



## **A Wonderful Day**

'Look! Look, Richard! Over there! I can hardly believe it. That's Doug Mackay, the great footballer – and the man who once risked his life to help us in Romania.'

With those words the visitor took his young son eagerly by the arm and hurried across the square in the direction of a man who was standing a little apart from the excited crowd gathering near the large wall, which was almost covered with graffiti.

It was December 1989 and the place was West Berlin. The Berlin Wall had a very special significance for Doug Mackay. Once, the year before, under its grim shadow he had dodged death by inches in a dramatic escape from the communist zone.

'Mikhail! Is it really you? How wonderful to see you again after all those years –

and on such a day as this.' Doug beamed as he grasped the man's hand in both of his, before his Scottish reserve succumbed to a Romanian bear hug.

'Richard,' said Mikhail, turning to his son, 'this is the one I've told you so much about. Long ago, before you were even born, he came to our poor unhappy country to entertain us with his soccer skills. But he also brought something else – the Bible, God's Word. What risks he took for us...'

Mikhail broke off in mid-sentence as a loud cheer went up from the crowd.

'The Wall! The Wall – it's coming down,' shouted a young woman.

'Down with the stones of slavery,' yelled an elderly man.

The bulldozers and cranes from the communist zone moved sections of the huge stone barrier, revealing ecstatic crowds of East Berliners who poured through the gaps in the wall to embrace friends and loved ones from the West. The air was filled with emotion and the many cries of joy blended into a prolonged cheer of victory.

Doug Mackay smiled and there were tears of joy in his eyes as he saw this, the most hated symbol of communist oppression, being dismantled.

What a wonderful day!

One after another, the countries of Eastern Europe were overthrowing the oppressive regimes which had closed them off, like an iron curtain, from the rest of the world.

Doug had prayed for such a day as this to dawn. Yet, as he stood there, it was like a dream – almost too wonderful to be true.

As the cheering of the people grew louder, it reminded Doug of that day when, in a sense, it all began. The day he made his debut for Dalkirk Albion in a Scottish Premier Division match at their home ground of Brickwell Stadium in Dalkirk—the little town which had stood for centuries at the crossroads of Scottish history.

The memories flooded back through the years. It had all been so strange. He had been only eighteen years old and a student at Stirling University, when he had been approached by the Dalkirk Manager, Jim Murray, to sign as an amateur for the Club. Doug had liked football for as long as he could remember. It was a family trait inherited from his father, Rev Alec Mackay, a Church of Scotland minister, whose calling had brought him from the rugged beauty of the Highlands to the demands of a large parish in the Central Belt. Doug had

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missed the friendships and adventures of his childhood home, but he had gradually settled in the Lowlands, making new friends and enjoying the increased opportunities to play football. It had been a dream come true when he was asked to sign up for Dalkirk.

The atmosphere of a big game is something special, even for the young spectator, but Doug could not have imagined what it would be like to actually take the field against one of the biggest sides in the land – Dalriada of Glasgow, a team with a European reputation. Doug had been chosen as a substitute for that particular match and realised that he could expect to get no more than a short run near the end of the game as one of the regular players tired under the pressure of such a demanding game.

That afternoon flashed through Doug's mind as he recollected the highlights. Brickwell Stadium was packed to its 20,000 capacity and at least half the crowd were Dalriada supporters. The splash of colour on the terracing and the roar of the fans that never quite died away throughout the game were unforgettable. The pre-match tension in the dressing room, the smell of the wintergreen – these things lived in a young lad's memory.

Doug seemed borne along on a wave of unreality as he watched the match from the dugout. The pace was frantic and the tackling hard, typical of Scottish football. Doug became so wrapped up in it all that he forgot that he was a substitute and not a supporter. His share in this nerve-tingling drama did not end at the terracing wall: he could go all the way to the pitch itself.

In fact he did go all the way that afternoon and sooner than he expected. The first half was only on for twenty minutes when Rob Malloy, Albion's midfield player, made a do-or-die tackle on Jim Bremner, Dalriada's classy striker. It wasn't a dirty tackle, but Bremner was clearly impeded in the penalty box and the referee had no choice but to point to the spot. Before the Glasgow club could take the kick, however, Malloy needed treatment from Hector Nicol, Albion's trainer. The midfield man had pulled a leg muscle in making his tackle and it was quickly apparent he would not be able to take any further part in the proceedings.

'Right, son, get your tracksuit off and take Rob's place in the midfield.' It was Jim Murray and he was talking to Doug. The youngster could hardly believe it. Indeed, he was about to protest that it wasn't yet halftime, but the look on the

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manager's face suggested this was no time for arguing. Stripping off his tracksuit, the lad hastened on to the pitch, stopping by the linesman only long enough to have his studs checked.

