

‘Shades – The short life and tragic death of Erich Schaedler’ by Colin Leslie



Last week the Edinburgh Reporter featured the recently published book ‘Crops’ by Tom Wright which highlights the career of Hibs’ legend Alex Cropley, and today we look at ‘Shades’ by Colin Leslie which tells the fascinating story of another well remembered and much loved figure from the same era.

Erich Schaedler’s story is remarkable. His father, also Erich had played briefly for German club side Borussia Moenchengladbach in the 1930s, then at the outbreak of World War II he joined the German navy where he was originally due to serve on the Bismarck, but only two weeks before its scheduled departure, he was assigned to a torpedo boat instead. He was later wounded off the coast of France, captured by the Allies and taken to the Happendon prisoner of war camp in the Lanarkshire village of Douglas, where, after being sent out to work in the local farms, he met a Biggar girl, married her and eventually settled down in Peebles.

His passion for football was passed onto his son Erich who soon came to the notice of senior teams whilst playing for Peebles Rovers and Melbourne Thistle. Stirling Albion snapped up his signature, then, after only 24 appearances, Hibs boss Willie MacFarlane recognised his potential and paid the princely sum of £7,000 for his services before announcing to senior players that he had found a bargain who was a cross between legendary Italian defender Giacinto Facchetti and Celtic’s Lisbon Lion Tommy Gemmell, adding that he could also take really long throw.

Hibs legend Pat Stanton later joked "We didn't quite know what to expect and when Erich arrived we could tell pretty quickly that Willie's assessment was really spot on, at least in relation to the long throws."

It certainly did not take long for the youngster to make an impression when he made his debut coming off the bench in a friendly against Gornik Zabrze at Easter Road on 8 December 1969. Trying to impress, Erich hurtled into a challenge only to end up crocking team-mate Peter Cormack who had to be carried off on a stretcher.

Although not having the skills of some of his team-mates, Erich had many other attributes and brought some valuable steel to the Hibs defence. He never flinched from a tackle and his total commitment, fierce competitiveness and refusal to accept defeat made him a firm favourite with the supporters.

In 1971 Eddie Turnbull took over as manager and Erich became a mainstay of that great side which won two Drybrough Cups, a League Cup and finished runners up in the League, not to mention a certain seven nil score-line at Tynecastle. Because he was not on the score-sheet, Erich's contribution that famous day is sometimes overlooked although not by anyone fortunate enough to have been there. A trademark long throw created the first for Jimmy O'Rourke and a crunching tackle on Jim Clunie led to the seventh.

Eddie Turnbull certainly never underestimated Erich and was quoted as saying: "Erich didn't have the same amount of skill that Brownlie, Edwards or Cropley had but he could do things that they couldn't do plus he had a big heart. Likewise Alex Cropley said: "A lot of people didn't know how good Erich was but the players did. His energy was legendry and he could run all day even though he wasn't a six footer. His immense brawn meant he consistently overpowered opponents."

Although the son of a German, Erich was patriotic about his

Scottish nationality and March 1974 watched by his proud father he played for the national team in a narrow 2-1 defeat to future World Champions West Germany whose numbers included Franz Beckenbauer, Berti Vogts, Paul Breitner and Gerd Muller at Frankfurt's Wald Stadion.

Under the rules that were in place at the time, Erich did not receive a cap, although this was rectified over thirty years later when his brother John accepted the award at a ceremony organised by Hibernian to honour Erich and the five other Hibs players affected.

Erich was also a member of Scotland's 1974 World Cup Squad in West Germany as cover for full-backs Sandy Jardine and Danny McGrain but didn't play a game as Scotland were knocked out of the competition on goal difference. He did however get to sing on the World Cup song released by the squad entitled 'Easy Easy.'

For a reason only known to himself, Eddie Turnbull disbanded the Tornados; a decision he would later agree was premature to say the least. One by one the great players who had thrilled the Easter Road crowds were allowed to leave, including Alex Cropley, Pat Stanton, Jimmy O'Rourke, Alan Gordon, John Blackley and John Brownlie, and whilst good players were recruited including Ally McLeod, Jackie MacNamara, Ralph Callaghan and George Stewart to compliment youngsters like Des Bremner and Gordon Rae, the team never reached the high standards of their predecessors.

In November 1977, Erich moved to Dundee in a swap deal with Bobby Hutchison, a move which angered the Hibs' faithful, and right away the Dundee fans took to his committed playing style. Erich quickly became a firm favourite and helped them to win the First Division in 1979. The following year he played in the all Tayside League Cup Final at Dens Park, which ended in a 3-0 defeat to Dundee United.



