

Junior football's young achievers

By Douglas Gorman

Mention the term "Junior football" outside Scotland and the assumption would be that you were talking about youth football rather than the adult, semi-professional grade of the game. Of course, that did not mean young players could not play and excel. This is the story of the careers of two very young footballers who hold records for their achievements. 16-year-old Norrie Corbett was the youngest player to captain the Junior Scotland team and 17-year-old Joe Fascione was the youngest ever to win a Junior Cup winner's medal.

Norrie Corbett – the youngest Junior Scotland captain

Norrie Corbett was seen as a terrific prospect and as a schoolboy had captained a successful Falkirk High School team to win the Scottish Elementary Schools Cup and represented Scottish Schools against England in a 1-1 draw at Hampden Park on 20 May 1933. In March 1935, at approaching 15¾ but tall and well-built, he joined Junior club Musselburgh Athletic. After just two matches Heart of Midlothian swooped to secure first option on his services when he reached the age of 17 and eligible to play Scottish League football. It was thought that he was possibly the youngest player attached to a senior club at that time. He continued playing with Musselburgh Athletic and was selected in all three Junior internationals in the 1935-36 season.

A crushing 0-4 defeat by Ireland at Grosvenor Park, Belfast on 7 March 1936 saw the Scotland selectors make drastic changes for the team to face Wales at Rugby Park, Kilmarnock a week later. Only Norrie, goalkeeper James Clark (Cambuslang Rangers) and right back Matthew Devine (Royal Albert) of that team were retained to face the Welsh. The Scots fared better with a 7-2 win. A week later Norrie led Scotland out against England at Tynecastle Park, Edinburgh on 21 March 1936 at just 16 years 272 days. Unfortunately, the Scots went down to a 2-4 defeat.



Norrie Corbett in the Junior Scotland team against Ireland in 1936

Norman George Corbett was born in Camelon on 23 June 1919 and was the fifth of seven sons of Donald and Jeannie Corbett. Donald was a well-known athlete and was at one time Scottish pole vault champion. Four of the sons – David, Willie, Robert and Norman – played professional football. Norrie made another appearance at Hampden Park on 1 June 1935, this time finishing second in the 100 yards open handicap in the Queen's Park FC annual sports when representing Falkirk Victoria. Brother Robert went one better and won the high jump event.

Norrie joined up with Heart of Midlothian when he was 17 but perhaps surprisingly only played for one season and did not make any first team appearances. He was placed on the Open to Transfer List on Tuesday 27 April 1937 and was snapped up by English Second Division club West Ham United a day later for a fee of around £500 where his brother David was playing. He made his debut just three days later on 1 May 1937 in the Hammers' final league game of the season, a 1-0 home win against Sheffield United. He was just 17 years 312 days old. At West Ham Norrie made 166 league appearances (3 goals) in a career interrupted by the Second World War. He really broke into the Hammers first team at 19 years of age in the 1938/39 season making 31 league appearances (1 goal).



Norman Corbett

He saw Army service with the Essex Regiment as a Physical Training Instructor rising to the rank of Sergeant-Major. During the War he made a total of 126 appearances (seasons 1939-40 to 1945-46 inclusive) in the war-time leagues for West Ham United. He also won a Football League War Cup medal as although he did not play in the Wembley final, a 1-0 win versus Blackburn Rovers on 8 June 1940, he had played in sufficient games in the earlier rounds to qualify for a medal. During the War he also played as a guest on two occasions for Southampton. Brother Willie also played as a guest for Southampton and the Hammers during the War.

When normal football resumed after the War Norrie was a regular in the Upton Park line-up and earned a reputation as a "long throw expert". He played his final game for the Hammers on 15 April 1950 in a 0-1 defeat at home to Cardiff City. Although as a half back goals were rare, two of his three goals brought festive cheer to the West Ham fans – versus Sheffield Wednesday on Boxing Day 1947 and against Leeds United on Christmas Day 1948. His third goal was against Tranmere Rovers on 24 September 1938. He moved on to Clapton of the Isthmian League having qualified as a Football Association coach. Norman Corbett died in Derby in June 1990.

Joe Fascione – the youngest Junior Cup winner

Our second young achiever is Joseph Victor Fascione who was born in Coatbridge on 5 February 1945. Joe Fascione was an exciting teenage prospect when at the age of just 17 years 107 days he was a member of the Kirkintilloch Rob Roy team that won the Junior Cup in a replayed final against Renfrew at Hampden Park on 23 May 1962.

Joe was from a footballing family and there were two other footballing Fasciones. Michael was his older brother by ten months. Due to the closeness in age Mick and Joe played in the same school team and they tasted success in the replayed Lamarra Cup final in 1957 with St Augustine's winning

6-0. Mike was at full back and Joe scored four goals from the wing. In the St. Columbkille's team was future Lisbon Lion Bobby Murdoch and Pat Gardner (Queen of the South, Airdrieonians, Raith Rovers, Dunfermline Athletic, Dundee United, Motherwell and Arbroath). From schools' football both boys joined Burnbank United in the Coatbridge & Airdrie under-21 League. They played from 1959 until 1961 winning the title twice together with the Orr and Arthur Trophies.



