

## **MCNAB, MAIR AND NIVEN – JUNIOR SCOTLAND'S 1950'S TRIUMVIRATE**

### **BY DOUGLAS GORMAN**

There were three truly great Junior Internationalists in the early post-War period - Bert McNab (Petershill), Davie Mair (Stonehouse Violet) and Willie Niven (Irvine Meadow XI).

Their combined Junior Scotland careers stretched from 1948 to 1955 and overlapped between 1951 and 1954. In the 16 matches played from 23 December 1950 to 12 February 1955 at least one of the trio was in the team. They all captained the team in a total of at least ten matches. It may well be more as the name of the captain in three games is not known. Although since then others have played more matches, Bert McNab's 13 matches against international opposition has only been equalled by Jackie Myles (Bonnyrigg Rose) who was capped between 1982 and 1988. In terms of total matches played Bert's 16 matches places him equal 3<sup>rd</sup> behind the 22 games played by Davie Fulton (Arthurlie) between 1992 and 1999.

This photograph was taken of the Junior Scotland team that played Banks o' Dee FC on 22 March 1952 in the Aberdeen club's Golden Jubilee celebration match at Linksfield Stadium in Aberdeen. It was the same team that had defeated Northern Ireland on 23 February 1952 at Windsor Park, Belfast. These were two of the four matches in which the trio played together.



With thanks to The Irvine Meadow Archive (Gordon McCreath)

Back row (l to r): Wullie Westwater (Dunipace), **Bert McNab (Petershill)**, Jimmy Lornie (Aberdeen St Clements), **Davie Mair (Stonehouse Violet)**, Johnny Flannigan (Whitburn), **Willie Niven (Irvine Meadow XI - Captain)**.

Front Row (l to r): Ally Hill (Jeanfield Swifts), David Todd (Luncarty), Jimmy Swan (Broxburn Athletic), Joe Roy (Clydebank), Joe Dunn (Jeanfield Swifts).

McNab, Mair and Niven played at a time when the team was selected by committee; a method that did not encourage consistency and did not lead to long international careers. With committee members keen to have “their men” in the team there would have been strong competition for the left back, right half and left half positions respectively occupied by the trio. It is also fair to say in those days more Junior Internationalists moved into Senior football. Today's players have the advantage of a manager selecting the team and perhaps more good players choosing to remain in the Junior ranks that in turn leads to players having the opportunity to earn more caps than those players in the immediate post-War period.

Willie Niven had won his first cap in 1948 but had to wait until 1950 for another chance. He had captained Ayrshire against a Junior Scotland team, which included debutant Bert McNab, in a match at Kilmarnock on 9 December 1950 to raise funds for the Knockshinnoch Pit Disaster Fund. Both players must have impressed the watching officials as they were both selected to play in a match against Morton two days before Christmas in 1950. The purpose of the match at Cappielow was to help select the team for the three international matches to be played later in the season. The left-sided combination of McNab and Niven was clearly to the selectors liking and they played in all three matches. Willie was made captain in the second match against the Republic of Ireland at Dalymount Park, Dublin. In the following season Bert and Willie were joined by Davie Mair at right half. Willie again captained the team in the first match against Northern Ireland in Belfast.



Rival captains in the Ireland v. Scotland junior soccer international –Niven (Scotland), on left, and McCurdy—shake hands before the kick-off.

Northern Whig - Monday 25 February 1952

Image © Successor rightsholder unknown. Source British Newspaper Archive

The trio played in all three international matches that season and Willie retained the captaincy. They also played in the match already mentioned that was played in Aberdeen to celebrate the fiftieth

anniversary of Banks o' Dee FC. Davie played in one additional match at Muirton Park, Perth, to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Perthshire JFA. The match against the Republic of Ireland at Shawfield, Glasgow, proved to be Willie's last match. In the 1952/53 season four internationals were scheduled and Bert and Davie played together in three matches. Davie was captain in all three matches he played and in the fourth match and final match of the season Bert took over the captaincy. Willie was clearly still in the selectors' thoughts and was selected as travelling reserve for the match against Wales. Willie's place at left half had been taken by future Hearts, Spurs and Scotland star Dave Mackay (Newtongrange Star). Bert and Davie continued their partnership in both internationals in the 1953/54 season but the match against the Republic of Ireland on 10 April 1954 was the last time Bert and Davie played together. Bert played in the first international of the following season, a 1:0 win at Firhill against Northern Ireland. However, although not selected to play against Wales, the defeat inflicted by the Welsh led to him being recalled for the final match against the Republic of Ireland. However, it appears Bert may have been injured as he did not play in the match.

At that time the trio's respective clubs played in different leagues – Meadow (Western League), Peasie (Central League) and Violet (Lanarkshire League). This meant that the only time they would find themselves on opposite sides in club matches would be in the Scottish Junior Cup or the West of Scotland Cup. During his time at Meadow Willie encountered Davie and Bert on two occasions each.

Home team	Away team	Competition	Date	Score
Lesmahagow (Davie Mair)	Irvine Meadow XI (Willie Niven)	Junior Cup 6 <sup>th</sup> Round <sup>1</sup>	13 March 1948	0:0
Irvine Meadow XI (Willie Niven)	Lesmahagow (Davie Mair)	Junior Cup 6 <sup>th</sup> Round (Replay)	20 March 1948	0:1
Irvine Meadow XI 0 (Willie Niven)	Petershill 1 (Bert McNab)	Junior Cup Final <sup>2</sup>	19 May 1951	0:1
Petershill 3 (Bert McNab)	Irvine Meadow XI 1 (Willie Niven)	West of Scotland Cup 3 <sup>rd</sup> Round	26 March 1955	3:1

<sup>1</sup> record crowd of 14,567 for a match at Craighead Park, Lesmahagow.