To the delight of the fans, Erich returned to Hibs in 1981 and although his second spell was less successful than his first, he still displayed the same old enthusiasm and dedication to the cause.

In one memorable game against Manchester United on Boxing Day 1981, which took place because of Easter Road's new under soil heating, Erich's crunching tackle on Bryan Robson, the most expensive player in the UK at the time resulted in the future England captain having to leave the pitch with a suspected dislocated shoulder, an injury that would plague him throughout his career, and the sight of a furious Ron Atkinson in his full length fur coat will never be forgotten by those who braved the elements.

Erich had a warm relationship with fans and would happily chat with fans and sign autographs outside the ground as well as raising money for St Columba's Hospice through his pub called Shades in Easter Road.

In 1984, he helped two police officers disarm a shotgun raider who had tried to rob his establishment. For this act of bravery he was awarded the Lothian Police Meritorious Award which was presented to him by Scottish Secretary George Younger.

His last appearance in the famous green and white jersey came in a 2-2 draw at Tynecastle, the scene of arguably his greatest triumph in April 1985.

Erich eventually turned part-time and moved to Dumbarton on a free transfer before the start of the 1985/86 season, subsequently making 14 appearances for the 'Sons.'

A few weeks before Christmas of 1985 Erich and his wife divorced, and on Christmas Eve he went on a shooting trip alone. A field sports enthusiast he regularly took his 12 bore

shotgun to go rough shooting in the Borders, but when he failed to pick up his dogs that evening from neighbours who had been looking after them, a search was launched, and on the 27th of December his body was discovered in his car in a remote wood at Wallace Hill, Cardrona on the banks of the Tweed.

Dumbarton's match against Alloa Athletic which was due to be played the following day was postponed, and a minute's silence was observed before Hibs' match against Clydebank. His funeral took place at Mortonhall Crematorium where former team-mate Iain Munro provided the eulogy.

Author Colin Leslie was keen to point out that whilst Erich's life ended prematurely, he left a host of great memories for those fortunate enough to have known him and also the for the football fans who watched him play. He said: "Erich is sadly remembered as the first of that great Hibs' team to die. He was cut off in his prime and it is a very sad tale, but he was not just famous because of the manner of his death, but mainly because of the type of footballer and man that he was.

"He was the type of player than fans identify with and although not a dirty player by any means, he would steam into tackles to win the ball. He was also immensely strong and could deliver a long throw into the box which was unusual at the time and from what I have gathered speaking to people who knew him well, he had a great personality and was the type who would happily spend 10-15 minutes talking to the fans.

"I started watching Hibs in the early 80s, so only saw him during his second spell, but I remember being shown round Easter Road one day as a Hibs' Kid and when we reached the old gym, Erich was in on his own working out. Everyone else had left the ground and he was in his 30s at the time but he was aware that he had to put in extra work to prolong his career although he did take a break to sign autographs and chat with the kids.

"My favourite chapter is the one entitled the 'Mad Kraut' which demonstrates what a close knit bunch of guys the Hibs team were as well as all being excellent players as there was clearly a great camaraderie off the field.

"I would like to thank Erich's family for their help and co-operation, in fact I would not have written this book without it.

Former team-mate John Blackley also talked highly of Erich: "Firstly he was a good footballer and a really good team player. Erich was as hard as nails but a great lad on and off the park but he was very underrated. He was a great type to have around the place and an unbelievable trainer. He was very fit and looked after himself and everything was geared to his performances."

Former coach John Fraser echoed these comments. He said: "Erich was Mr Superfit. At training when Eddie Turnbull blew his whistle to start a sprint, Erich would be the first to the finishing line. Arthur Duncan was very fast over 20 yards, but Erich would overtake him in a longer sprint.

"He was also great fun, but hard as nails. I remember he used to grab the trainer Tom McNiven in a bear hug and squeeze the life out of him, he was so strong.

"Erich was also an excellent footballer and Eddie used to bring him and Arthur back in the afternoons for tactical training. Bear in mind that they were both Scotland internationals at the time so they could have taken umbrage, but neither did as they both wanted to learn.

"We were delighted when Erich and John (Blackley) made the 1974 World Cup squad, and Eddie Turnbull took all the backroom staff to Germany to watch the games and Scotland were unlucky not to qualify for the next stage."

'Shades – The short life and tragic death of Erich Schaedler'

by Colin Leslie is available at all good book shops.