**I KNEW THEM AS SCHOOLBOYS**

**By Malcolm Berry**

County secretary 1977-79. ESFA Council Member 1979 -90

Chief Executive ESFA 1990-2000. and member of the FA Council

The growth and strength of national schools football has always coincided with the regional popularity of the professional game. The North East is therefore almost unrivalled in the development of young players. Over the years the game has brought fame and fortune for many from our region, and Northumberland in particular. So where to begin?

Who should I pick out for special mention? What should be my criteria? Should I write in some detail about Paddy Lowery (Newcastle SFA) and Stephen Howie (Wallsend) or two outstanding Newcastle schoolboy goalkeepers in Derek Forster and Peter Ewart, noting that all four of them went on to play for England schoolboys in the 1960s?

Teaching at the Grammar School in Wallsend in the 1960s, I well remember Gordon Nisbett playing in goal for Northumberland, but in midfield for his school and district!. Gordon went on to a unique career with West Bromwich Albion, making his debut for the Baggies in goal, and then having a long run as their regular right full back.

In the early seventies, Denis Leman (Newcastle) and John Trewick (East North) come immediately to mind. Both had very successful seasons playing for England Schools and then onward to excellent professional careers with Manchester City and West Brom respectively. John, of course, came back to the North East to sign for Newcastle United for a fee which was at the time a club record £250,000. Both continue in the game today, Denis as an administrator at the PFA and John as a coach and manager at Hereford United.

I spent a lot of my time encouraging the development of representative football at the under 18 age group, encouraging players to remain in full time education beyond the age of 16 and gaining schoolboy honours before then going further in the game in a number of ways. Bob Graham (East North) and David Rayner, (Newcastle) both very good School International players for England went on to become model coaches and teachers. At more or less the same time, Gordon Hodgson, Paul Cannel and Eric Steele also made their mark as International players with England and then had good careers at Newcastle United. Eric of course has progressed to be a fully qualified goalkeeping coach and is still in the game at the highest level with Manchester United. He may not have used his A-Level in English along the way…but then again he might.

At this point I should recall the schoolboy days of Steve Bruce and Alan Shearer. Both Newcastle boys, and known throughout football today as two of the most famous sons of the North East football heritage. I well remember them gracing the field at Benfield Park, but in both cases they don’t quite tick all the boxes…neither was selected to play for England Schoolboys. Also as young players they were never considered good enough to become associated Schoolboys with any of the professional clubs in the North East. Steve was about to become an apprentice at Swan Hunters when he was invited to join Gillingham. Alan, likewise, was not troubled by local scouts before being whisked away to the south coast and the start of a great career ---at Southampton…the rest as they say is history! Steve arrived back in the North East via Norwich and Manchester United and several managerial posts. Alan eventually signed for his home- town club when the Magpies paid a now record fee of £15m. I still find it hard to remember them as anything other than excellent schoolboy players.

The Eighties was a particularly successful period for Northumberland Schoolboy players of note. It was a pleasure for me to work with Andrew Sinton (South North) and Neil MacDonald (Wallsend)…both of them very good players in the same England schoolboy team. Following Neil MacDonald into the Newcastle United side was Ian Bogie…yet another Walker lad. He gained five England Schoolboy caps and had the strength and determination to create a career for himself in professional football, which continues today as manager at Gateshead AFC as they strive to get back into The Football League.

Also from the Walker community was Lee Clark who in 1988 captained the England Schoolboy team and played in some of the earliest international matches against Brazil. He is one a very select handful of players ever to score a hat trick in a Schools International match. At the time of writing he is forging a very successful and promising career at Huddersfield Town as manager there.

There are so many other excellent Northumberland County players I could write about. …but forgive me for not going on as space is limited

I have however taken the difficult decision to write in more detail about a Northumberland boy who in my opinion does tick, and has ticked all the boxes for me. It gives me very great pleasure that the NSFA has invited him to be the Chief Guest at the Centenary dinner in the Civic Centre, Newcastle