

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Gordon Strachan

Leo Moynihan

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About the Book

Gordon Strachan's career as player and manager has spanned 35 years. From his early years at Dundee and Aberdeen, Strachan's wily skills and leadership qualities have stood him in good stead as he graduated to playing for Manchester United and Leeds, and in his time as manager of Coventry, Southampton and now, Celtic.

At Aberdeen, under the fledgling manager Alex Ferguson, Strachan was an integral part of the team that won the 1983 European Cup Winners' Cup. He had 50 caps as a Scottish international and competed in two World Cups for Scotland. He remains the only player ever to win the Football Writers' Player of the Year Award both in England and Scotland. His dedication to fitness and idiosyncratic diets involving seaweed prompted Ron Atkinson to make the remark 'There's no one fitter at his age, except maybe Raquel Welch.'

In this fully updated edition of the highly praised biography, Leo Moynihan looks at the tenacity of Strachan as a player, the true nature of his relationship with Sir Alex Ferguson, his management at Celtic, and above all, the honesty of a man that has often left fans scratching their heads, but always full of admiration.

Gordon Strachan

A Biography

Leo Moynihan



To my Mum and Dad - thank you so much

FOREWORD

There's an old English saying, 'Good things come in small parcels,' and an old Yorkshire saying, 'Tha gets nowt for nowt.' In Gordon's case, both were highly appropriate. Signing him was not easy. He had already spoken to his old pal 'Big Ron' and he seemed certain to go to Sheffield Wednesday. That would cost me an extra £25,000. Very soon after I told Alex Ferguson of our interest, he was back on the phone, telling me Sheffield Wednesday had offered £25,000 more and he'd reluctantly have to ask me to match it. Or at least that's what he said.

Seriously, he was worth every penny. From the moment we met in Leeds United's chief executive's house, I knew he was my sort of player, my sort of person. I explained my dream for Leeds: promotion, then then the championship in five years, Europe, youth development, everything. I convinced him that leaving Manchester United did not have to be the beginning of the end; instead it could just be a new beginning.

From the day he joined us, he never short-changed the club or me. My beliefs became his; his values matched mine. He led by example and, when example was not enough, there was always a few well-chosen words: 'King Tongue' could silence anyone. As a player, his contribution to Leeds United's success during his prime there ranks with the greats of the Revie era.

As a manager, he has the qualities to go right to the top, if he wants to, that is. In saying that, please don't misunderstand me, I'm not expressing doubts about his commitment, there's no one more committed. But more

than just commitment, Gordon truly cares. Players of his stature are constantly in demand, visits to hospitals, openings, good causes and such. Gordon was top of the league when it came to that, but his duty didn't end there. His self-imposed list of extra duties was twice as long as anyone else's, performed quietly, no publicity, no photographs and no interviews.

I remember one youngster who was terminally ill. I'd pop in to see him on Saturday mornings before home games, only to find that Gordon had been there before me, plus perhaps once or twice in the week. That caring extends equally to his friends and family and that means more than football to him. If the cost to them was too great, I think he'd reluctantly refuse to pay that price.

He now needs a top club and if I were a top club's chairman I'd have no hesitation, as he can go on to be a top manager. He has well served his apprenticeship, and my belief is we will see him back very soon. Rod Stewart's team may have to do without its star player!

As a player, he won everything the domestic game has to offer, and he has his rightful place in the history books of Scottish and English soccer. He can now go on to match that as a manager. After all, foreign managers have proven how good they can be. I say foreign, because I for one have never understood a single word he says.

Howard Wilkinson

1. FLASH GORDON!

GORDON AFTER ANOTHER FINE PERFORMANCE BY HIS STRIKER JAMES BEATTIE: *I would like to thank James's parents for what they did 25 years ago.*

A MONSTER OF a car moves towards the training-ground gates. You know the type: the off-road vehicles favoured on the road by mums doing the school run, and by professional footballers in need of their space. His is a Porsche, a brand like its driver better known for its compact build and wonderful performance. The gates slowly open and the car moves out for the last time. A scattering of autograph hunters are joined today by cameras and microphones. His window slides down as if about to reveal a Mafia Don and everyone at the club is thanked. He's off. 'But, Gordon,' asks one reporter hoping for one last Strachanism, 'why today?'

'It's Friday.' He smiles. 'It's the end of the week.' With that the giant car pulls away into the distance.

Those reporters are strangely going to miss him, and while he can do without them for a little while he will miss the players, to whom he has just had to say goodbye. After training he told the men who had helped him raise the profile of this modest south-coast club that that would be his last session with them. He would see each of them individually to say thank you. 'I was one of the first in,' says his Finnish goalkeeper Antti Niemi, the tough-guy football image betrayed by the clear sentiment in his voice. 'It was emotional. I thanked him for all he'd done. He gave me my chance in the Premiership and I will always be grateful. I hope he knows how much that meant to me.'

