

JIMMY LEADS POMPEY'S GREAT ESCAPE

Last-gasp survival on 40th birthday

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Jimmy Dickinson MBE, whose first name alone is synonymous with Portsmouth Football Club, was born 100 years ago today. The club's most loyal servant spent 36 years on the payroll as a player, club captain, public relations officer, club secretary and manager until his death at the age of just 57 in 1982.

Much has been written about Jimmy over the years, and no doubt there will be fulsome tributes to him from a number of sources today, so this short article makes no attempt to chronicle his entire remarkable career. Suffice to say that Pompey's fortunes during that time encompassed both triumph and disaster, and Gentleman Jim, forever calm and even-tempered, treated those two imposters just the same. Rudyard Kipling must have had someone like Jimmy in mind when he wrote his poem "If".

The anniversary of Jimmy's final match as a Pompey player, on his 40th birthday in 1965, also falls today. Earlier in that 1964/65 season, when he made the decision to finally hang up his boots, Jimmy probably hoped that he could bow out quietly, modestly, and without fuss. It wasn't to be.

Pompey's season had been one of stunning mediocrity. A poor start was never really overcome. The odd win here or there occasionally hinted at better times ahead, but with goals difficult to come by after the shock sale of Ron Saunders to Watford in September 1964, Pompey's momentum was always downward.

Going into Easter, Pompey sat second from bottom of the Second Division, with just four points separating the bottom seven clubs. A nervous 1-0 win against Cardiff City on the Saturday set things up nicely for Jimmy's final Fratton Park appearance against Norwich City on Easter Monday, when goals from Harry Harris (2), John McClelland and Cliff Portwood gave Pompey a 4-0 win and real hope of survival. At the final whistle the pitch was engulfed by Pompey fans - partly in celebration of the win, but mostly to join the procession which carried Jimmy shoulder high around the pitch.

The following evening came the return fixture with Norwich. Jimmy was rested, but he travelled to Carrow Road with the Pompey party and sat in the directors' box to watch his side lose 3-1.

With just one match remaining, at Northampton Town, Pompey's fate was still in the balance, and, worryingly, matters were not entirely in their own hands. The defeat at Norwich had sent them back to second from bottom in the table. Immediately above them were Swindon Town who, on the final day, were to face Southampton at The Dell. If Pompey were to survive they would need their neighbours and close rivals to do them a favour!

And there was an added complicating factor. Whereas the Saints v Swindon fixture was a 3pm kick-off, Pompey's match at Northampton would be played in the evening. Therefore if Swindon were to get so much as a draw at The Dell, Pompey would be already relegated by the time they arrived in Northampton.

The first part of the relegation conundrum was resolved in Pompey's favour, with Saints beating Swindon 2-1. The great escape was therefore still on, but the Blues still needed at least a draw at Northampton in order to stay up - a tall order considering The Cobblers were on quite a roll, being unbeaten at home, and they had already booked their promotion to the top flight alongside Newcastle United.

If ever a situation called for Jimmy Dickinson's cool head this was it, and he was duly restored to the Pompey team for the big match. It would be his final game for the Blues, on his 40th birthday.

Pompey: John Armstrong, Alex Wilson, Ron Tindall, Johnny Gordon, Jimmy Dickinson (Capt.), Harry Harris, John McClelland, Cliff Portwood, Dennis Edwards, Albert McCann, Tony Barton.



The County Ground was packed to the rafters, but it was Pompey voices that dominated as the teams took the field to form a guard of honour for Jimmy. He emerged from the tunnel immaculate, sporting the same sheepish grin that had endeared him to the football world for 20 years, 834 Pompey first-team matches and 48 England international caps.

Pompey started the match well and, with sharper finishing, could have been home and dry by half-time. Edwards, Portwood and McClelland all had scoring chances.



Pompey's John McClelland fires a shot just wide at Northampton Town

The same pattern of play continued after the break, with Pompey's dominance silencing the home fans who had turned up for a promotion party, but disaster struck Jimmy and his team mates in the 77th minute.

During a rare Northampton attack Pompey conceded a free kick. As the ball was lobbed into the penalty area Johnny Gordon rose to head clear but he succeeded only in steering the ball past the despairing dive of goalkeeper Armstrong and into his own net.

For the next few minutes it looked like the rejuvenated Cobblers would finish with a flourish. Pompey were now staring down the barrel of relegation, and Jimmy's illustrious playing career would finish on a low. But Jimmy himself was having none of it, and he cajoled his men for one last hurrah.

With six minutes remaining McClelland took a corner on the left. First Harris, then Portwood got heads to it before the ball dropped to Alex Wilson, who fired it into the net through a forest of legs. Pompey were level, and the affable Scotsman was mobbed by his team-mates.

Pompey saw out the remaining minutes with ease and the match ended 1-1. Second Division status had been preserved, albeit by the skin of their teeth.

Jimmy Dickinson's playing career was at an end. He was taken on a final lap of honour, perched on the shoulders of Johnny Gordon and Alex Wilson, the two other

long-serving Pompey players. In the stands and on the terraces Northampton fans joined the noisy Pompey contingent in paying homage to Gentleman Jim.



Alex Wilson fires home a shot to put Pompey level in their crunch match at Northampton



Johnny Gordon (left) and Alex Wilson take Jimmy Dickinson on a final lap of honour



Jimmy removes his boots for the last time while Harry Harris has a word in his ear



Cheers! Johnny Gordon (left), Alex Wilson (right) and Jimmy enjoy a pint after the great escape