**THE STORY OF JACKIE MAXWELL: THE SELFLESS NORTHERN IRISHMAN WHOSE WORK IN FOOTBALL INFLUENCED THE LIVES OF AN ENTIRE COMMUNITY**

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“If you stick a pin in your finger and black and white blood doesn’t come out; don’t come back.” For members of St Oliver Plunkett Football Club, those words mean everything. They were uttered by the man who devoted his life to their team. The same man who, despite suffering unimaginable tragedy, helped forge one of the premier youth sides in Northern Ireland.

December 11, 1970, is when Jackie Maxwell’s life changed forever. His two young sons, Seán and Gerard, were sent to do the paper round. Moments later they were knocked down. Both children, aged 10 and 13, were killed.

Until that day, Jackie had been a talented footballer, taking in spells with Derry City, Larne and Chimney Corner. The death of his two young sons, however, sent him into understandable despair. Overcome with grief, he fell into a biting depression. “I was struggling,” he told the journalist Maxie Swain in an interview for Match of the Day. “I wasn’t at work because I’m sure you can understand the way you are after something like that.”

Maxwell felt hopeless. That was before his wife Kathleen made the call that would save her husband’s life. “After a while, my mum could see how leaving the club was much worse for his mental health,” says Tony Maxwell, Jackie’s son, for These Football Times. “She approached Tommy Johnson, a friend who was involved at Plunkett at the time, and asked him to try to get my dad back into the game.”

Plunkett had been a youth club originally, set up by local nuns with the help of funding from the Belfast Education and Library Board. The football team was a natural offshoot, with the first playing squads organised by Dominic McEnhill, Paddy Johnson and Danny Collins in 1969.

At his wife’s insistence, Maxwell threw himself into club life, becoming an integral part of the management team whilst maintaining a playing career that would continue until he was 54 years old.

His affiliation with Plunkett, however, became an obsession when the Education and Library Board withdrew the team’s funding in 1981. With no facilities or finances, Jackie took it upon himself to manage the organisation in its entirety. “He kept the club going from our house in Ladybrook, with zero financial backing from anyone or anything,” Tony recalls.

The Maxwell household became the unofficial Plunkett headquarters. Club meetings were held in the living room, while the garage was used as an impromptu changing facility. The family car was commandeered, used to ferry players to and from training and matchdays. Even holidays to Ballycastle were timed to coincide with the team’s plans to participate in the Milk Cup on Antrim’s North Coast.

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“The sacrifices made to his personal and family life were monumental, beyond anyone’s imagination,” says Eoghan McGonigle about his grandfather’s efforts. He had all the problems family life could throw at you, but his front door remained open. Yes, he was running a small football club but it wasn’t just about football. It was about much more than that; it was discipline, it was character-building, it was respect. It was allowing kids and young adults to escape from their own problems. That’s what spurred him on.”

“He wasn’t just a coach,” Tony agrees. “He was also a counsellor to a lot of the kids. Often, parents would phone asking for my dad to come up and have a word with their son if they were misbehaving. One of the main reasons the club kept growing over the years is that he wasn’t just there for the winning, but to get as many kids playing and enjoying football and developing their skills as possible.”

Jackie’s devotion to the club was legendary, bordering on comical. Anecdotes were shared jealously amongst Plunkett fans and players. Like the time he was ferrying the squad to a match in his Volvo Estate, only for the bonnet to detach whilst driving on the motorway. Rather than having a mechanic call out to fix the vehicle, Jackie ran after the offending bonnet before tying it to his car with a rope and continuing on to the game.

His caustic wit was famous – and feared – amongst the team’s players. “We went to watch the Northern Ireland under-15s at Blanchflower Stadium one night,” Eoghan recalls. “He was doing a bit of scouting for Ipswich at the time, so he headed into the small stand at the side of the pitch where there were a handful of other scouts and coaches.

“I’m a big Liverpool fan, and there he is standing with a scout in a Liverpool jacket. He introduced me and then the scout asked me, “Well, do you play a bit and are you any good? Before I could open my mouth, my granda had answered him. ‘Our Eoghan,’ he shouts ‘has two tricks – getting the ball and losing it’.”

Jackie’s humour was underpinned, however, by a desire to ensure that young people in his community had a meaningful distraction from the travails of their lives. This became even more important when the country’s political situation deteriorated from the 1970s onwards.

“Throughout the Troubles, I think we lived in our own wee bubble within the club,” Tony recalls. For me, if not all of the other lads, it was all about football. It was sometimes unavoidable going into some areas to play games, where we had to get police escorts to get back out,” he continues. “But my Dad always made us be respectable, no matter where we had to go or who we had to play against. He had no tolerance for sectarianism or bigotry and the reputation of the club was always at the forefront.”

All of Jackie’s efforts would have been for nothing, however, without the boundless strength of his wife Kathleen. “For years she washed and dried the players’ kits, and when there was a big match, she would have put all of us out of the house so the players could come round to eat,” Jackie’s daughter Jacqueline admits.

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“Our Granny’s the forgotten hero in all of this,” Eoghan agrees. “Without her none of this would have happened. He often admitted how she pushed him to go out and give his time to the club. She too was experiencing the hardships of life; she too experienced the loss of their two young sons. Granda Maxwell was undoubtedly a strong character but Granny Maxwell, you could say, was probably a stronger one. She was the only person I ever seen him answer to.”