So why now? To so many in the game it had seemed that Strachan had found the perfect vehicle. Under Strachan, Southampton had become an entertaining yet resolute team; they possessed one of the newest and most impressive stadiums in the Premiership; they had reached the FA Cup Final, played in Europe and had a number of internationals on the books. It was time, though, to move on. Throughout his successful and charismatic time in the game, Strachan had been like a shark, desperate to keep moving. He has been capable of the unexpected, both with a ball at his feet and with his career choices, and now, well, it seemed he had sold us all another dummy.

He signed for Southampton in October 2001, and on agreeing a two-and-a-half-year contract had promised his wife Lesley that he would take a break. It had got tough during his previous job at Coventry and the short break between jobs was hardly ideal. Strachan was too tempted by the role offered to him by Southampton's chairman Rupert Lowe, too engrossed in a game that had been his livelihood for over thirty years. The problem was he knew that that very same engrossment can also change a man and he was adamant that if that ever happened it was time to take a step back.

That's what he'd done. But there must be an ulterior motive. There must have been a row with Mr Lowe (Strachan once described himself and Lowe as 'the odd couple'); there must have been a better job offer and this was his way of slyly getting out of the club. After all, this is football and this was a season where lies, deceit and wrongdoing had left their soiled footprints all over the game's fragile reputation. While football's celebrities chose to buy bed linen rather than take compulsory drug tests, sit in foreign prison cells rather than play on pitches, and brought the word 'roasting' to football's strange new vocabulary book, a man keeping a promise to his wife was hardly conceivable.

A man putting his family first? That raised eyebrows, but Strachan was sticking to it. Since donning a manager's tracksuit and enduring the stress that comes with the profession, it was clear Strachan would be immersed in the job at hand. It was hard for the role of manager not to change him; always feisty, always first with a quick one-liner, Strachan was now also carrying the weight of a club on those slender but sturdy shoulders. At Coventry he had lost a game on their way ultimately to relegation. The family was expecting visitors on the Sunday but he couldn't get the defeat out of his head. 'A walk will help,' he told Lesley. 'I'll go for a little walk to ensure I'm reasonable company.' Three hours later, Lesley received a phone call from her weary husband. 'I'm seventeen miles away, can you pick me up?'

Things hadn't changed at Southampton and, while he also cited the need for a hip replacement, it was the chance to have a break that was so appealing. 'I'm not saying I'm walking away from football,' he told the press in January 2004 once the news had broken. 'But there are other things I would like to do, though I am not arrogant to think I can take a break and then get straight back into football.'

The season had started with Southampton riding the crest of a wave that had taken the club past the Solent and on to the rich waters of European football. Despite not progressing beyond the first round, the club's fans were hailing their manager as the best since Lawrie McMenemy a whole generation before. Strachan though was aware of his pending decision and, sitting on a plane returning from a game on the Continent, he quietly told his chairman the news. He would be leaving at the end of the season. 'It was a blow,' says Lowe calmly, like an experienced farmer resolved to losing his prize bull. 'Of course it was but that was the contract he had signed so that was that.'

Lowe of course tried to stall any final decision: Strachan could have time to think about it and improved financial packages would be offered, but his mind was made up. This

was not about money. The two men agreed that the matter should stay between them, not easy in the modern world, but while it did the team's form could continue to prosper and, with the aid of a 2-1 win at Liverpool, they even ventured as high as fourth before Christmas. Lofty heights had been climbed and the expedition's leader was now an admired man, but as one of the most respected young managers in the country would he plant his flag in Southampton's soil and commit his future to them? Southampton's public and local press had become agitated by a lack of progress concerning their manager's contract and called for the club to sort it out quickly. Theirs was now a stable football club and they wanted it to stay that way.

It wouldn't. A little over a week into the New Year, the *Daily Express* ran the story, 'STRACHAN TO QUIT SAINTS'. It was a huge blow, to the fans, the chairman and to Strachan, who felt let down by the leak. It was going to make life very hard. 'Whilst it was a private matter between Gordon and me, the situation was tenable,' claims Lowe. 'But, once it became common knowledge, it became very difficult for the club. There was pressure on us all, me, Gordon, the players, and life was made very difficult. It was a retrograde step that really didn't suit anyone.'

Lowe was right about the players. The club's form had been patchy going into January (a 0-0 draw with Leicester had the opponents' manager Micky Adams admitting he 'was glad he got in free') and it got worse as they managed to win only one of their following five games after the story had gone public. It seemed that the harmony that had secured so many positives over the past year or so was beginning to splutter under the weight of rumour, counter-rumour and speculation. 'Things weren't going well at all,' admits Niemi. 'We had been as surprised as anyone with his announcement and whilst we are professionals and want to play well in every game, whatever the circumstances,

Gordon I think was becoming aware that the news had affected some of the lads. That worried him.'

