

Hibs' legend Eric Stevenson dies aged 74 following a brave fight against cancer



Hibs' legend Eric Stevenson has died aged 74 following a brave fight against cancer.

Football is an entertainment industry and few (if any) players provided the Hibs' supporters with more entertainment in the 1960s than Eric.

Equally capable on either wing, his close ball control consistently got the better of the opposing full back, but he also had an eye for goal, scoring an impressive 79 times and creating many more in his 390 games for the club during 11 memorable years.

After a controversial spell on Hearts' books which culminated in the club being fined for a contract irregularity, Eric turned down Wolverhampton Wanderers and Manchester United to join his boyhood heroes. He starred in numerous famous games for Hibs before personal reasons saw him move to Ayr United where he was famously fined for missing a game to watch Hibs win the League Cup.

Eric retired prematurely to concentrate on his business interests in Bonnyrigg but he remains a 'weel-kent face' at Easter Road and four years ago he was deservedly inducted into the Hibernian Hall of Fame.

Earlier this year John Hislop caught up with Eric who kindly recalled his career in the beautiful game.

He said: "I played in the first team when I was only 17 but I wasn't really ready at that time. The club took me to

Barcelona for the Fairs Cup tie even though there were no subs in these days and after the game which finished 4-4 I went for a drink with Willie Ormond. I honestly thought I was in heaven as a few months earlier I had been working down the pit.

"I even managed to play in the Fairs Cup semi-final play-off against Roma and although we were well beaten on the night, the papers in Italy the following day said that Lazio were considering signing Hibs' teenage winger, but of course nothing ever came of it.

"I have so many great memories playing for Hibs and in particular I loved playing against Hearts. Their supporters really hated me as I had been on their books as a youngster and there would be crowds of 40,000 at Tynecastle for the derbies. One game in particular stands out when I scored twice and we were 4-0 up after only 10 minutes. If we had kept going it could have been double figures, but we took our foot off the pedal. I still feel guilty as I started to take the mickey with flicks and back heels which the Hibs' fans loved, but I think that if Eddie Turnbull or Jock Stein had been in charge then they would have insisted that we go for more goals. Bob Shankly was the manager at the time but he was more laid back.

"The European nights under the floodlights at Easter Road were also special and we played against some great teams such as Hamburg with Uwe Seeler and Willi Schulz who played in the 1966 World Cup Final, Porto and Naples who had Dino Zoff in goals but even he couldn't stop us scoring five goals that night.

"Red Star Belgrade in particular were a class act and they had a player called Dragoslav Sekularak who had been the player of the tournament in the 1962 World Cup and Eddie had played against him for Scotland in 1958. Eddie said he was a genius and he was correct. I would say that Sekularak was the best player I ever played against.

"Eddie Turnbull rated me as a player and tried to sign me for Aberdeen but when he arrived at Hibs, I was having personal problems and was keen to leave the area. He tried to persuade me to stay but I signed for Ayr United who were part time. I realised quickly that it was mistake although Ayr had good players such as John Murphy, Alex Ingram, Johnny Doyle who later joined Celtic and Johnny Graham who had been at Hibs.

"I had played with Ayr manager Ally McLeod when he was at Hibs, and he really rated me but I am sorry to admit that the Ayr fans didn't get to see the best of me. I wasn't fit and my head and heart weren't in it. I felt really sorry for Ally and apologised to him.

"When Hibs got to the League Cup Final in 1972, I went to Hampden even though Ayr were playing that day and I would probably have been in the team. I sat in the main stand and when the Hibs players came out to check the pitch a few, including Pat (Stanton) and Jimmy (O'Rourke) spotted me and waved. Jock Stein also saw me and I suspect he told Ally as I was called in to see him when I turned up for training the following week. He asked where I had been on Saturday and I told the truth. He said he would have to fine me two weeks wages but I told him that it was worth it and would have been happy to pay four weeks wages as I wouldn't have missed that game for anything.

"Pat was magnificent that day and in my opinion played his best game ever for Hibs.

"Despite offers from Canada and South Africa, I retired from the game in my early 30s to concentrate on my newsagents shop in Bonnyrigg which I ran for 30 years.

"I was absolutely delighted and honoured to be nominated for the Hibernian Hall of Fame in 2012 and the fact that that my trophy was handed over by Lawrie Reilly meant as much to me as actually being inducted.

“Illness prevented me from going to Hampden for the final in May but I watched it on television and don’t mind admitting that I shed a tear or two when David Gray scored the winner as I know how much it means to everyone. It wasn’t such a big deal when I played, but it’s been a monkey on the back of the club for years now.”

A new book, ‘Hibs through and through: The Eric Stevenson story’ with Eric and Club Historian Tom Wright was published last year by Luath Press.

The Edinburgh Reporter sends our sincere condolences to Eric’s friends and family.