

ALEX HAIR

By Douglas Gorman



Alex Hair in 1933

Alex Hair was a prolific goal scorer in Scotland, England, Ireland and Wales and holds goal scoring records at each club for which he played. If some reports from 94 years ago could be verified he would be only one goal short from appearing in the Guinness Book of Records with the greatest number of goals scored in a season for an individual player in junior professional league football. In competitive action, he is the only player to have scored five goals in one game against Rangers and a trophy presented to him in recognition of this feat is on display at the Scottish Football Museum at Hampden Park, Glasgow.

His football career tells the story of a proven goal scorer who was not disadvantaged by his slight build. He had great record-setting seasons, spells where his form waned and times of injury. So, on the face of it, the usual ups and downs of the life of a professional footballer. However, there were two other factors that affected his career – the “*retain and transfer*” system for players that governed the movement of players between clubs in England and Scotland and his age, or more precisely what age his clubs thought he was!

Was he was too slightly built (5ft 6in 10st 7lb) to sustain a career at centre forward in senior football? In the 1926/27 season the leading goal scorer in Scotland was Jimmy McGrory (5ft 8in 11st 8lb) of Celtic who scored 47 goals, 6 more than Alex, in 36 matches. Bob McPhail (Airdrieonians) (5ft 10½in 11st 6lb) was third and scored 34 goals in 31 league games. However, the Scotland international centre forward berth was the property of Hughie Gallacher (Newcastle United) (5ft 6in 10st 4lb). Goal scorers come in all shapes and sizes. While Alex was smaller than some others, he was a good header of the ball, two-footed, had a cannon of a left foot shot, would run all day against bigger defenders and had that magical “*eye for goal*”. However, perhaps his height and build delayed his development as a footballer. He was reported to have been Strathclyde Junior’s youngest-ever signing at just 14 years of age but he was 25 years old before he signed for a league club and on the back of a very successful, but no doubt hard, season in Glasgow Junior League football.

If his stature was not a barrier in his day what else prevented him reaching the highest levels in football? I believe it all came down to a combination of opportunity, luck and the era that he played in.

The 1926/27 season was a brilliant season for him and his form would have attracted the attention of English clubs. Maybe he saw English football as his future? He was keen to leave Partick Thistle in 1928, however, the Jags did not want him to go. Although injury had restricted his appearances in the 1927/28 season and he had been inconsistent earlier in his time at Firhill, he was still a proven goal scorer. Alex had already been rejected by Rangers for being too small and with goal scorers Jimmy McGrory at Celtic and Bob McPhail having joined Rangers in April 1927 who would pay the transfer fee required for his release? Other Scottish clubs will have probably baulked at the fee placed on the thirty years old player. But there is usually an opportunity somewhere for a goal scorer. Preston North End paid £2,200 to get Alex's services. This was a substantial fee for the time and I do wonder if the Lancashire club knew Alex's correct age.

Once at Preston Alex was effectively trapped by the "*retain and transfer*" system that operated in football at the time and the club held all the cards. Alex was one of several centre forwards tried by the Lancashire club. After two seasons they decided to place him on the "*Open to Transfer List*" even though his contract had expired and he was no longer getting paid by the club. He would remain on this list until a Scottish or Football League club agreed a transfer with Preston or the club decided to give him a free transfer. The latter action would take him off the list and he would be free to find another League club himself. Preston were wanting to recover part of their transfer fee paid to Partick Thistle but a £1,000 fee appears to have frightened off other clubs. Alex could do nothing about it and was not getting paid wages. His only option was to play his football outside the Scottish and Football Leagues. He had little chance of a return to Scotland. The previously thriving senior non-league grade in Scottish football had largely ceased to exist. He found that his options lay in the Irish League and then in the Birmingham and District League. However, we should not automatically assume he was paid less in these other leagues. They did not have to pay a transfer fee and were not under maximum wage limits that applied in League football. Players could expect to get wages similar to many average league footballers but were able to get a job to supplement their earnings. The Preston North End officials will have kept tabs on his goal scoring after he left Deepdale and appear to have maintained a demand for a transfer fee to secure his release to another club. From their point of view Alex was still scoring goals and another club had to pay a transfer fee for his services. He was eventually given a free transfer in 1934 but this was too late to give him the chance to rebuild his league career as he was now 36 years of age.