It had become too much. The day after the story broke, reports of Strachan's decision appeared next to possible applicants for the job. Mark Hughes and Micky Adams were immediate 'favourites', and everyone pondered if Strachan would be joining struggling Leeds or Tottenham, or heading home to Celtic or Hibernian. One name stood out amongst the print like succulent fish and chips. Glenn Hoddle, the man who had left Southampton over two years earlier and who had now been sacked at Tottenham, was a candidate. The rumour sent ripples of dissent around the club's supporters, still squeamish from Hoddle's initial abandonment.

In early February, Strachan and Lowe met and decided that now was the right time for the manager to depart and to let his chairman search for a new man. Lowe likened his role at the club to that of Captain Kirk on the *Starship Enterprise*, but now, without his canny Scottie, who on earth was going to continue to beam the club up to new heights? He was keen on Hoddle, there was no doubt about it, but the reaction from hurting fans was clear. 'Glenn wanted the job,' claims Lowe. 'The way he had left though made it impossible for him to return. I must say that some were pro his return but many were anti it. What you can forget is that people in football have very deep feelings and our fans demonstrated that. If Glenn had come back the club would have been split.'

What was unanimous at the club was the depth of gratitude and admiration that Strachan took with him. Fans inundated the club's website with good wishes and appreciative messages. This wasn't a manager jumping ship. This was a manager proudly and honestly resting his sea-weary legs. Southampton's captain and long-term defender Jason Dodd gratefully said, 'Gordon has had a massive effect on all the players. We cannot underestimate

what he has done.' While James Beattie, now the club's star man, said, 'The gaffer has turned around the way in which the club [and he] is perceived.'

While the players pined after him, he couldn't easily forget them. Football raced far too prominently through his veins for that. On leaving that February, Lesley and he took a well-earned holiday to a favourite destination in Florida. As they lay by the pool soaking up the rays - or, in Strachan's pale case, deflecting them - he couldn't keep his mind from swaying across the Atlantic to St Mary's where Southampton were entertaining Everton, their first home game since he had left. Strachan's mobile informed him of the score: 1-0 to Everton, 2-0 at half-time; 2-1, Strachan was fidgeting now; 3-1, it didn't look good; 3-2 and, in the last minute, 3-3. Strachan let out a cheer that made it patently clear to his American companions that their guest was having a nice day.

It wasn't to be the only break that Strachan enjoyed. His was to be a sabbatical, the kind of break usually enjoyed by students trying to find themselves between jobs, and maybe that's exactly what it was. The Strachans visited Milan (although it may have been to study the football as well as the shops), and fulfilled an ambition of travelling around Australia together, unnoticed and unharassed. To those who know Strachan well, though, their instinct is that the game is never far from his mind.

'He's already asked me to arrange if he can go and watch big clubs working,' Andy Roxburgh, UEFA's Technical Director, told me not long after Strachan's decision to leave Southampton. 'It's a working sabbatical. He has been to see top coaches work and that's because he is learning the game. He's very open and always has been to knowledge, which is great. If you want to live with the Wengers of this world, you have to be up to date and take in the wider world. You must adapt ideas and make them fresh. Strachan is like that, a student of the game.'

His players, too, having worked with and been inspired by his enthusiasm, are sure they will soon be up against the man they used to call boss. 'His plan is to have a whole year off,' says Niemi affectionately. 'I would bet my house though that he will take a job very soon. I cannot see him being without football for much longer.' There would be plenty who hoped so. 'He is an extremely charismatic individual,' purrs Rupert Lowe. 'He is great fun and has that wicked sense of humour that you can't help but love. Charismatic and unique is how I'd describe him. Football is better with him in it rather than out.'

2. BLINDED BY A PASSION

REPORTER: *You must be delighted with that result?*

GORDON: *You're spot on! You can read me like a book.*

THE BALL ZIPS across the school's playground like a perfectly skimmed pebble over the ocean. From one end to another, the action flows and, without much regard for shape, formation or any other of the game's annoying little idiosyncrasies, the boys revel in the barely organised chaos that shapes this and every break-time.

A small, red-haired boy moves purposefully from the school building towards the action. Dressed in uniform, pens regimentally placed in his blazer pocket, the boy keeps his head down, avoiding the scary-looking older boys trying to charm a cheeky cigarette off the scarier-looking girls. His short steps pick up as he reaches his goal. 'Where've ya been, Gordie?' cries one player desperate for reinforcements. 'We're getting done 9-3, wee man, get ya arse in here, pal!'

