



Players - Bobby Collins - Part 2 - Home grown hero

Bobby Collins was one of post war football's biggest names, bursting to prominence with Glasgow Celtic in 1949 and becoming one of their favourite sons. He enjoyed almost a quarter of a century as a professional player, the first decade of which was in Glasgow, and he achieved legendary status for his never say die approach.

Born Robert Young Collins in Glasgow on 16 February 1931, he was the eldest of six children and followed his local club, Third Lanark, as a boy, often squeezing under the fence to see them play accompanied by brother Davie.

He was a football fanatic from the very first, recalling later: "I was really influenced by players of the era and among a host of Scots we cheered on were the likes of Jimmy Delaney, Billy Liddell, Archie Macauley, Jimmy Caskie and two players who went on to manage at the highest level, Bill Shankly and Matt Busby. England were spoiled for choice and over the years I saw Eddie Hapgood, Stan Cullis, Joe Mercer, Stan Matthews, Frank Swift, Raich Carter, Jimmy Hagan and Tommy Lawton display their skills. I played at every opportunity and growing up I loved hearing about the likes of Hughie Gallacher, Alex James and Jimmy McMullan who proved that height did not matter if you are good enough."



Bobby Collins joined Celtic at 17 and quickly became a fans' favourite

Collins was always on the short side, but never let that deter him, compensating big style with his football talent and sheer guts. Both Everton and Celtic chased his signature and the Merseysiders offered his Pollok club a £1,000 transfer fee. The 17-year-old initially agreed to the deal, but quickly changed his mind when he heard that Celtic manager Jimmy McGrory was after him and signed on as a part timer at Parkhead in 1948 for a weekly wage packet of £8.

The Glasgow giants were among the cream of British football, with 19 Scottish League titles and 15 Scottish Cup wins to their credit since their formation in 1888. That success was in the past, though, and Celtic were in a barren spell with only two championships in twenty years, as arch rivals Rangers eclipsed them, winning the title eleven times over the same period. Collins may have been joining a footballing super power, but he did so at one of the lowest points in their history.

Jimmy McGrory had been appointed by club chairman Bob Kelly to bring back the glory times. He

was a Celtic legend in his playing days and took over from Jimmy McStay in 1945, intent on reviving the club's fortunes.

Bobby Collins was pitched hopefully into this maelstrom of under achievement as a highly promising 18-year-old. He made his first team debut on 13 August 1949 in a League Cup clash with Rangers. 71,000 Parkhead supporters saw the youngster perform admirably on the right wing, tormenting Rangers veteran Jock Shaw.

Collins: "I remember going through the middle and Willie Wood fouled me and we got a penalty. He moaned like hell, but he clipped me. Fortunately, we won 3-2 and I was never out of the team thereafter. When Celtic played Rangers you simply had to win and it didn't matter how. If you didn't win then you knew you wouldn't be able to go out for a while!"

He became an automatic choice, winning rave reviews after his first League goal, the winner in a 3-2 victory over Hearts. John Jessiman of the Sunday Express: "Little Bobby Collins, game as a pebble, built like a Brencarrier, and in his element at inside-right, crashed home a picture opportunist goal, fired first time. Away up on the terracing behind the goals, out flew the green scarves. He brings back to Celtic, this boy, the immortal fire of Patsy Gallagher. His idea of progress is the shortest way through ... the technique of the electric drill! When he was not hurling himself at the entire Hearts defence he was back defending. That was Patsy's way. After the Collins winner, the roar from the Parkhead faithful went on for five minutes. No wonder!"

He enjoyed a fine debut season, scoring seven League goals, though Celtic trailed in fifth. Nevertheless it was the club's best finish since the war. 1951 saw the club slip to a seventh place finish, though Collins' 15 goals made him top scorer, and included a hat trick in a 6-2 win against East Fife. There was also a first trophy since 1938 as they captured the Scottish Cup. Collins was ever present in the Cup run, helping the Celts beat Motherwell 1-0 in the final before a 132,000 capacity crowd.