How old was he? Alex was born in Glasgow on 9 March 1898. However, in some sources this is given as 9 March 1902. The Scottish Football Association player registration records show the date as just the day and month with no year, i.e. 9 March. I received some advice from other football historians. The likely explanation for other sources showing the date as 9 March 1902 is that they have all drawn the date from a single source. It is possible that this source may have found his age in years in a newspaper report and then worked back to add the year to the already known day and month. Without the easy on-line access to birth records that we have today they would have had to have been satisfied with the result. Well, why not? It should produce the right date of birth, Unless Alex's age was being incorrectly reported and recorded.

As a young player in Glasgow junior football he must have thought that his chance of playing in the senior game had gone as he was approaching his mid-twenties. However, the 1922/23

season changed that. But for the time it was unusual to see a player making the step up at 25 years of age. It was not unknown for players to “*self-adjust*” their age to suit their circumstances. So perhaps a 25 year old junior goal scorer would not have looked as attractive a proposition to the Firhill club as a player a few years younger? Preston North End’s interest may be explained by the club thinking they were signing a centre forward with experience in the Scottish League in their mid/late twenties rather than a 30 years old. It also seems strange that Preston North End did not give Alex a free transfer until 1934. However, they might have thought he was younger than his 36 years when they granted his release and perhaps still thought that they were giving him a chance of joining a Scottish or Football League club? How old did they think he was? When the Preston North End team travelled to the United States of America in 1929 the passenger list for the White Star Line liner RMS Olympic that departed from Southampton for New York on 8 May 1929 gave his age as 29 whilst his correct age was 31. Perhaps Alex did indeed “*self-adjust*” his age?

Alex Hair’s football career started at just 14 years of age when it was claimed that he was the youngest-ever signing by Strathclyde Juniors whose ground at Springfield Park was a short walk from his home in Broad Street, off London Road in Glasgow. Later on in his twenties his goal scoring for the club led to him stepping up to Senior football. However, he may have played for other clubs before re-joining Strathclyde. In the 1921/22 season Clydebank Juniors had a centre forward named “*Hair*” who was scoring goals. When they reached the final of the Glasgow Junior League Cup and faced Strathclyde Juniors at Shawfield the only “*Hair*” on the field was playing for the Bankies. Was this Alex?

We do know that he was back at Strathclyde Juniors for the 1922/23 season. The history of the club written in 1936 says that in the 1922/23 season Alex scored 96 goals for his club as they completed the Glasgow Junior Football League double, winning the league title and the league cup. The Guinness Book of Records says the record for the greatest number of goals scored in a season for an individual player in junior professional league football was only one more at the 97 goals scored by Tommy Duffy (Ardeer Thistle) in the 1959/60 season.

However, even these goals did not earn him selection by the Glasgow Junior Football League for their annual match against the Irish Intermediate League. This is perhaps not surprising as the team would have been selected by committee voting with all clubs anxious to get their players in the select side and so only Shettleston had more than one player in the team. The Junior Scotland teams would also have been selected by committee vote and centre forwards from Dundee Fairfield and Port Glasgow Athletic were selected for that season’s three junior internationals.

Partick Thistle signed Alex and he made a good start in the 1923/24 season in scoring marginally over a goal every other league game. In the next two seasons he spent some time on loan to other Scottish League clubs (Queen of the South in 1924/25 and Third Lanark, Alloa Athletic and Bo’ness in 1925/26) as the signing of a new centre forward and a dip in his form saw him lose his first team place at Firhill.