The boy is straight into the action. He takes a pass perfectly and in one smooth action knocks the ball to the far post for his jubilant classmate to pull a goal back. On this concrete arena the boy is king; wee Gordie is a giant. The boy is everywhere, his enthusiasm effervescent and his skill there for all to see. He heckles boys to whom - in the complex world of playground politics - he shouldn't even be talking. Here he has their respect; here he has authority.

An opponent wriggles free and sets off towards goal. Blissfully unaware of the boy stalking him like a small fox, he shapes to shoot. Without breaking his stride the boy stretches, slides and takes the ball from his adversary's feet. The ball is won, but no one notices a pen from the boy's blazer slip out and fly towards his freckly face. The praise ringing in his ears is replaced by a sharp and piercing pain in his eye. Then there is darkness. The school stops as an ambulance hurls itself onto its grounds. 'Gordon's lost an eye,' screams a boy. 'He'll never play for Hibs now!'

Two weeks later a fifteen-year-old Gordon Strachan, whose vision as a professional footballer lit up overflowing stadiums from Motherwell to Mexico City, sits in hospital, his right eye heavily bandaged, wondering if he will ever properly see again. The pen had plunged straight into the socket, damaging the optic nerve, and now was the moment of truth. His heroes at Hibernian had recently shown an interest, but this could jeopardise his dreams, his passion. All he could think of was Lex Shields, a boy younger than him at school and also a fine player. Hibs had been keen to take on Lex but cooled their interest when discovering he had a glass eye. Was he to suffer the same fate?

The boy, for all his spirit, sits frozen. His parents are with him, gripping his hands as the bandage is slowly removed. Darkness is slowly replaced by blurs, which in turn are replaced by colour and form. The pen had come within a thousandth of an inch of permanently blinding the right eye, but the boy and his parents, momentarily overjoyed with restored vision, soon realise it is a half vision that would remain with him throughout his career. For Gordon Strachan the player, if he were to close his left eye, would be able to see only the top half of the object he was looking at. The future though was the furthest thing from the boy's mind. He was all right; the bandages were off and he would soon be back on that football pitch. That was the most important thing.

Gordon David Strachan was born on 9 February 1957, the first child of Jim and Catherine, a young couple from Edinburgh. The world was changing, its boundaries constantly broadening. The space age began as the Soviet Union launched Sputnik 1, the first artificial satellite; nine black schoolchildren attempted to attend an all-white Arkansas high school, sparking mass riots; and Edinburgh's Duke had the title Prince bestowed upon him by his wife. For a young couple and their child in north Edinburgh, however, the world was a much smaller place.

Jim, Catherine and Gordon had moved into 4/4 Muirhouse Grove, a new council block on Edinburgh's Muirhouse district. Built up in the late 1950s, Muirhouse was a typical Scottish housing scheme. Young working families moved in and settled in a community where morale was high. Among those families living near the Strachans was that of the author Irvine Welsh, today still a resident of Scotland's capital. Welsh, who went on to bring the area and nearby Leith to life in his novel *Trainspotting*, recalls a vibrant place to grow up. 'It was a happy time,' he says. 'It sounds like a cliché but kids would go out late and play, you know jumpers for goalposts and forty-a-side matches. Throughout the sixties, the spirit was good. It was a real community, with people wanting to make the best of where they lived and make it better. Things turned though in the late seventies and eighties. Thatcher arrived as did mass unemployment and an influx of cheap Pakistani heroin. The place took a bit of a hammering and became a kind of ghetto, branded the drug and AIDS capital of Europe.'

For Strachan as a boy though, his life was simple and routine. Food was always on the table, yet a little more modest as the week wore on. Eating well over the weekend, the quality of the menu would subside with the week before soup and something from the chippy on a Friday.

Catherine worked in the local whisky distillery, but it was Scotland's other great passion that was bestowed upon

Strachan by his father, a keen amateur footballer who had had trials with Raith Rovers before earning a living as a scaffolder. Football was ingrained in the community, and, despite not having siblings until the age of eight and the arrival of his sister Laura, Strachan had countless playmates always willing to kick a ball about, build bonfires or bunk onto the nearby Silverknowes public golf course.

It was football though that held Strachan's attention over anything else. His dad had seen to that by whisking his five-year-old boy off to Easter Road, home of Edinburgh's Hibernian Football Club. Hibernian had been formed by Irish Catholic immigrants in 1875, but for the Strachans theirs was a simple love of the club over any religious tendencies. Anyway, it was a proud club to support. Hibs had a rich history in Scottish football, had taken part in the inaugural season of the European Champions Cup and had competed heartily with their Glasgow rivals over the decades. Hibernian's attacking flair had gripped the Scottish game after the war, and Strachan was unfortunate to have been born too late to see their renowned front line, dubbed 'the famous five'. While most children were brought up on Enid Blyton's stories, Strachan, via his enthusiastic father, was weaned on tales whose protagonists Willie Ormond, Bobby Johnstone, Gordon Smith, Eddie Turnbull (who would soon become more acquainted with the Strachans) and Lawrie Reilly worked their heroics on the way to bringing three Scottish titles to the capital in the late forties and early fifties.

