

McCracken, William Robert ('Bill'; 'Offside')

by Jim Shanahan

McCracken, William Robert ('Bill'; 'Offside') (1883–1979), soccer player and manager, was born 29 January 1883 in Thames St., Belfast, son of William McCracken, tenter, and Eliza McCracken (née McDowell) of Thames St. He joined the Belfast club Distillery as a part-time player while employed as an apprentice in the building trade, and played in IFA Cup finals in 1902 and 1903, winning the latter 3–1 against Dublin club Bohemians. Usually a right full-back, he was a Distillery player when he made his international debut (one of three caps he won in the left-back position) in a 3–0 victory for Ireland against Wales in Cardiff (22 February 1902). He won six caps with the club and attracted the attention of Celtic, Rangers, and Everton before being signed by the English first-division side Newcastle United for a fee of £50 (May 1904). The transfer was the subject of an English FA investigation, with allegations both of secret payments and of his being illegally approached by Newcastle player Colin Veitch after an international against England. It was by no means the last controversy that would surround him.

He went on to become one of United's most famous and longest-serving players, making 377 league appearances for the club (443 in total) over nineteen years, winning three league championships and one FA Cup medal, and having two spells as captain of the side, until his retirement in 1923. He made his debut for the club in the first game of the 1904/5 season, a 3–0 home win against Arsenal (3 September 1904), and Newcastle went on to dominate the English game for the next ten years. The club played a short-passing brand of football that was heavily influenced by the Scottish game, and regularly fielded six Scotsmen in the team. In his first season they won the League Championship, although a bad injury in October 1904 meant that McCracken was restricted to thirteen games and missed their FA Cup final defeat to Aston Villa. The following year he played twenty league games as the club finished fourth and he missed another cup final defeat, a 1–0 reversal to Everton. League Championship medals followed in 1906/7 and 1908/9, and McCracken finally played in a cup final, losing the 1908 decider 3–1 to Wolves. His second FA Cup final was to be luckier, as Newcastle won 2–0 against Barnsley in 1910 after a replay. They went on to contest another final the following year, losing 1–0 to Bradford City, again after a replay. His career was interrupted by the first world war, but he played on until the 1922/3 season, when, with full-back partner Billy Hampson, who was also 40, he was part of what is probably the oldest full-back partnership ever seen in top-class soccer. His last match for Newcastle was a 5–0 defeat away against Cardiff City (10 February 1923).

He joined second-division Hull City as manager shortly after, and the highlight of his reign there was guiding them to an FA Cup semi-final in 1930. Working with limited resources he fashioned a useful side that challenged for promotion in 1926/7 but

eventually were relegated to the old third division (north) in 1929/30. He resigned (May 1931) and moved to Gateshead as manager, and subsequently to Millwall (May 1933). In February 1937 he became manager of struggling Aldershot and remained there during the war years, when Aldershot's status as a major garrison town ensured that he had the cream of Britain's footballers under his control. He was dismissed as manager in November 1949 and subsequently became a talent scout, spending some years with Newcastle in that capacity during the 1950s. It was while scouting for Watford in the 1960s that he discovered future Northern Ireland legend Pat Jennings and persuaded him to sign for the club. He continued to scout enthusiastically into his nineties and was presented with a medal by the FA for long service to the game in 1978.

At international level he played a mere fifteen times for Ireland, as a result of a ten-year dispute with the IFA over international match fees. Always something of a rebel, he refused to play for Ireland in the 1907/8 season when he discovered that English players were getting £10 for each game while Irish players received only £2. 2s. The IFA retaliated by suspending him from international football until he pleaded by letter for his suspension to be lifted during the war. By 1919 he was back in the fold and played a further five times for Ireland, his last appearance being against Scotland in 1923, when he captained the side at the age of 40. His stand had ensured that he missed out on international football when he was at his peak, and on Ireland's 'home' championship victory in 1914.

An enthusiastic and extremely quick full-back, who had tremendous powers of recovery and anticipation and could kick with either foot, he was also an expert penalty taker and an excellent motivator. Although his ability and achievements as a player would be enough in themselves to ensure his status as one of Ireland's finest footballers, he is best remembered as the man who, virtually single-handedly, forced a change in soccer's offside law. The number of players needed to play a forward onside was reduced from three to two in 1925. Although he was no longer playing at that stage, he had helped to set in train a style of play that had ensured that soccer had become almost unwatchable and unplayable. Known as 'Offside' McCracken, he had a speed and anticipation that helped him to develop a style of defending that meant that, by stepping up at the right time, he would invariably catch an opposing forward offside. In an era when amateur 'Corinthian' values were still felt to apply in football, his tactics were widely perceived as unsporting, although he always maintained that he was not doing anything that was not allowed by the rules of the game. The result was that he could, almost by himself, disrupt the flow of a game, and matches in which he played usually degenerated into stop-start affairs. Disliked intensely by opposing spectators, he frequently had fruit, coins, and other missiles thrown at him; he once had the shirt torn off his back by Chelsea supporters. As more teams adopted his tactic, the goals per game average fell from 3.00 per game to just 2.21 by season 1923/4, forcing the FA into action.

A gregarious and outgoing personality, who was tall and handsome in appearance, McCracken enjoyed the furore that surrounded him and often baited opposing players and supporters. His combative nature was a consistent feature of his character: once, after being sent off, he sent a referee a four-page letter explaining why his decision had been wrong, and received a four-week suspension instead of the usual seven days. He died 21 January 1979 in Hull, just short of his ninety-sixth birthday.

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