He did play for Thistle against Rangers in a Royal occasion to hanel Helenvale Park in Parkhead, Glasgow on 2 September 1924. All the players and officials were introduced to the Duke of York (later King George VI) and then Alex and the other three inside forwards and

two centre forwards stood around the centre circle as His Royal Highness made the ceremonial kick off. He took a few steps back before making a strong kick that saw the ball glance off the back of the head of a newspaper photographer much to the amusement of the spectators.



Alex Hair (third player from the right) looks on as Lord Provost Montgomery (left) makes a presentation to HRH the Duke of York. The photograph was provided and is reproduced with the kind permission of Alex Hair's family.



Alex Hair (extreme right) appears to be distracted as HRH Duke of York kicks off closely watched by the match officials and Lord Provost Montgomery.

However, Alex hit a rich vein of form in the 1926/27 season scoring 41 goals in 36 league matches to set the individual goal scoring record for a season at Partick Thistle that still stands today. He concluded the season by scoring five goals against Rangers to win the Glasgow Merchants' Charity Cup. Sometime after the game had finished Alex's mother heard a commotion outside their flat on Dalmarnock Road, near the bandstand at Bridgeton Cross. She leant out the window and shouted down; "*what's all the noise about?*" Someone shouted up; "*A local lad has just put five in against Rangers!*" She looked down and saw the crowd carrying her son on their shoulders. It is surprising that Rangers did not re-think their appraisal that Alex was "*too wee*" after that performance.



Alex Hair receiving the Glasgow Merchants' Charity Cup from Lord Provost Mason with the Chairman of Partick Thistle FC, Mr TC Reid, looking on. The presentation took place at the City Chambers in Glasgow. The photograph was provided and is reproduced with the kind permission of Alex Hair's family.



The trophy presented to Alex Hair by Partick Thistle supporters after he had scored five goals in the final of the Glasgow Merchants' Charity Cup 1927 and is on display in the Scottish Football Museum, Hampden Park, Glasgow.

In the 1927/28 season he suffered some recurring injuries that limited his playing time. Towards the end of that season Alex clearly wanted to leave Partick Thistle. In March 1928 a

temporary deal with Clyde floundered as Alex wanted a permanent transfer. He eventually re-signed for the Firhill club for the 1928/29 season.

He finally got his move in October 1928 when he was signed by English Second Division club Preston North End for a transfer fee of £2,200 and became the eighteenth Scot on the club's books at the time.



Alex Hair as a Preston North End player

The photograph was provided and is reproduced with the kind permission of Alex Hair's family.

Despite his late start Alex was Preston's top league scorer for the 1928/29 season with 19 goals. In June 1929 he was in the Preston party that toured Canada and the United States of America. The club played two games against Hakoah New York (1:1) and Pittsburgh All-Stars (2:4).



Alex Hair (second from right) with his Preston North End team mates at Coney Island, New York in 1929

The photograph was provided and is reproduced with the kind permission of Alex Hair's family.

However, only a year after moving to the Lancashire club he asked to be placed on the transfer list and two months later, in December 1929, Millwall were reported to be showing strong interest in signing him. Alex was placed on the Open to Transfer List at the end of the 1929/30 season with a fee of £1,000. He would also cease to be paid by the club. Alex had three options. He would have hoped that an English or Scottish League would pay the transfer fee and sign him. It was possible that the transfer fee would be dropped and he would be given a free transfer allowing him to sign for any club that showed an interest. Preston would be unlikely to do this so soon after paying a transfer fee to sign him. The third option and the one he had to take was to play for a club outside the Football and Scottish Leagues while he remained on the Open to Transfer List as a Preston North End player.

For the 1930/31 season he played in the Free State League for Shelbourne FC. The Dublin-based club had gone on a spending spree signing many Scottish and English players to strengthen the team in what proved a successful attempt to take the league title from their great rivals, Bohemians. Alex's goal scoring for Shelbourne had not gone unnoticed by other clubs and Dundee tried unsuccessfully to arrange a loan deal with Preston North End for the 1931/32 season.

He eventually signed for Colwyn Bay United who were due to play their first season in the Birmingham and District League. The league was one of the strongest in England and had a wide geographical range of clubs that took in North Wales. He made an immediate impact for the new boys and had scored 31 goals by New Year 1932. He ended up scoring over 40 goals as his new club led the table on two occasions and ended the season in a very creditable sixth place.