Those halcyon days might have waned slightly at Easter Road but for the five-year-old Strachan, the atmosphere, smells and banter had him hooked. On that first afternoon it had nearly all gone wrong for Jim Strachan as his son's eye was immediately caught by the opposition. That first game at Easter Road was prophetically against Aberdeen, and it was their tricky right-sided ball player Charlie Cooke, later of Dundee and Chelsea, who had Strachan - as well as his new

team's defenders - well and truly mesmerised. Strachan would soon more than emulate Cooke's feats on Aberdeen's right wing but for all of his tricks it was Hibernian who ultimately cast a spell over the boy.

Strachan moved on to Silverknowes primary school, not far from the Muirhouse estate, and immediately began to shine on the playground with a ball at his feet. It was the mid-sixties and, although the most popular activity for a while at Silverknowes was re-enacting the cinematic hit *Zulu* on the playground with lines of kids playing Michael Caine against the tribal enemy, it was at football that Strachan clearly enjoyed seeing the whites of his opponents' eyes. Mrs Webster's class - of which Strachan was one - would take on Mrs Pemberton's set, and although declaring a severe lack of knowledge when it came to association football his teacher must have had a sixth sense about her young student and requested he pick the team, thus giving him his first managerial role at the tender age of nine.

Standing out for more than his flame-coloured hair, Strachan was playing with boys two years his senior. The school team was run by the janitor Mr Day who would take his eager troops to their matches on the number 16 or 27 bus. With Strachan's precocious talents on board, however, they hardly needed a master tactician in charge. Allan McDougall, a close childhood friend of Strachan and school team-mate, recalls their ground-breaking style of play and lets out a mischievous laugh. 'All we had to do was give it to Gordon. He would literally run rings around the other kids and end up scoring or giving me a simple tap-in.'

Grabbing the limelight at Silverknowes, Strachan was noticed by an opposing manager: Tom Aitken, who was also a janitor at the nearby Groathill School. Aitken ran a boys' amateur football club called Edinburgh Thistle, whose catchment area included Strachan's little world in Muirhouse, and Strachan was immediately invited to join. Playing for Craigroysten secondary school while still at

primary school, as well as the respected Thistle, earned him almost celebratory status among the boys on his and surrounding estates.

It was a tag that came in handy once his days at the large and potentially frightening Craigroysten secondary school began. A tough place to learn in a tough area, it could be daunting and for many it was, but Strachan had the advantage of being recognised by most. 'That's wee Gordie. Did ya see his goal on Saturday? He'll be bangin' 'em in at the Hibeas soon.'

By the early seventies Muirhouse and the surrounding estates of Pilton and Drylaw were becoming less desirable places to live. John Dickson, a team-mate of Strachan at Edinburgh Thistle, grew up in neighbouring Pilton, and, despite also enjoying a young footballer's immunity from aggro, he was under no doubt that trouble lingered around every street corner: 'The likes of Gordon and myself were known footballers so we could walk around the estate with a bit more freedom than others. Our faces were well known as we were doing well for our local teams. It was becoming a rough place to live. We were very lucky in many respects as we grew up and got out before the drugs took control, but even back then there was always trouble and some nasty fights.'

Strachan has attributed his legendary fitness to his constant running to the shops and back as a boy to get groceries for his mum to avoid the hassle. Light-hearted as ever, Strachan's words were tinged with a reality regarding a nasty element to the hordes of youths standing around his estate at night. The most unsavoury group came from nearby Drylaw. Young Mental Drylaw, or YMD as they liked to be known, would often infiltrate Muirhouse looking for trouble. 'They were a mad gang,' recalls Dickson. 'A real crazy firm. They were wild and could have held their own on any estate you care to mention. They were vicious and wild and were known for carrying knives.'

The boys were taught menacing ways in which to punch (in self-defence of course) an assailant, with your house keys protruding through each finger for maximum damage. Strachan, though, kept his nose clean and continued to be excused from rival bouts. The extent of his brushes with the long arm of the law would amount to no more than kicking a ball about on the estate's roundabouts. 'People were either good fighters, proper hard cases or they could play football,' says Irvine Welsh. 'You would be labelled by these two skills, or perhaps having the gift of the gab, but that was how you could get some sort of status.'