As Collins turned 20, he was making his name as one of the brightest young stars in Scotland. He recalled later: "My early games for Celtic went well and I soon settled into the team's pattern of play ... I was expected to play as a link man in attack as well as a striker who had to get his share of goals. It was a challenge, but if the manager thought I was capable of playing in that role then that was fine by me.

"There was no over complication in tactics. Talk never centred on 4-2-4, 4-3-3, diamond formations or sweeper systems, we believed in attacking football. That was our style of play. If we were on the attack we'd have five forwards and two wing-halves looking for opportunities and supporting each other. If we were on the defensive we'd track back to support our defenders.

"Of course, we had players who could control a game; intelligent footballers like Bobby Evans,



Bobby Collins is on the far left of the front row of this Celtic team group from 1949-50

Willie Fernie, Charlie Tully and John McPhail, and with players of this calibre in the side changing tactics came natural to us and we were able to adapt. If we had to battle we could and if we were able to play our natural game we did.”

Collins’ outstanding club form caught the eye of the Scotland selectors and he was called up to the full international squad in the autumn of 1950. Injury forced his withdrawal from a fixture with Switzerland, but he made his full debut soon afterwards, at Cardiff against Wales on 21 October 1950. Bobby laid on a cross for Billy Liddell to head home spectacularly en route to a 3-1 victory. Collins retained his place for home matches with Northern Ireland, a 6-1 triumph with Billy Steel scoring four, and Austria. The latter game brought a depressing landmark with a 1-0 defeat leaving the Scots as the first home international nation to lose on their own turf to overseas opposition. The setback prompted a radical rebuilding programme, and it was four and a half years before Collins regained a place.

Despite winning the St Mungo Cup competition in the autumn of 1951 by beating Aberdeen in a Hampden Park final, Celtic again finished no better than mid table in the League in 1952. They had a bunch of outstanding individuals, including Collins and the mercurial Charlie Tully, but could not function consistently as a team, trailing in a hugely dispiriting ninth in an up and down campaign.

The season did have a more positive undertone, though, as Celtic welcomed a new arrival who was to have a fundamental impact on the club, heralding a revival in their fortunes.

Jock Stein, a gangling defender, was plucked from the obscurity of Llanelli. He hailed from a fiercely Protestant family and was approaching 30 when he arrived at Parkhead in December 1951. He was disowned by his Rangers-loving father and the move created genuine controversy as he crossed Glasgow’s yawning sectarian divide.

Stein had never pulled up any trees, but Celtic scout and reserve team trainer Jimmy Gribben was convinced enough of his potential to seek him out when the Celts required defensive reinforcements, as recalled by Archie MacPherson in his biography of the Big Man:



Bobby Collins is outjumped by Partick Thistle's Gibb

“It is not entirely clear what had been retained on the retina of Gribben's mind's eye about Stein. Adam McLean, Stein's (Albion) Rovers colleague, has his own view: 'I remember one night we played a reserve game at Celtic Park. Celtic had fielded [John] McPhail at centre-forward and he was a handful, as you would know. Well, Jock never gave him a kick at the ball. He out-headed McPhail, who was good in the air. All right, it was just a reserve game, but the way Stein played that night he must have caught somebody's eye.' But perhaps even more significant was a game played by Rovers at Celtic Park in January 1949 when they played for an hour with only ten men. They were well beaten in the end, 3-0, but it could have been worse and their defensive performance received wide praise, the *Sunday Post* identifying Stein as one of the 'heroes'. The *Sunday Mail* noted that 'pivot Stein, along with Muir and English, looked as confident as if the score had been reversed'. That game would possibly have registered on any

football shrewdie like Gribben.