Between October 1931 and December 1932 the Everton FC minutes of meetings of the board of directors includes references to a "Mr A Hair" providing scouting reports on Scottish players and mostly from the Junior grade. Could this be Alex? Since October 1928 he had lived fairly near Liverpool in Preston and Dublin and his home at this time was at Colwyn Bay only 50 miles from Liverpool. So opportunity to make some Everton contacts? It is difficult to think that he would have time to make frequent spying trips to Scotland alongside playing for Colwyn Bay United but maybe he had former Scottish-based players whose judgement he trusted watching some of the prospective players as well? At 33 years of age he might have started thinking about a career in football management and like many would start scouting for clubs and try to make contacts.

Another Birmingham League club, Worcester City, saw Alex as an ideal player/manager who would bring goals, contacts and experience to the job. Alex maintained good contacts in Scotland. He had given the bad news to the Dundee Courier that former Dundee player George Lawley had broken a leg while at Worcester. However, the Courier also reported "*Alec is doing famously in his new role, and is open to pay good fees and good wages to good men. He is open to consider applications from Scotsmen of the right type*". It proved a good appointment as Worcester City finished as Birmingham League runners-up to Wrexham Reserves in both his seasons (1932/33 and 1933/34) as player/manager. In 1933/34 it was the Wrexham Reserves centre forward and future Welsh international, 19 years old Wilson Jones, who pipped Alex by just one goal in scoring 52 league goals to set the individual goal scoring record for a season. Despite proving themselves to be the best club in the league outside the

Football League club reserve teams the directors felt the club was standing still and remarkably Alex was allowed to leave. At the same time Preston North End had decided to give Alex a free transfer but, despite his goal scoring he was now probably thought too old by Scottish and Football League clubs. He was quickly signed as a player for another Birmingham League club, Burton Town, by fellow Scot and player/manager Willie Rankin (ex-Dundee, Blackburn Rovers & Charlton Athletic).

His days in the Birmingham League gives an insight into playing conditions of the time. In his two seasons at Worcester City the team played without any postponements on every Saturday in his two seasons. This is perhaps explained by the description of a pitch he played on at his previous club, Colwyn Bay United, in January 1932 when the pitch sloped in two directions, with ankle deep mud in the centre sinking to a foot deep in the penalty area. Alex scored all four goals in a 4:2 win despite the mud!

He was reported to have been on the shortlist for the manager's post at Ards in the Irish League but went to manage Shirley Town in the Birmingham Combination (that included the "A" teams of three of the big West Midlands Football League teams) for the 1935/36 season. It appears he was interested in continuing his football management career as he was reported to have applied for the manager's post at Doncaster Rovers in March 1936. However, he did not pursue his interest and returned to Scotland. He worked for various engineering companies including two where his football memories would not have been far away - Butter Brothers in McLennan Street close to Hampden Park and Sir William Arrol & Co in Dalmarnock near Strathclyde Juniors ground.

Alex's daughter in law remembers watching "*auld Sanny*" (as he was affectionately known) in 1970 playing football with his two years old grandson in the back garden. She was slightly worried as to how he would kick the ball. Would he blooter it past the toddler? No he did not! She vividly recalls the passing of the ball was incredibly gentle and almost balletic.

Alex Hair passed away in Bishopbriggs near Glasgow on 31 May 1970.

To this day Alex Hair holds individual goal scoring records at Partick Thistle, Shelbourne and Worcester City. He scored cup final hat-tricks (or better) for Strathclyde Juniors and Partick Thistle. He scored six goals in a game on three occasions. Most important of all, his goal scoring won silverware at Strathclyde Juniors, Partick Thistle, Shelbourne and Worcester City.

He is also remembered as a father, father in law and grandfather who was a forward-thinking man. His nomadic football career brought him into contact with many professional people and he learnt from them. This stayed with him and shaped his attitude to life.