Joe (left) and Mick Fascione with either the Orr or Arthur Cup won with Burnbank United in 1961

Mick went on to join the British Railways amateur side. He moved on to Blantyre Victoria before playing two matches (1 goal) for Albion Rovers in the 1964-65 season, when there were reports of Luton Town being keen to take him south. He returned to the Junior grade with Blantyre Celtic and emigrated to Canada when his playing days were over. Vincent is three years younger than Joe and played for Blantyre Celtic and Thorniewood United and had senior trials with Dundee United and Queen of the South. In his career Vincent came up against a young Kenny Dalglish playing for Cumbernauld United.

From Burnbank United Joe signed for Kirkintilloch Rob Roy in May 1961. The amateur season had finished but the Junior season was reaching its conclusion and the successful Rob Roy team faced a backlog of games. Joe was in the team that faced Cambuslang Rangers in the final of the West of Scotland Cup at Shawfield Stadium on 17 June 1961. The score after 90 minutes was 0-0 but there was no extra-time scheduled but instead corner kicks were to be counted in the event of a draw. Even that method could not separate the teams. This was the last day of the Junior season. Both sets of players returned to the changing rooms while club and West of Scotland Junior FA officials tried to decide what to do. The association officials wanted to declare joint-winners but the clubs wanted the destiny of the cup to be decided on the pitch. The only option was for the two teams to meet again that evening. Rob Roy ran out 5-2 winners with Joe scoring twice and, along with all the players, received a watch for his achievement.

The victory in the West of Scotland Cup was a precursor to a very successful 1961-62 season for the Kirkintilloch club. They won the Central League West Division title and then defeated Shettleston of the East Division 3-0 in the Championship play-off to win the Evening Times Trophy. They also reached the final of the Scottish Junior Cup and on 19 May and in front of a crowd of 49,000 at Hampden Park fought out a 1-1 draw with Renfrew. Joe had been dropped by the Rab's a few weeks before the Final as they were concerned that the small, slightly built player may not have the strength for the arduous end-of-season schedule. In the Final Joe put in a five-star performance and the Glasgow Evening Times under the headline "*Wee Joe made the Seniors sit up!*" predicted a similar performance in the replay would see Senior clubs queuing up to sign the youngster. The clubs reconvened at Hampden Park on the following Wednesday (23 May) and 19,500 witnessed a tough, bruising match. A Kenny Cunningham shot from over 20 yards out produced the only goal of the game to take the cup to Kirkintilloch and give Joe his medal. The club completed a memorable season by winning the Dunbartonshire Junior Cup and the Dunbartonshire Junior Charity Cup.

The Evening Times' prediction was proved correct and Joe signed for Chelsea in September 1962. On 15 May 1963 he returned to Adamslie Park as part of a young Chelsea team that played a friendly in aid of the Freedom from Hunger charity against Rob Roy that was arranged as part of Joe's transfer. At Chelsea Tommy Docherty had moved from trainer to manager in September 1961. He could not prevent relegation to the Second Division at the end of the 1961-62 season but set about rebuilding the team. Younger readers will find it difficult to believe that at that time Chelsea did not pay huge transfer fees and the manager had to balance the books with transfer transactions and bring youth players through to the first team. In a long management career Tommy was well known for giving young players their chance. This started at Chelsea when he set about promoting young players already at the club and made signings like Joe to replace some of the old guard. Despite his reputation, Tommy displayed great patience recognising that Joe needed time to develop. Of course, he was eligible for the Chelsea youth team and had an early experience of European football winning a tournament in the Netherlands by beating Ajax with a young Johan Cruyff.



Joe Fascione (front row fifth from left) and Johan Cruyff (back row second from left)

Joe had an early taste of playing against top players when on the evening of Monday 21 October 1963 he was in the Chelsea team that provided opposition to the FIFA Rest of the World team in a 40-minute warm-up match at the White City in London. The 16-man FIFA squad was preparing to play England at Wembley to celebrate the centenary of the Football Association two days later. The World squad included such greats of the game as Lev Yashin (Russia), Eusébio (Portugal), Alfredo Di Stefano (Spain), Francisco Gento (Spain) and, of course, Denis Law and Jim Baxter.

The Duke of Edinburgh attended the Wembley showpiece and was presented to the teams but may, according to a story told later by Terry Venables, have made an informal visit to this warm-up match. In 1978, remembering amusing incidents from his career, Terry recalled introducing Prince Philip to Joe. The conversation went like this:

Terry Venables: "...and this is Joe Fascione who is playing his first game."

Duke of Edinburgh: "You mean he has never played soccer before?"