Strachan was content. His milk round was a source of some pocket money and fitness. Muirhouse had expanded and among the small blocks such as that inhabited by the Strachans sprouted new high-rise towers. Temperamental lifts saw Strachan often carting pints of milk up and down 23 floors to make sure the Muirhouse residents had their tea just the way they liked it. Sean Connery, also a one-time milkman from Edinburgh, by now had become James Bond and would have been proud of his young compatriot's efforts.

Strachan's competitive nature was being nurtured with games of golf (at which he also began to show a strong talent), snooker (if he and his friends could find a hall) and Subbuteo. The table-football game enjoyed by so many young boys was a firm favourite. 'Gordon loved playing and collecting teams,' recalls Allan McDougall. 'We would regularly put on tournaments which turned out to be very well-organised and competitive affairs. It's a shame that none of those young entrepreneurs went on to run the Scottish Football Association.'

His boundless energy, though, meant he liked nothing more than to be outside, dribbling a football or lifting a sneaky little seven iron onto the green, but he knew how to relax and as a child loved Elvis. The Beatles may have been all the rage in more fashionable Liverpool and London, but

in 4/4 Muirhouse Grove the King reigned supreme and to this day, while the posters have presumably come off the bedroom walls, Elvis lives on in the Strachan household.

He continued to support Hibs with a passion, and hordes of boys from the estates, if not cadging a lift off a passing fan, would get the 16 bus (worryingly painted in the burgundy and white of arch city rivals Hearts) past the Granton district of Edinburgh, along Newhaven and up Leith Walk to Easter Road. For the other passengers it was far from a peaceful journey as the Hibs boys made their presence well and truly felt with their incessant singing, often incurring the wrath of the driver who would threaten them with a long walk. It would take more than an irate bus driver to dampen their spirits, and the boys would alight at Balfour's Bar, just down the road from their beloved stadium. Inside, Strachan's attention was fixated by his heroes: Pat Stanton (who would eventually coach Strachan at Aberdeen), Willie Wilson in goal, Joe Davies, Eric Stevenson, Bobby Duncan, Alec Cropley and Peter Cormack, who went on to win honours under Bill Shankly at Liverpool.

They would eventually all have to take a back seat as Strachan's Saturdays were given over to playing rather than watching football. He could get to Easter Road for the occasional mid-week match, but it was participating that was all-important. The morning game would be for Craigroysten. Ken MacAskill, an English teacher at the school, however bleary-eyed from the night before, picked the team and drove them to away games. Although he never taught Strachan, MacAskill came to know him well as his star player, and his enthusiasm as we chat in a pub not far from his pupil's old stomping ground underlines his pride in playing a small part in a local hero's career. 'When he started playing for us, the call from the opposing touchline would be "stick two players on the wee red-haired feller", and other managers would come over to me afterwards and ask, "Where the hell did you find him?" That changed

though and soon opponents were shouting, “Mark wee Strachan. Don’t give him any room!””

Being denied space and often double marked on the school playing fields was, to a talented but fledgling footballer, a blessing. It became clear that Strachan, rather than being nullified, had the footballing wherewithal to use his status to the team’s advantage. Playing at old-fashioned inside-right for Craigroysten, he would drift out to the wing, taking his pursuers with him, all the while creating space for his grateful team-mates to exploit. His clear thinking and excellence belied his age, while his confidence belied his size. ‘A lot was said about his height,’ recalls MacAskill, ‘but only by those who hadn’t seen him play that much. It became obvious that with the ball his stature didn’t matter. Anyway, he may have been small, but he was by no means slight, and like a future Scotland team-mate of his, Kenny Dalglish, he used his weight very well. He had a tremendous low centre of gravity and used it to perfection.’

Strachan’s ability as a young footballer had given him the confidence that a small boy might otherwise lack. Being able to bark orders at bigger and older boys every Saturday put inches on him, and he was soon giving team-talks in the dressing room. John Dickson and his other team-mates at Thistle were left with no doubt about his temperament: ‘He was a fiery character that’s for sure. He was never a good loser but while he hated losing he never had tantrums, even at a young age. He would have a go at his team-mates but in a constructive way. Remember he was a wee kid and the vast majority of us were bigger than him. But that made no difference to Gordon. If he felt he was right, he would tell you in no uncertain terms.’

Self-assured but not cocky, his persona around a football pitch was taking shape. ‘He had a prickly nature,’ says MacAskill, laughing. ‘That may have come from a bit of a Napoleon complex that some smaller guys have. They have to try that bit harder to get where they want and in that

respect Gordon was no exception. Don't get me wrong, he was a natural athlete, but very, very competitive. From a young age when the team would be getting a hiding Gordon would never give up. He would have tears in his eyes but would keep going, always chasing lost causes. For all that, his will to win was eclipsed by his enjoyment for the game. There was huge enjoyment on the football field from Gordon. He loved it so much and would visibly shine and glow with a ball at his feet.'