“The news of his December 1951 signing for Celtic was greeted by two distinct groups of people with almost the same degree of incredulity. Firstly there were the boys from Burnbank Cross whose sectarian solidarity was as unflinching as it had always been. They found it hard to comprehend. Had Stein turned up at the Cross blind drunk and ranting against the evils of gambling, it would not have caused as great a stir as the news that he was about to don a green and white jersey. As Harry Steele admitted, Stein became an outcast. 'He lost a lot of pals overnight when he signed for Celtic. "Turncoat" was about the kindest thing they said about him. After a wee while his name just wasn't mentioned at the Cross. And although he was in and around Burnbank for a long while he never came back down amongst us to stand and have a blether.'

“Then there was the Celtic supporters' reaction. To understand how they felt you have to understand the state Parkhead was in at that time. Since the war the club, which enjoyed massive support, had struggled to win anything ... A measure of their inadequacies and the disillusionment of their supporters came in season 1951-52 when for the first time in 80 years they lost a Scottish Cup replay, on this occasion to Third Lanark who had beaten them 2-1 at Cathkin. This underlined not only an apparent lack of ability but the almost spiritless surrender of the only major trophy they had won in fifteen years, outside the St Mungo Cup. It represented staggering underachievement for a club that moved whole armies around the country in its support. Even worse was the fact that they were no longer the major challengers to Rangers, having been replaced by Hibernian: since the end of the war the pendulum of success had swung between Ibrox and Easter Road where the Famous Five Hibs forward line was playing the kind of football Celtic themselves had always aspired to.

“When Stein joined Celtic, the club had a League record that made their aficionados wince when they were forced to consider it. They were in twelfth position in a sixteen-club league with a record of ten points from eleven matches (three wins, four draws

and four defeats). The pain became almost unbearable, dissent grew thick on the ground, and the supporters wanted a positive and creative sign from the board that they knew what they were doing and where they were heading. What they were being informed about now was that the club had signed a little-known player from a little-known town in a little-known league in a country that was addicted to a game where the ball is shaped like an egg. It was not an acquisition likely to win friends and influence people. If there was incredulity at Burnbank Cross and its environs, then you might say that on the other side of the sectarian divide many of the Celtic support were stricken with increased anxiety and were struggling to make sense of it all.

“The manager who greeted Stein and was pictured beside him as he signed on was one of the most self-effacing men in Scottish football, Jimmy McGrory. His constant geniality, the gentle and polite manner with which he seemed to exist within the maelstrom of Old Firm politics and his dignified



Celtic with the Coronation Cup they won in 1953. Collins is on the left of the front row, Jock Stein is third left and Jimmy McGrory is on the right of the back row

bearing stood in sharp contrast to the autocratic Kelly. When you met McGrory inside Celtic Park, nursing his pipe constantly like a life-support system and invariably greeting you with a broad smile, and didn't know who he was, you could have mistaken him for some pleasant grandfather who had been sent in to wait for a ball to be autographed in the dressing room. According to Sean Fallon, the Celtic captain at that time, McGrory's team talks hardly evoked the tone of the Gettysburg Address. 'It's going to be a hard game today, lads,' was about as much he could summon up.

“So Kelly was the dominant figure, even when it came to selecting the team. John McPhail, years after he left Celtic, told me that in those days there was a specific ritual when it came to away games. 'What would happen when we were away from home is that Bob Kelly and Jimmy McGrory and maybe another director or two would go into the toilet in the dressing-room and shut the door. We would all sit around waiting for the team announcement. Out they would come, and Jimmy would read out the names. That was it. Just the names read out and then you got on with it. There was one day when I knew in my bones I wouldn't be playing. It was a cert. I had been playing badly and I was putting on weight. Well, that day, to my utter surprise, Jimmy read out my name in the team. I noticed then the chairman hadn't come out of the toilet and I discovered later that he was answering the call of nature for he had something wrong with his stomach that day. The team Jimmy read out wasn't the one they had selected in the toilet. He made a mistake naming me, and since the chairman wasn't at his elbow there was nobody there to correct him. I had stripped off like everybody else and was out on the park before Bob Kelly realised it. Celtic won that day, by the way, and I got to play because of the chairman's diarrhoea. I know it sounds incredible now, but that was the way the club was run in those days.”