Terry said: "I've never known from that day to this whether he was winding me up."

Joe got his opportunity at the start of the 1964-65 season when he made his first team competitive debut on 23 September 1964 at St Andrews in a 3-0 win in the League Cup against Birmingham City. He went on to play in two other League Cup ties that season. Today you would expect to see a developing player start to appear on the substitutes' bench. However, the 1964-65 season was the last before the introduction of a substitute, and then only one to replace an injured player. In the first team England Under-23 cap Bert Murray was playing very well on the right wing and scoring goals. Chelsea were also contesting the League Championship with the great Manchester United side of Law, Best and Charlton and the emerging Leeds United team. A difficult time, even with Tommy Docherty's enthusiasm, for a young player to break through.

Joe was clearly part of the first team plans and was one of eight Chelsea players famously sent home after they arrived late back to their Blackpool hotel prior to the last but one match of the season at Burnley. Tommy Docherty later admitted that he had over-reacted as Chelsea were still in a position to win the League Championship if other results were to go their way. A 2-6 defeat inflicted by Burnley on his weakened team put paid to their chances and they finished in third place. For Joe all this was forgotten at the start of the next season and he made a scoring league debut in a 3-1 win at Highbury against Arsenal on 4 September 1965. He scored the Blues first goal and made the third for Barry Bridges. He went on to have a run of 13 more first team matches, including Inter Cities Fairs Cup ties against Roma and Wiener Sport-Club and in the new number 12 shirt against West Bromwich Albion.

On 13 November he came up against Bobby Moore playing against West Ham United. The elegant defender and England captain found it difficult to contain the tricky winger and the newspapers reported that he had to resort to some unsporting tactics. In early 1966 Joe faded out of the first team reckoning in a re-shuffle that saw the emergence of a young Peter Osgood. It would have been difficult to get back into the winning first team ("Docherty's Diamonds") that reached the semi-finals of both the FA Cup and Inter-Cities Fairs Cup and finished fifth in the First Division. He did manage to make two more appearances as substitute and played in the last league match of the season.

In the 1966-67 season the arrival of Charlie Cooke from Dundee for a large fee played a big part in Joe only making four (plus one as substitute) league appearances. Bill Shankly wanted to take Joe to Liverpool at the time he was also negotiating the transfer of Mark Hateley between the two clubs in July 1967. The Doc's reply was: "He's going nowhere!" Joe was, however, placed on the transfer list in August 1967 but came back into first team contention when Tommy Docherty left the club in

October 1967 and was replaced by coach Dave Sexton, who immediately gave him a run of six league games before the arrival of Alan Birchenall for £100,000 from Sheffield United saw Joe back in the reserves again.

It must have been a frustrating time for Joe. He could not secure a regular first team berth in Chelsea's £100,000 forward line, a term coined at the time as the huge transfer fee required for the club to consider selling any one of those players. But Joe was too good for the reserves and too valuable to release. Inevitably his name often came up in transfer gossip. In December 1968 there was talk of a three-month loan spell at Brighton & Hove Albion although I do not believe that came to fruition. He played 27 (plus 7 as substitute) league and cup matches and scored one goal in his seven years at Stamford Bridge before he moved to South Africa in 1969 to play for Durban City.

Durban's player/manager was former England international Johnny "Budgie" Byrne. In his time at the club Joe's teammates included Scottish goalkeeper Jim Herriot, Johnny Haynes (Fulham & England) and another fellow Scot, Greg Farrell. Durban City won the National Football League championship in the 1970 season. Joe, now 26 years of age, returned to the UK in 1971 but Durban City were looking for a fee to release his registration. Although he was able to train with Brentford, it meant that there was a seven-month delay before he was able to join a club. This must have been another frustrating time in his career as he had been out of the eye of UK clubs for a couple of years and they would have been unwilling to offer him even a trial period until the registration problems had been resolved.

He was eventually given a five-week trial by Jim McLean at Dundee United in July 1972 but his stay was short and he did not play a competitive game although he played in a pre-season friendly against MSV Duisberg. Inverness Thistle of the Highland League approached Joe but the cost of air fares from London each week would have proved too expensive and Thistle reluctantly could not make an offer.

Joe then joined Third Division Charlton Athletic but, as at Dundee United, he did not play a match and moved on quickly to top non-league club, Barnet where he made his first team debut on 28 October 1972 against Ramsgate in the Southern League. That season the club reached the Third Round of the FA Cup and held Second Division Queen's Park Rangers to a 0-0 draw at Loftus Road before losing 0-3 in the replay. He played 34 league and cup matches that season. He moved on to play for another Southern League club, Romford, and then Barking (Isthmian League). He continued in the Isthmian League as player /manager at Hampton before hanging up his boots and becoming manager at Barking followed by spells at Croydon and Bromley. Joe passed away in Sutton on 5 February 2019, his 74th birthday.