

Jeff Holmes - Tortured - The Sam English Story

PRE-SEASON TRAINING, in its rawest of forms, was over. The players were fit, raring to go and counting down the days until the start of the new season. There was growing speculation in the media that manager Bill Struth might spring a surprise on the huge Rangers following by announcing the rookie Irishman Sam English in his starting 11 to face Dundee at Ibrox on the opening day of the season

In the club's official trial game, the former Yoker man had showed up well, especially in dealing with high balls from the wing and in his distributive play. He was said to be first class, and earned the plaudits and acceptance of those who made up the 20,000 crowd.

But Sam was taking nothing for granted and on the day of the match, waited nervously for the team lines to be pinned up in the dressing room. He wouldn't be disappointed. As he worked his way through the 11, there, ninth name down, was that of Sam English. He was in. After impressing in the trial game, he had been given the nod ahead of both Jimmy Fleming and Jimmy Smith, which perhaps highlighted a shift in thinking by Struth.

Unlike most centres of that era, English believed in working with his inside men, and if Dr Jamie Marshall and Bob McPhail bought into the young centre-forward's philosophy, it was quite conceivable that both Smith and Fleming would find it difficult to get back into the first team.

One thing was certain, though – English would prove a grand draw, as he possessed all the necessary attributes of the ideal centre. There was a sense of anticipation ahead of his debut.

With the advent of the sectional League Cup still some 15 years away, it was straight into the league campaign. Points were up for grabs, and it was imperative Rangers make a good start, as an emerging Motherwell side, under the expert guidance of John 'Sailor' Hunter, were starting to make waves in the Scottish game.

But Rangers had an expert of their own, and under Bill Struth had won the Scottish Division One title for the previous five seasons. Of course, arch-rivals Celtic would be there or thereabouts, but it was the Fir Park men Struth was keeping a watchful eye on, and his assessment of the opposition was seldom wrong. Win the title again, and Rangers would equal Celtic's record of six successive championships.

Just over 30,000 fans were at Ibrox to witness this bright new beginning, and while the overall standard of play was mediocre, the keenness shown by both sets of players was at times exhilarating and made for a good spectacle on opening day.

Of course, everybody had more than one eye on the two fresh-faced centre-forwards, lint-locked English in particular, but also Dundee's Craigie. As for English, he was plied with the ball from all directions, and though at first perhaps being disposed of parting with it too quickly, he caused the Dundee defence a lot of anxiety by his quickness in darting this way and that. He went for everything, high and low – clearly a player who would require a lot of watching. It took the new boy little time to get up to speed with this new standard of football and he was soon stamping his authority on the game, although when he came within sight of goal, his shooting was a little off, certainly in the first half.

Rangers had the first real opportunity in the game, but McPhail's snap-shot was cleared with consummate ease. English then took up good positions inside the box on two separate occasions, but both times he was out of luck.

Ten minutes before the break, the home side edged in front. A swinging pass from Brown to Archibald was returned to English. The centre-forward shot hard against Marsh, who failed to hold the ball, and it rebounded out to Marshall, who made no mistake. Just before half-time, English doubled Rangers' advantage when he powered home a header, taking advantage of some hesitation in the Dundee defence to ghost away from his marker and find the target.

It was a special moment and the debutant celebrated the goal with great excitement, running straight to a section of the crowd who had travelled from Yoker to see their former favourite make history. He drank in the applause of the home crowd before slowly making his way back to the centre circle for the resumption of the game. It was such a special moment for this extremely likeable young footballer.

After the break it was all Rangers, and it was a case of how many. Clever play on the part of Archibald led to a third for the Light Blues. In a seemingly simple manner he drew and tricked the defence, and then sent over a well-placed cross to the unmarked Nicholson, who met the ball on the drop and drove it past Marsh. Shortly after this, Dundee enjoyed a brief flurry of possession, and nicked a consolation, but with time running out, Nicholson – deputising for Alan Morton – went on a mazy run down the left and sent over a delightful cross for Sam to head home his second of the afternoon, and Rangers' fourth.

But while it may have been an excellent day for English, it wasn't so good for his opposite number, Craigie, who enjoyed nothing like the same support. Besides, Meiklejohn was always on his case, although the Dundonian had the best of it when he scored his goal, taking both the Ibrox captain and Hamilton by surprise.

It had been English's day. It was a fantastic afternoon for the ex-Yoker Athletic man, and to get two goals on his debut – just a few weeks after stepping up from the Junior ranks – was a great achievement. And it begged the question – was Sam the type of player who was blessed with supreme talent, and able to step up to whatever level he found himself playing at; comfortable in the company of the top players? Or was the gulf between Senior and Junior football not as big in the 1930s as it is today? Perhaps the true answer lay somewhere in between, although there was little doubt that Rangers had made a smart acquisition. No wonder Herbert Chapman had joined the queue.

It was the perfect start for Struth as he negotiated the defence of Rangers' title and a warning shot to those who fancied seeing the flag flying above their stadium at the start of the following season. It was business as usual for the champions and, for Sam English, he headed home to Dalmuir – aboard a corporation bus – to bask in the personal glory of being a Rangers player, and one who had scored two goals in his first match. The following day, Sam awoke to find himself headline news in the Sunday morning papers. He had to give himself a shake to ensure it hadn't all been part of some far-fetched dream. However, along with the adulation, he was also feeling a lot of pain in one of his legs. He had taken a hefty kick during the game, but the euphoria of making his mark in such a triumphant manner had acted as the greatest form of pain relief and he hadn't noticed the injury. When he reported to Ibrox on Monday morning, it was straight on to trainer Arthur Dixon's treatment table and while the prognosis was far from serious, it was still bad enough to keep him out of Rangers' next game, at home to Airdrie just 48 hours later