Jock Stein's merits were plain enough to Bobby Collins, who offered his endorsement: “Some supporters threatened to boycott games if he was selected, which was incredible. Jock may have been turning professional at the age of 28, but you had to give him a chance. Fortunately the manager did give him an opportunity and Jock soon settled into the team.

“Jock read the game well, could spot danger and opportunities quickly and as a player we all respected him, but it was as a captain that you really saw his credentials. He was always encouraging and demanding more effort, and got it. Nobody escaped praise when it was warranted or a sharp word where necessary.”



Bobby Collins pressurises the Airdrie keeper in a match in 1953-54. Celtic won 6-0 on the way to their first Scottish title for 16 years

Steadied by the influence and leadership of Stein, Celtic won the Coronation Cup in 1953, defeating Arsenal, Manchester United and Hibs on the way. Collins' goal direct from a corner was the only score in the game against the Gunners and he remained one of the club's most regular goalscorers, despite their inconsistency.

1954 saw Celtic finally recapture both consistency and the championship. They began the season tentatively, though Collins was on fine form. He became one of the few players ever to manage a hat trick of penalties in the same game, helping Celtic beat Aberdeen in September. The Glaswegians spent most of the season in the wake of table topping Hearts and it seemed their

chance had gone when they lost 3-2 at Tynecastle in February, leaving the Edinburgh club seven points clear at the top.

However, Celtic had become a resolute team under Stein, and they won their final nine games on the bounce to end the season champions by five points, securing a first title for 16 years.

Collins played in all but five games, though an injury suffered against Hearts meant that he missed the Scottish Cup final, which saw his club secure the Double by beating Aberdeen with a Sean Fallon goal.

Collins: “It was really disappointing to miss out on the Cup final, but I was delighted for the lads. I’d been injured for around ten weeks, but after battling back to fitness I’d hoped to be in contention. It wasn’t to be though, and I couldn’t complain because the team had played well and reached the final without me. I had to wait for my chance to get back into the first XI. I was just delighted to play and score in the final League game two days after the Cup final and enjoyed all the celebrations. Our fans were ecstatic. It was a wonderful achievement because the team had been in inconsistent form for a number of years so it was fantastic to put a run together. Overcoming Hearts was a great effort by the squad.”

Celtic failed to defend either trophy in 1955, losing out to Aberdeen in the title race, though they ended the season with more points than the year before. They reached the Scottish Cup final but could only draw 1-1 with Clyde.

Archie MacPherson: “Celtic should have had the Cup won in the first half hour of the game when they swamped the Clyde defence. Bobby Collins was demonstrably the most influential player up front, and like all wee men who perform like that he had the crowd backing him, like a favourite jockey leading the pack. He was also throwing his small but sturdy frame around and was particularly heavy on one occasion with Clyde's South African goalkeeper Hewkins. That was significant for what was to occur later.”

Jimmy Walsh put Celtic ahead after 38 minutes and it was expected that the goal would be decisive. However, two minutes from time a corner from Clyde’s Archie Robertson was blown into goal by the Hampden swirl and the Bully Wee had snatched an unlikely draw.

Archie MacPherson: “What ... occurred thereafter was to trigger in Stein's mind the need for inviolate managerial control over a team. Those next few days before the replay, particularly the team announcement for the game just before kick off, preyed on his mind in the days leading up to his decision to go back to Parkhead as manager in 1965. He never forgot it ... what happened next was a shambles. Collins was dropped. Mochan, who had scored nine goals in seventeen League matches that season, was kept in the stand. Walsh's position was changed unaccountably from inside-left to the right wing. McPhail, who had played centre, was moved to inside-left and Sean Fallon, famed for his rumbustious style, was brought back after a long spell of injury to lead the line. The changes were in themselves odd, but the dropping of Collins in the light of what was to happen was simply a provocation to the Celtic legions. The wee man had certainly indulged in uncompromising challenges in the first game and it was clear that Bob Kelly had taken a dim view of his demeanour, so Collins was not to play.

