



## STILL WORKING AT 88-YEARS-OLD - BILL PUNTON



An email to Norwich City led to us finally catching up with Bill Punton to invite him to join SUEPA.

Born in Ormiston, Scotland, on 9<sup>th</sup> May 1934, at the age of 15 Bill was spotted playing locally by the manager of Portadown who was in Scotland on holiday and who ended up taking the young winger back to Northern Ireland. It didn't start well. Pushed straight away into the first team on a muddy pitch, it was 0-0 with time running out when Bill passed back to the keeper, the ball got stuck in the mire, and the opposition centre forward nipped in to score. The crowd reacted badly, and afterwards young Bill wanted nothing else but to go back home.

The Portadown chairman and others however persuaded him otherwise, Bill spent a couple of matches in the reserves, scored a hat-trick, and soon found himself back in the first team. This time it went much better, prior to the match the usual opposition centre-half had been dropped and went to the pub to drown his sorrows but then had to be recalled from the watering hole as a last-minute injury meant that the team were a man short. Bill ran rings round him (*"he was clearly drunk!"*) and had a great game. Confidence boosted, Bill went on to score 28 goals that season and soon his performances were attracting interest from several big clubs. *"The Celtic manager wanted to sign me but then found out that I was a Protestant so that put an end to that, Arsenal were interested and said that they would be up to sign me the next day, but Newcastle were already there with an offer plus a bag of cash as an inducement so off I went to St James' Park".*

*"When I signed for Newcastle they already had five other left-sided wingers, but I gradually eased my way into the team playing alongside the likes of Bob Stokoe, Jimmy Scoular and Jackie Milburn. In one match I recall beating Sunderland 6-2 which was just fantastic and playing in front of crowds of 70,000 was a sight to behold."*

Bill's appearances, though, for the Geordies were restricted to just 23 (one goal) in four years, so at the start of the 1957/58 season he found himself on the way to the delights of Southend as part of an exchange deal which saw John McGuigan going in the opposite direction. *"I also had offers from Swansea and Cardiff, but another 'bonus' payment tipped the balance and it was off to Roots Hall."* The 1957/58 season was a decent one for the Shrimpers with an eighth-place finish

in the then newly created non-regionalised Third Division. Bill scored on his home debut and ended the season with six goals from 40 appearances, feeding the prolific Roy Hollis and Sam McCrory as we plundered 85 goals in the league (we won't dwell on the cup defeat to Yeovil).

Bill recalled with fondness the names of many of his former Southend teammates, most of whom have sadly since passed away, though he was pleased to learn that we were in touch with Alan Dicks who he recollected had been signed from Chelsea together with Les Stubbs. *"The training was a bit archaic, and it was a shock compared to what I had been used to at Newcastle both in terms of techniques and facilities. Wilf Dixon, an ex-army sergeant in the war, was the trainer and his favourite was 'progressive laps' where we ran one side of the pitch and walked the rest, then ran two sides, and so on. Another was 'bunny hops' over benches holding concrete blocks as we jumped, all pretty basic stuff."*

Bill remembered one match when high-flying Doncaster Rovers were the visitors, a team which included Charlie Williams who went on to make his name as a comedian. *"I had been out the night before with a couple of the lads and we didn't get home to our digs until 4.00 am, something which was somehow reported to manager Eddie Perry. Eddie's reaction was to place a £1 bet with us (a decent sum back then) that we wouldn't score against Doncaster – we duly won 5-0! Later in life when I was manager of Great Yarmouth, Charlie Williams used to come and sit with me on the bench on match days when he was appearing in shows at Great Yarmouth."*

*"During that season the Norwich City manager Archie Macaulay made an approach to sign Errol Crossan and myself after being impressed by us in our win at Roots Hall (Errol scored the only goal) – Eddie let Errol go but not me. However, when back home in Scotland at the end of the season Archie travelled up to see me and I decided to sign for Norwich where I then stayed for eight years."* Bill made 214 league appearances for the Canaries scoring 24 goals and has been inducted into their Hall of Fame. He won a League Cup winner's medal with them in 1962, scoring in the 4-0 aggregate win v Rochdale, and ended his full-time playing career with brief stints at Sheffield United and Scunthorpe.

*"I was living in Norfolk whilst playing for Scunthorpe and they wanted me to move up, but I got an offer from Great Yarmouth Town which included a job locally as a Highways Inspector so I took that, a career that then stood me well for 30 years."* Bill became the Great Yarmouth manager, a position he held for an incredible 20 years (former Shrimper and SUEPA member Graham Franklin was a player during Bill's time there), before moving to Diss Town for a further seven years which included a memorable win at Wembley in the FA Vase.

Bill, even at the age of 88, is still involved in the game today as alongside former Shrimper Peter Silvester he acts as match day guest at Carrow Road.

Andy Leeder, August 2022