picked for the first team, he began to think that he could make a decent living out of kicking a ball about. Once he was able to get a regular first team place he was persuaded by the Raith manager Bert Herdman to sign as a full-time player with the £9 guaranteed weekly wage, with bonuses added when there was a good result. With Bert a special bonus for a seriously good result could mean that the players were allowed to choose from the à la carte menu at their after-match meal!

This was life in the fast lane at Kirkcaldy and Jim Baxter, while seen as having a special talent, was not cosseted, either by the straight-talking Herdman or by his tough and experienced team-mates. Herdman was a manager of the old school. He would not be seen at training and it's doubtful if he ever knew what a track-suit was.

Yet in his own rough-diamond fashion he kept Raith Rovers in the first division for many years and, even more important in these parlous financial times, he was able to keep them afloat financially by shrewd moves into the

transfer market. He sold players on a regular basis and always appeared able to bring in others to fill their places until they, too, were moved on at a profit. Always, though, Herdman had a core of seasoned professionals in any of his teams and Baxter, therefore, found that no matter how precocious his skills might be he was not going to waltz his way into the first team and instant acceptance from the older and more experienced men who were now going to complete the young apprentice's football education.

For example, the half back line Rovers boasted then had the powerful Andy Young at right half, the vastly talented Willie McNaught at centre half, and the wily Andy Leigh occupied the left half position that Baxter preferred to play.

Jimmy McEwan, the outside right in that team and one of Bert Herdman's exports to England where he went on to play for Aston Villa, remembers when Baxter, in his words, 'still just a boy', started his senior career.

Recently he explained: 'People will find it difficult to believe today but when he joined Raith Rovers he had a bit of a job getting into the first team. He was still a part-timer, of course, still working in the pits and training a couple of nights a week. And we had a well-established half back line and so Jimmy had to play at inside left when he began to get his chance in the first team. He couldn't dislodge Andy Leigh at first.

'But the trouble was, eventually, that Jimmy was not comfortable when he was pushed that little bit further forward. He had exceptional ability and a magnificent left foot and once old Bert (Herdman) was able to slot him into the left half spot he really began to blossom. That's when all the transfer speculation emerged in the newspapers.'

Before Baxter was sold to Rangers, McEwan himself had departed for Aston Villa, but he has always found it hard to reconcile the stories of 'Baxter the playboy' with the 'shy' teenager he first met at Stark's Park. At Raith he had been so quiet that when some of the younger players were going

out to the dance hall in Kirkcaldy, he would be content to sit at home.

Willie Wallace, McEwan's successor in the Raith team, was one of his Stark's Park contemporaries and he was to go on to play for Hearts and Celtic. He would also play a key role in the victory over England at Wembley in 1967, and he confirms: 'Going back to the time I was with him at Rovers he was really quiet. A few of the young players would go to the dancing during the week and Jim would never come with us. He kept to himself, away from the ground, except for playing golf. He would make up a four with myself and Denis Mochan and Andy Leigh. He was a left-hander, of course, and he was a good player and he liked to gamble a bit on the games even back then when none of us had much money to throw around!'

He was also displaying his hatred of training and Wallace says, laughing: 'I think that by the time I was in the team at Raith Jim realised that he was something a little bit special and so he thought that his skill gave him a licence not to train as hard as the rest of us. But the old trainer, there, a lad called Willie Hunter, used to haul him back from the dressing room when we had finished and make him push the huge roller over the park to make up for all the skiving he had done during the training sessions. It didn't change Jim's attitude any. He went his own sweet way!'

Earlier, however, there had been signs that the young man from Hill o' Beath was willing to listen to his elders and even to take advice. McEwan claims: 'He would always listen to Willie McNaught and there were occasions when Willie and I would talk to Jim about the way he was dressing. There was no need to talk about drinking or the like because none of that had surfaced when I was playing with him. But we would see him come in wearing drainpipe trousers and long jackets, almost Teddy Boy-type clothes that were fashionable for teenagers around that time. We thought he should move away from that and, gradually, he did. You

know, when he signed for the club he was a good lad and an ideal kind of youngster to have around the dressing room. Glasgow seemed to change him.

‘Once he was there with the world seemingly at his feet I don’t think anything that Willie McNaught or myself could have said would have made any difference.’

