

Billy Hunter new Project Ambassador of the Football Memories Project



Billy Hunter, the former Motherwell, Hibs and Scotland player has taken over the role of project ambassador for the Football Memories Project, following the sad passing of his great friend Lawrie Reilly.

The project was launched two years ago and trains volunteers to spend time with people with dementia who have an interest in football, talking about teams and matches from the past and working with images and memorabilia to stimulate memories. The project is a partnership between Alzheimer Scotland and the Scottish Football Museum, and is supported by the players of the People's Postcode Lottery and BUPA Care Homes.

Billy is a well-known figure amongst football fans of a certain era. He joined Motherwell from Edinburgh Norton in 1957 and became part of the famous side that became known as the 'Ansell Babes,' playing inside left, and his performances at Fir Park earned him three caps for the Scotland national team scoring his only goal in his first cap in a 3-3 draw with Hungary. He also played in defeats to Turkey and Wales.

In May 1967, the Detroit Cougars paid £14,000 for his transfer and Billy moved to the new American professional league, the NASL, where he spent one season before Hibs' manager Bob Shankly persuaded him to move to Easter Road.

Billy made his debut on February 1 1969, in a 2-1 win over Clyde at Easter Road alongside Pat Stanton, Jimmy O'Rourke, Peter Marinello, Joe McBride, Peter Cormack and Eric Stevenson, and scored his first goal for the club a month

later in a 3-4 defeat away to Morton.

Before the end of the season, Billy had played in six games, but competition for places meant that he was only able to start four times in the following campaign, although he was a substitute in the Scottish League Cup Final defeat to Celtic.

He also represented Hibs in the Inter Cities Fairs Cup second round second leg against Portuguese team Vitoria Guimareas, which the Easter Road side won on aggregate.

After leaving Hibs, Billy spent four years playing in South Africa, before returning to Motherwell as former team-mate Ian St-John's assistant manager, a role he held for three years.

He later had a short spell as manager of Queen of the South and Inverness Caledonian.

The 73 year old has been a long term supporter of the work done by the Football Memories Project and regularly visits and spends time with former players suffering from dementia, an illness that he firmly believes can be attributed to regularly heading the older heavy footballs used in the past.

Billy remains active and took time out of his busy schedule to speak to the Edinburgh Reporter about his new role, but modestly pointed out that although he accepts that having his name at the forefront of the project helps with publicity; he is only one of many volunteers for this worthwhile cause.

Billy said: "First of all I would like to say that to be asked to be the ambassador with the Alzheimer's project with the Football Memories Project in place of Lawrie (Reilly) is a real honour as far as I am concerned. I worked with Lawrie at various functions when he used to attend the meetings and basically that's all I would do which is to be available for functions in the winter and summer when we need to get people organised for dinners and things, but I'm really enjoying the role. There are a lot of players out there beginning to

struggle with their memory with some of them going into dementia stages which is pretty hard to take. We are getting a lot more support through the work and effort of Michael White who started this programme off.

“Michael has started a thing like a little football league in the Central Belt where there are about five teams such as Dunfermline, Motherwell, Hibs, Hearts, Rangers and they bring along four or five people with someone to attend them and they have a quiz programme which is basically Michael showing a whole load of photographs on a screen and they can identify players or teams. It really is good fun and gets some of the players out of their home, away from their carer who needs a bit of a breather and it really does energise them. You can see that immediately.

“I don't think there is any doubt about the part heading the heavy ball has played but I can appreciate that they don't come out now and say that this could well be a cause of it because if you get hit on the head with the equivalent weight of a punch bag which they identified when they examined Billy McPhail quite a number of years ago. To get hit on the head with one of these big punch bags every day for umpteen times, particularly the centre forwards and centre halves who were doing that all the time there must be a connection but we can understand that if they did that then they are opening Pandora's box up and perhaps they are open for certain recompense, not for the guy who has got it because he doesn't recover from this but certainly for the carers who have many years attending their husband who is really struggling.

Listen to Billy's interview here.

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Michael White said: “Billy has kindly agreed to take over the role that Lawrie Reilly fulfilled and it is a tremendous help to have a high profile former player who can act as a link

between the project and ex professional players all across the country.

“In the early days, one of the first clubs to get involved was Aberdeen and they now have three separate groups running which is tremendous, and Hibs, Hearts, St Johnstone and Forfar have started to run groups from inside their stadiums which is great because when the men arrive they know straight away that they are in a football environment and something good is going to happen.

“The meetings are very much focussed on images and pictures of football from the 1940s 50s and 60s and the guys come in and we start off with looking at pictures and recognition of players and teams and then try to draw stories out of them about their experiences of going to games, favourite players, favourite grounds as well as funny stories and there are lots of them and we find that the football memories trigger off their memories of work, school, national service or for the older guys, the war.

“There is always a half time break then after that there is more interaction and conversations, and not so much focussing on the images, and at the end of the session which usually lasts about an hour and a half, the guys go away with a really good positive feeling about themselves.

“Some of the relatives find it hard to believe the changes that have taken place. Daughters, sons, grandsons come into the group and they are amazed at the recall their family member has and is often in a sharp contrast to how they are at home in a normal day to day basis.”

Can anyone identify the two players in the photograph with Billy? Here is a clue; all three found success at Fir Park.