Crowds - by school football standards - were impressive; far from one man and his dog. It could be argued that the majority of the men there on a Saturday morning were waiting impatiently for the local Doo'cot pub to open and serve them all a much-needed hair of the dog, but one fixture always had the school crowds flocking: Craigroysten versus Ainslie Park. Ainslie Park was a school only streets away from Strachan's and there was no love lost when it came to competing on the football pitch. John Dickson attended Ainslie Park and was himself a decent player tipped to go far. Playing at left-back put him in direct opposition to Strachan and he relished the days they turned over the Craigroysten boys: 'Being close to him meant it was always nice when we beat them. It was that competitive streak in Gordon. I played with him at Thistle and he hated losing out on bragging rights for a few months. He would sometimes blame our pitch, which he hated playing on. It was called Seagull Hill and was admittedly on a huge slope. We were playing one year and my school were attacking but the ball broke to the left and Gordon was on to it. He galloped up the hill, took on the last defender, rounded the keeper and knocked it towards goal.

'At this point I was on the eighteen-yard line with no right to prevent the goal but, due to the hill, Gordon's effort slowed up just enough to allow me to slide in and make the clearance. If looks could kill, I wouldn't be talking to you

today. He gave me the deadliest of stares; he just couldn't believe he hadn't scored. He had high standards.'

Dickson's big claim to fame is that Strachan, challenging for an aerial ball, caught his mouth with the back of his head, splitting his lip and killing his two front teeth. He still has the scar and the crowns. 'I never did send him the bill.'

Into his teenage years and the game was becoming serious. Edinburgh Thistle were doing well in the local area and reaching national finals. Here Strachan came across plenty of names that would later cross his path as a pro. The Scottish Juvenile Under-16 Cup was ideal for future stargazing, and Strachan would have to learn early about losing cup finals, coming runner-up twice. The first defeat came at the hands of an impressive club from Dundee called St Colomba's who beat their challengers from the capital 5-1. Losing to the likes of Graeme Payne, David Narey and John Holt, who all made names for themselves at Dundee United, and John McPhail, a future team-mate of Strachan's at Dundee, was no shame. The other final was lost by the narrower score-line of 2-1 to a Dunfermline club. Strachan's job of making progress down the right side in that final was hindered by a sixteen-year-old left back named Douglas Rougvie. He was huge and Strachan, only fifteen and barely reaching Rougvie's waist, had no joy that day, but would soon come to rely on his opponent's large frame during their days at Aberdeen.

Thistle's Tom Aitken had taken Strachan under his wing. A scholar of the game and a true gentleman, Aitken was just what he needed. Strachan was well known for his backchat, and teachers, friends and referees would all be on the receiving end. A history teacher at Craigroysten went by the name of Mr Gillette, sported a huge beard and had to put up with Strachan's remarks on the obvious connection between the two. Harmless stuff, but Aitken saw his behaviour as an unnecessary distraction and came down hard on his

somewhat audacious prodigy in order that all that talent would be realised.

By the age of fourteen, Strachan, as well as playing for his school and club, was turning out for the Edinburgh Schools Select side that included a sweeper called Arthur Albiston from Edinburgh school Forresters. Albiston would eventually play with Strachan at Manchester United and room with him at the 1986 World Cup in Mexico. For now they had smaller fish to fry and took on Fife in the Scottish Schools Cup first round. An Edinburgh paper was quick to point out which Edinburgh player might just steal the show. 'Gordon Strachan of Craigroysten . . . could very well be the ace in the Edinburgh pack. A strong, forceful type, he holds a big chance of winning a Scottish cap this season.'

They were right but first there was Fife to deal with and hope quickly turned into disappointment as they were knocked out 3-2 by a spirited side led by a young Allan Evans who would go on to win Scotland caps alongside Strachan, as well as the English Championship and European Cup with Aston Villa. 'It was crazy,' recalls Albiston. 'We were very disappointed not to have won as we were a team picked from a far bigger catchment area and had some great players. Five of us, including Gordon of course, went on to play for the Scottish under-15s that year, but that day we slipped up.'

Despite that setback, the Edinburgh side showed their mettle in the yearly clash with their schoolboy counterparts from Glasgow who boasted an impressive array of young talent including Alex O'Hara who went on to play for Rangers. The game, played at Hearts' Tynecastle, was won 5-0 by Edinburgh, and Strachan, who scored the fifth goal from the penalty spot, was on his way to international recognition. Strachan was aching to represent his country but thought he had blown it after a moment of impudence playing for his school.