In a sense, however, it was McNaught’s own stalled career which probably had as big an influence on Baxter’s life as anything else. The defender won only five Scotland caps in the early 1950s including one against England at Hampden in 1952 when the Scots lost 2–1, and spent his whole football life with the one club. When he retired he was back working at his trade as a bricklayer. For a superb and stylish defender he was left with little to show for nearly twenty years as a full-time professional footballer. That image of his mentor rarely left Baxter and was a major factor in his thinking as he constantly looked for salary increases during his five seasons at Ibrox. It was also McNaught to whom he turned for advice when the opportunity to sign for Rangers came. Predictably the veteran told him that he should not hesitate, that he should not even quibble over a signing-on fee or even wages, but that he should grasp the chance which had never come to him. In fact the veteran had more of a hand in the transfer than has ever been known until now.

One match day Baxter invited his mate Malcolm Sinclair and another of his pals from the village to Stark’s Park where they were introduced to some of the other players after the game. Sinclair claims: ‘There was a whole lot of talk going on about Jim and a possible transfer and that Rangers might want to sign him from the Rovers and we were all talking about that. There was me and one of our mates George Bryce and Jim and Willie McNaught and it was either Andy Young or Andy Leigh who was also in the company. McNaught got up and excused himself and when he came back he told us that he had been on the telephone

to Ibrox. He told the people there that he was a relation of Jim Baxter of Raith Rovers and that he could assure them that the laddie wanted nothing more than to play at Ibrox. His thinking was simple: if you stayed in Fife, as he had done, then you did not get the international recognition that you received as a player in Glasgow or even in Edinburgh. He spelled that out to us and said that he had learned that from his own experience. Before we knew it the transfer to Rangers had happened, and the day after Jim signed he came back up to Fife to see me and he rolled up in front of my house in his new Jaguar and took me over to Lochgelly golf course. I'll never forget that, and George Bryce and I always believed that the phone call made by Willie McNaught to Rangers helped Jim get there.'

Baxter had played senior football for just two seasons when he was sold for £17,500 which was a fair return on the so-shrewd Bert Herdman's £200 investment, which was the fee that was paid to the junior club, Crossgates Primrose.

He had played only eight times against Rangers – on the first two occasions he was out of position at inside left and then at outside left and Raith lost both these games at the end of the 1956–57 season – 4–1 at Ibrox and the following week by 3–1 at Stark's Park.

Long-serving Rangers captain Bobby Shearer still smiles when Baxter described, later, how he felt about facing him directly in the second of these matches.

'We would laugh about it when he was at Ibrox,' says Shearer, 'but he wasn't laughing too much before that second match. I can't remember exactly what had happened to the fixtures but we finished up playing each other twice within a week. He was playing inside left at Ibrox and then in the return Bert Herdman told him he was going to be playing on the left wing – right against me! Well, he admitted to me that he hardly slept the night before the match because he was convinced that I would kick him off the park. He didn't fancy it at all when the game got too

physical and I was the old-fashioned type of full back who liked to get in a few heavy tackles. That was the way we played but it was never Jim's way. I don't remember too much about the game but I don't think I kicked Jim too much. He seemed to be happy to stay out of my way.'

Still, when he did get the step back to wing half, in the parlance of the day, Baxter more than held his own. In the next six games against the Glasgow club Raith won two of them, drew two more and lost the others. That was a creditable record against the Rangers team then and it was in one of these Rovers victories that the transfer to Rangers was sealed, with that little bit of help from McNaught thrown in.

Baxter's own swaggering virtuoso performance that day convinced the usually cautious Ibrox manager Scot Symon that his maverick talents could transform the Rangers team. The game was on 29 November 1959 and, subsequently, when he was signed some six months or so later, Symon revealed to him: 'When I watched you that day I knew that I had to sign you. You ran the game, the whole show. You controlled everything and that was in a Raith Rovers jersey and I wondered just what you would be capable of wearing a Rangers jersey.'

That was a question that would soon be answered after the transfer formalities were concluded. What remains a surprise, even allowing for Baxter's extravagant skills, is the determination Symon displayed in his efforts to clinch the transfer on the very eve of a Scottish Cup Final against Kilmarnock.

After all, he had a formidable left half available to him already in Billy Stevenson who had played close to a hundred first team games in the two seasons prior to the Baxter signing and had helped Rangers win one League Championship, one Scottish Cup and reach the semi-final of the European Cup. He was also built in the tradition of Rangers wing halves. Powerfully built, strong in the tackle