The referee noted the newcomer's name, before striding purposefully towards the penalty spot. At the blast of the ref's whistle, Jim Bremner stepped up and dispatched the penalty expertly into the net. The visitors were one up. During the remainder of the first half Doug battled to get into the game, but the pace was incredible. No wonder part-time players found it tough going into the Premier Division. At last, with halftime approaching, the teenage received a pass in space on the left side of the field, deep in his own half. He set off on a run and Dave Ferguson, Dalriada's international midfield player came quickly to close him down. Employing a trick he'd used a lot in school football, Doug feinted left, then quickly moved right, carrying the ball infield. The ploy worked and Ferguson was left floundering, to the delight of the home fans.

Unfortunately for Doug, Dalriada had more internationals on the field that day and one of them had moved quickly to block his path. The lad shimmied to avoid

the challenge, but the ball was touched away from him into the path of none other than Jim Bremner, who seemed to be everywhere. The big fellow wheeled round and sent a high ball into the penalty area where the Dalkirk defenders were caught in two minds. In dashed Charlie Simmons, the Glasgow Club's winger to score a brilliant goal.

There was no time to restart the game before the halftime whistle sounded and the teams left the field. Doug couldn't help noticing the contrasting moods at the two ends of the ground. The Dalriada fans were singing with delight, whereas the Dalkirk supporters were silent and glum.

'You're not playing badly,' said the manager, Jim Murray, as he closed the dressing room door, 'but you lack the confidence to have a go at them. Don't be afraid of them. You're good enough.' He was addressing the players generally and Doug could see how his inspiring words were serving to lift the morale of the whole team. The pep talk over, Albion got ready to go out for the second half. Doug was last to finish his drink and the other players were already disappearing up the tunnel to the pitch. Instantly, there flashed into his mind words his father had often repeated: 'What a man is on his knees before God, that he is and no more'.

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Bowing his head, he prayed quietly, 'God, help me to do my best and play my part.' It was a short and simple prayer, but Doug had no doubt he would be heard, for he had grown up in a home where prayers were answered and he had seen it happen many times in the past. Furthermore, he wasn't asking to win, or seeking an unfair advantage. Rather he was praying against those hostile forces of fear, nervousness and intimidation that can hinder us from doing our best.

As he emerged from the tunnel on to the pitch, Doug's glance met that of Jim Murray. 'Have a go, son. You're doing fine,' he said. These words, in themselves, seemed like a bit of an answer to Doug's prayer, for he had felt at fault over the loss of the second goal. If the youngster had hoped the second half might be played at a less hectic pace he was in for a surprise. Time and again he was caught in possession, or found his pass to a colleague cut off. But Jim Murray was a shrewd manager and he had known what he was doing in signing Doug Mackay, for as the game progressed, the youngster's reflexes quickened and he gained that extra fraction of speed. Soon his weaving dribbles and cross-field passes were putting the Dalriada defence under pressure.



One move down the Dalkirk right wing ended with the visiting goalkeeper tipping a shot from striker Bill Dawson over the bar. The resultant corner was not cleared properly and the ball bobbed around the six-yard line. Quick as a flash Doug pounced and thumped it into the net. The game was wide open once again and the play flowed from end to end, with first Dalriada then Albion having the advantage then, just when it looked as if Dalkirk were in for another honourable, but costly, defeat, Doug robbed Dave Ferguson in the centre circle and set off towards the visitors' goal. A quick one-two with Bill Dawson took him past two defenders and he was within yards of the penalty box. Feigning a pass to the left, he twisted in the opposite direction and sped past Johnston, the powerfully built central defender. Suddenly, the goal was looming up invitingly, but just as Doug drew back his right foot to shoot he felt a sharp pain in his left leg and he was sent crashing to the ground.

There was no doubt about it, a penalty for Dalkirk. As Doug rubbed his bruised leg, Wallace Thain, Albion's sweeper and captain, stepped up to take the all-important kick. He sent the keeper one way and the ball the other way, to tie the score and give Dalkirk a share of the



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points. Doug couldn't help noticing that it was Albion's fans who were dancing with delight and the Dalriada end of the ground that had gone quiet.

The whistle blew shortly afterwards and the players made for the dressing room and a welcome bath. Doug suddenly realised that he was extremely tired. He prided himself on his fitness, but this level of football was far tougher than even he had expected.

'That was tremendous, lads,' enthused Jim Murray. 'A few more results like that and we could make it into Europe next season.'

Europe – the word rang like a bell in Doug's mind. If the team could finish in the top five of the league they would earn a place in the UEFA (Union of European Football Associations) Cup competition for the following season, with the possibility of trips all over the Continent. Dalkirk had never qualified for Europe before. What an experience that would be.

Just how great an experience it was to be, Doug Mackay could not have imagined at that moment.