Just a school game maybe, but Strachan was still everywhere, showing the determination to win that had got him to the verge of pulling on the Scotland jersey he so craved. The referee cared little for the Craigroysten star's reputation, awarding decision after decision against him. Referees today will vouch for Strachan's acidic tongue and it was clearly getting some practice at this young age as he turned on the man in black. Red cards in those days and at this level were rare but he was soon given his marching orders. The reality of what had happened so soon before the Scotland squad was announced sank in as Strachan sat distraught and alone in the dressing room. 'They'll never pick me now,' he said, his lip quivering as he was driven home by MacAskill. 'They'll nae want me now.'

Inconsolable he ran straight to his room, refusing to listen to his teacher and his dad's assurances that all would be fine; that the selectors wouldn't hold it against him. This time his elders were right and soon he was turning out against England at Ibrox in Glasgow. The game finished 1-1; a young Raymond Wilkins cancelling out Albiston's penalty. That game was followed by an away trip to take on the West Germans at Saarbrucken in front of 40,000 fans. The match finished in a magnificent 4-4 draw, and the experience of having a blazer fitted, posing for newspapers and boarding planes might have been daunting, especially for a young boy who had never been as far as Butlins in Ayr and who even into adulthood had never seen the military tattoo his home town is famous for. Not so, says Albiston. 'Gordon took it all in his stride. Even as a child it was a case of what you see is what you get. He was a confident lad and that was reflected in not only his play but also how he carried himself within the squad. He had great confidence in his own ability.'

It was a confidence shared by most of his peers and his family. His father was a great supporter, attending games and offering advice. His mother, proud of her son's ability

and the effort he was putting into his talent, was nevertheless cautious about its tendency to eclipse everything else, most notably his schoolwork. Playing the level of football he was playing of course meant that a number of club scouts and representatives were contacting his parents and showing interest in signing him on schoolboy forms. Decisions had to be made. Should Strachan leave school outright and put faith in his talents with a ball or should he stay on at Craigroysten and gain his qualifications? It wasn't as if Strachan was a poor student. He'd done well in his studies, his competitive nature propelling him to keep his work up to scratch, and was even sent from the top stream of his year to sit an entrance examination for the nearby and renowned Trinity School. Jim Strachan knew though that his son had his mind set on the game of football and revelled in his son's progress. For Catherine the uncertain world of professional football was far less appealing.

Every night she'd be at her son. 'What if you don't make it in football?' she'd scold. 'You'll have nothing else to fall back on.' Her words though were in vain, and with the amount of interest being shown by clubs the young Strachan had every right to feel that the talent that he had been nurturing from such a young age would blossom into his dream career. His association with Edinburgh Thistle had attracted many admiring eyes. Glasgow's Old Firm had sent scouts, and for a while Rangers showed a lot of interest. Their scout, sporting an expensive mackintosh and an even dearer cigar, ran the rule over Strachan and other boys at Thistle a number of times but the Protestant club's interest waned when they could not be guaranteed that Strachan was not Catholic. The Strachans were not religious people, but here being a fan of the Catholic Hibernian side may well have denied him the chance to join one of Scotland's giants. No matter, Manchester City, Coventry City and Nottingham Forest from England were sniffing about Muirhouse but it

was an offer closer to home and to his heart that had the teenager jumping about his living room.

Hibs of course were the ideal, and Strachan's heroes were showing a real interest in his game. It became known that Strachan, for so long *the* player in the area, might soon be signing for the mighty Hibs. 'We used to taunt our rival mates who supported Hearts,' says Welsh laughing, who had witnessed first hand how much his young neighbour stood out, even in those forty-a-side games. 'We'd say, "We've got a young kid called Gordon Strachan and he is going to be bloody brilliant man." We weren't joking either, he really was that good.'

Edinburgh Thistle had been formed by an Archie Buchanan, once a player at Easter Road, and he still had ties with the club and their scouting system. They liked what they saw and approached Strachan to train and sign forms with them. It was a dream come true and for a Hibs fanatic like Strachan a simple case of 'where do I sign?' The club had recently gained a new chairman, Tom Hart, who wanted a new manager and happened to be a good friend of Eddie Turnbull. Turnbull had been an integral part of the club's glory years and the inside-right in that 'Famous Five' front line. He had recently done a great job as boss at Aberdeen, winning the Scottish Cup in 1970, but his heart too lay with Hibs and he immediately took over the vacant position at Easter Road.

Turnbull went over the forms that they were offering the local boy and was not happy. A great footballing man and coach, Turnbull was not averse to speaking his mind and voiced his apprehension with Strachan's father. Already slightly apprehensive about Strachan's height, the new boss took issue with the expenses being offered to young Strachan and resented the amount of money being laid out on bare essentials such as football boots. Jim was having none of it and fiercely argued his son's corner. It must have been a surreal situation for the Edinburgh scaffolder: here