“Stein never said an unkind word about Bob Kelly, that I know, but he as much as admitted to me that he had witnessed manager Jimmy McGrory being starkly ignored, ridden over and eventually, in terms of the loss of the replay, ultimately humiliated ... Harry Haddock, Clyde's cheery and

mobile full-back captain, read out the Celtic team in the Clyde dressing-room with astonishment and with a renewed feeling of confidence. It was not misplaced. On a miserably wet evening, with only 68,831 in attendance ... Tommy Ring scored the only goal for Clyde seven minutes after half-time.”

Collins was devastated by his exclusion, saying: “It was really disappointing. I wonder in the modern game how many chairmen would have taken that decision. I was not happy.”

His mood was lifted by a recall to the Scottish ranks as the season drew to a close.

The Scots had enjoyed a pretty dire couple of years, losing both games in the 1954 World Cup finals, including a 7-0 reverse against reigning champions Uruguay. A disastrous 7-2 defeat against England at Wembley in 1955 had concluded a depressing run of just four victories in 15 games. The humiliation against the Auld Enemy prompted a major overhaul, with 9 changes for the following match, which brought a 3-0 victory against Portugal. Collins was recalled for the next game against Yugoslavia in Belgrade on May 15.

David Saffer: “In a battling display the Scots twice came from behind to draw 2-2 and were somewhat unfortunate not to win when they were denied a last minute penalty. Four days later national pride was restored after a thumping 4-1 win in Vienna.



Bobby Collins goes close to a goal for Scotland

“Played four days after Austria had gained full independence, after concluding a peace state treaty with wartime occupying powers, the atmosphere was hostile throughout. Scotland controlled the match for long periods, scoring in the opening and closing minutes of the game. Clearly frustrated, and no doubt in mind of the historical importance, home players engaged in fist fights throughout the game, and twice hundreds of fans invaded the pitch. The only surprise was that only one Austrian player was sent off, Barschandt, for persistent fouls on Scotland captain Gordon Smith. Smith was escorted off the field at the end by police, as was the Scottish team coach when they left the ground.”

Alec Young of the Scottish Daily Mail: “This was a great Scottish victory. No team has been asked to do more and no team had made such a magnificent response as our lads did in this amazing ‘Battle of Prater Stadium’. In the midst of all the excitement of this clash it was a matter of light relief to see Bobby Collins, a lion heart terrier, repeatedly being pushed aside, yet repeatedly coming back again and even squaring up to six footers when as often happened football science was forsaken for the fistic arts.”

Collins retained his place for the final tour match, which the Scots lost 3-1 to Hungary. Nevertheless, it had been a splendid return for Collins, who declared: “It was wonderful to be back and part of a really successful tour, which gave us tremendous confidence for the battles ahead.”

1955-56 brought more disappointments in the League as Celtic trailed in fifth behind champions

Rangers. They reached the Scottish Cup final once more, but yet again Collins missed out on the big day, this time with a knee injury, as Celtic lost 3-1 to Hearts. Collins: "I could barely believe it when I was ruled out of a major final for the third year running. Losing was bad enough, sitting on the sidelines unable to help made it even more frustrating."

There was some compensation, though, with two Collins goals helping Celtic beat Rangers 5-3 in a Hampden replay to win the Glasgow Cup.

Collins sustained a broken leg in a League match against Dundee and missed three months of the 1956-57 season, though he scored a goal as Celtic beat Partick Thistle 3-0 to win the League Cup.

He continued to feature for the international team and was a key part of Scotland's plans for World Cup qualification. Their campaign started with a clash against Spain at Hampden on 8 May 1957.