<sup>2</sup> record crowd of 77,650 for a Junior Cup Final

They also played for their counties in the McColl Inter-County Cup and league in other representative matches. Bert represented the Glasgow JFA and the Central League and this included "international" matches against the Irish Intermediate League. Willie represented the Ayrshire JFA and the Western League against the Irish Intermediate League. Davie represented the Lanarkshire JFA and this included games against the Leinster Senior League and Junior Scotland.

Bert McNab first made his mark as captain of Dunipace Thistle when they won the Scottish Secondary Juvenile Cup at Brockville, Falkirk, in June 1944. He was signed by Falkirk in August 1944. He only spent a season at Falkirk and joined Dunipace Juniors for the 1945/46 season. He built up a formidable full back partnership with his friend Wullie Westwater that led to them playing together four times for Junior Scotland. During his time at the 'Pace they reached the West of Scotland Cup final but went down 1:3 to Clydebank. I have been told Bert could not decide whether to join Wullie Westwater and sign for Kilsyth Rangers or sign for Petershill. The Glasgow club sent a taxi to collect him and that clinched it and he moved to Petershill for the 1950/51 season. In his first season the Peasie won the Junior Cup. When the Peasie repeated their Junior Cup win in 1956 Bert only played in the first three rounds of the competition as he missed the second half of the season due to injury. George Scobbie, reinstated as a Junior after a spell with Rangers, took his place at left back. In 1957 Bert moved to Kirkintilloch Rob Roy as player/coach but only stayed for a season. He later returned to Dunipace and coached the team.



Courtesy of Robbie McNab via Twitter.



Bert McNab briefing his Dunipace players before a Junior Cup tie with Petershill in 1969.

Courtesy of Pie & Bovril Junior forum

Davie Mair started out as an inside forward at Larkhall Thistle. He was given a trial in that position in the Falkirk Reserve team on 2 February 1946 and was signed. He clearly impressed enough to be re-signed for the 1946/47 season. However, he failed to make a first team appearance and was released at the end of the season. He was reinstated as a Junior player and joined Lesmahagow. However, he appears to have moved back to half back on joining Stonehouse Violet and it was in this position that he attracted the attention of the Junior Scotland selectors.

Willie Niven acquired the nickname of “*Beef*” due to his thick and strong thighs that powered the left half. Willie joined Meadow for the 1947/48 season. In his first season in the Junior ranks he helped his club to a Junior Cup Final appearance against Bo’ness United on 22 May 1948. The final was the fifteenth match Meadow played in their cup run and the matches would have given the Junior Scotland selectors several opportunities to see the young, skilful and strong half back in action. Even though he was in his first year as a Junior a disappointing 0:3 defeat by Northern Ireland in the first international of the season led to Willie getting the opportunity to win his first cap against Wales in the next international. In his last season (1958/59) at Meadow he only played in the early part of the season and was not in the team that won the Junior Cup. Willie served Meadow for eleven seasons and saw out his playing days with local rivals Irvine Victoria.



Willie Niven won a total of eight caps although he only played in seven matches and three times against Wales (1948, 1951 & 1952). The eighth cap, on the right of this photograph, was awarded for a game against Wales at Easter Road, Edinburgh, in 1953 when Willie was a travelling reserve, but did not actually play.

Courtesy of the Irvine Meadow Archive (Gordon McCreath) and the photograph is courtesy of Shelagh Niven Middleton.

Appearances for the Scottish Junior Football Association XI:

Year	Date	Opposition	Ground	Willie Niven	Bert McNab	Davie Mair	Score	Result
1948	1 May	Wales	Farrar Road, Bangor				5-3	Won
1950	09-Dec	Ayrshire	Rugby Park, Kilmarnock				0-1	Lost
<i>Consecutive matches:</i>								
1950	23-Dec	Morton	Cappielow Park, Greenock				2-5	Lost
1951	17 Feb	Northern Ireland	Firhill Park, Glasgow				4-4	Drawn
1951	25 Mar	Republic of Ireland	Dalymount Park, Dublin	Captain			4-3	Won
1951	7 Apr	Wales	Rugby Park, Kilmarnock				1-1	Drawn
1952	23 Feb	Northern Ireland	Windsor Park, Belfast	Captain			2-0	Won
1952	22-Mar	Banks o' Dee	Linksfield Stadium, Aberdeen	Captain			5-0	Won
1952	19 Apr	Wales	Holywell Road, Flint	Captain			2-2	Drawn
1952	26-Apr	Perthshire Junior Football Association	Muirton Park, Perth				3-0	Won
1952	3 May	Republic of Ireland	Shawfield Park, Glasgow	Captain			1-2	Lost
1953	31 Jan	Northern Ireland	Firhill Park, Glasgow			Captain	5-1	Won
1953	7 Mar	Wales	Easter Road, Edinburgh			Captain	3-2	Won
1953	6 Apr	Republic of Ireland	Dalymount Park, Dublin			Captain	3-0	Won
1953	5 Dec	Northern Ireland	Windsor Park, Belfast		Captain		1-3	Lost
1954	27 Mar	Wales	Recreation Ground, Holyhead		Captain		3-1	Won
1954	10 Apr	Republic of Ireland	Dens Park, Dundee				4-1	Won
1955	12 Feb	Northern Ireland	Firhill Park, Glasgow				1-0	Won