The Spaniards had Alfredo Di Stefano in their ranks, but the Scots had the spirit and the goals of Jackie Mudie, whose hat trick was the telling factor in a 4-2 triumph. Scotland built on the good start by battling back from a goal down to win 2-1 in Switzerland. Collins' 72nd minute decider was his first international goal.



Bobby Collins jumps for joy after netting the winner against the Swiss in a World Cup qualifier in Basle in May 1957. It was his first international goal

Even better was to come as Bobby contributed a brace when Scotland beat world champions West Germany 3-1 in a friendly in their own back yard. Douglas Ritchie: "Scott and Ring sizzled the ball from wing to wing and the outside-left turned his final cross low in front of goal. Szymaniak slipped going to clear and Collins darted in to score. Collins struck again after 56 minutes. The wee Scot waltzed past a defender and sent in an atomic shot that almost ripped the roof of the net. The tiny knot of sore throated Scots in the vast crowd loved that one and even the Germans couldn't help cheering."

A 4-1 reverse in the return in Spain was a body blow, but the Scots were still in pole position and well set for a place in the finals. By beating the Swiss 3-2 at Hampden in November 1957, Scotland confirmed their place in the 1958 tournament in Sweden, and Bobby Collins was set to prove his worth on the biggest stage of all.

He set off for the finals after an outstanding season for Celtic, notching a career best 19 goals in 30 League games as the Celts finished third, a distant 16 points behind champions Hearts. The high point came with an amazing victory over Old Firm rivals Rangers in the Scottish League Cup final. Bobby sealed the place in the final with a man of the match performance against Clyde in the semis.

The final was to go down in Celtic folklore as the ultimate humbling of Rangers. Collins recalls the 7-1 thrashing:

"It was a dream of a game for us, but it must have been a nightmare for Johnny Valentine. Rangers

had signed the big centre-half from Queens Park at the start of the season but he simply hadn't clicked. On this day at Hampden, I don't know if Valentine had no faith in George Niven or Niven had no faith in Valentine, but ultimately they had no faith in themselves, something you can sense very quickly on a football field, and inevitably the game became a rout.

“Valentine was covering Billy McPhail and McColl and Davis were covering Valentine, which left three of our men with the freedom of Hampden. Rangers' defenders were standing on their heels when Sammy Wilson slammed home goal number one in 22 minutes. They were standing on their heads when Neilly Mochan rammed in number two just before half time. They say Rangers' mistakes in the first half were because of too much sun in their eyes, but the truth is there had been too much Celtic in their eyes!

“By the time we came out for the second half we had sensed that 'something' was on. We could scarcely put a foot wrong. The ball sped from toe to toe. Donnelly to Fernie, Fernie to Tully, Tully to me, over to Mochan and so on. Just to vary things, the ball often stopped at Willie Fernie. Willie kept the entertainment going. And every now and then we slotted in another goal.

“Billy McPhail took a joint gift from Niven and Valentine to make it three. A good flying header by Billy Simpson reduced our lead, but somehow it didn't seem to matter. We just carried on, playing our football and we scored another four.



Bobby Collins is third right in the front row with the Celtic team in 1957 which won the Scottish League Cup Back: Goldie, Fallon, Beattie, Mcphail, Fernie, Evans. Front: Johnstone (trainer), Tully, Collins, Peacock, Wilson, Mochan, Jimmy McGrory (manager)

“Twice I hit the bar with 30-yard free kicks. McPhail nodded in to make it 4-1. Neilly Mochan duffed a kick, yet still saw his shot enter the net. Billy McPhail stepped in to complete his hat trick, then with the last kick of the game, Willie Fernie got his own souvenir of the occasion. Shearer fouled McPhail ... penalty! Fernie took the kick. The ball landed low in the net. The time up whistle blew.

“It was the biggest ever victory to be chalked up in a competitive Old Firm game and as a special favour, the Celtic players were allowed to keep their jerseys as a souvenir of the great day.”

It was a truly memorable occasion for Celtic and Bobby Collins and the perfect springboard for his footballing summer.