“For my own team, it was not unusual to go back to Jackie’s and Kathleen would have 16 burgers and 16 glasses of juice ready – one for every member of the squad,” recalls Neil McKee, Plunkett’s current club secretary.

“I couldn’t have asked for better, more loving parents,” remembers Tony. “Even at Christmas, which was around the anniversary of my two brothers’ deaths, they made it such a special occasion for the rest of our family. Looking back I don’t know how the two of them did it. It was very obvious the pain, hurt and loss was still there and would never go away, but they still made it special.”

Jackie might have worked harder and longer than most, but it wasn’t to make up for any lack of ability. He was also an exceptional coach, moulding some of the finest Northern Irish talent in a generation. Paul McVeigh and Philip Mulryne, who would go on to star for Tottenham and Manchester United, all developed under his expert tutelage.

Maxwell’s biggest success, however, was undoubtedly the Northern Ireland and Ipswich Town legend Jim Magilton. “I knew how proud he was,” Magilton says of the moment he left the club to sign youth terms with Liverpool in 1988. “The biggest compliment I could pay Jackie was that the information I received on a daily basis from the coaches at Liverpool, I had been getting from him for years. He had an enormous influence on my life but more importantly, he had a positive influence on the lives of so many.”

“Playing under him gave us the belief that we could beat anyone anywhere, with his energy and enthusiasm being passed on to all the players,” says Tony, who became a regular starter in his father’s team. “He was brilliant at seeing the potential in kids at a young age. He would point someone out and say, “Keep an eye on that kid, he’s going to be some player … and it always turned out that he would be right.”

“I think what made him such a good coach was how emotionally attached he was to his players and making sure he kept them on the straight and narrow,” Jackie’s granddaughter Leah suggests. “He always tried his best to keep his players off the streets and out of trouble. It wasn’t all about the football with him, and that’s where he has personally influenced me most. His attitude and actions towards the kids of the community have inspired me to continue to do what he was trying to do.”

McKee agrees with that sentiment: “It’s pertinent to stress that Jackie was not just about developing footballers – that did happen but he focused on the many not the few. He stressed to me very often that he would take a lad who couldn’t kick a ball but loved the club over a talented footballer.”

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Plenty of talented footballers passed through the Plunkett squad, all of them made better by Jackie’s obsession with improving their technical ability. Small-sided games and an emphasis on one and two-touch passing were hallmarks of his intensive, enthusiastic training sessions. “He made playing football fun,” Magilton agrees. “I loved waking up on Saturday mornings knowing I was going to play. I couldn’t wait for it.

“That was one of his special gifts and why he was such a charismatic individual,” he continues. He knew everything about you, your family, what school you went to.”

Jackie’s relentless quest for improvement didn’t stop at his players, either. “Even as hard as he may have been on me at times, I wouldn’t change any of it for the world,” says Eoghan, now a successful gym manager and personal trainer. “It’s helped me so much throughout my life. Now as an adult I see why he was firm with me, he knew what I needed and he knew how to motivate me. I’ve done and achieved things in my life based on thinking to myself, ‘What would Granda be saying to me right now?”

Fiona, Jackie’s granddaughter, might have grown up in the 1990s but she had a keen sense of her grandfather’s standing in the local community. “As soon as someone heard my surname, the first question I would get was ‘Are you any relation to Jackie?’” she confided. “From my friends in primary school to my teachers at secondary school, everyone seemed to know my Granda. Even as a teenager living some 40 miles away in Drumaness, people still knew.”

When asked about how Maxwell is remembered in Lenadoon, the estate where Plunkett is based, McKee is unequivocal. “In the greatest of esteem,” he says. “Whether people are involved with the club or not, they are all aware of the service he delivered for our community. It saved lives, created career paths and opportunities that would not have existed. He turned many boys away from crime to make positive contributions to our local community and wider society.”

“On the night he died, the hospital was packed,” remembers Shauna, another of Jackie’s granddaughters. “I watched big men crying and laughing with him, because even then he helped everyone through it. He was a daddy, Granda and uncle figure to each and every one of them. I overheard people saying that he’d helped them through rough patches in their lives. Some of them even said they’d have been ‘in a box’ if it weren’t for him.”

“He was that guidance that they lacked,” suggests Niamh, another family member. “He stepped in and took a lot of people under his wing and I respect him so much for it.”

When Jackie died, an entire community came out to pay their respects. Leah remembers the day vividly: “We opened the door of the house and stepped outside to see thousands of people as far as the eye could see,” she says. “From tiny children to men and women of all ages, standing for a guard of honour that stretched for miles. It was then I realised the magnitude of just how many lives my grandfather had influenced.

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“He just got up every day and battled on,” says Nicky, Jackie’s grandson-in-law. “The man had great drive, regardless of the tragedies he had faced in life. A couple of months before he passed, we were visiting him. He was just back from hospital, but he had a spring in his step as he said. ‘That’s me in the departure lounge now, kid’, whilst grinning from ear to ear. I will never forget him.”

“I’ve no ill feeling about the world and the club really saved my life after the boys. ”Jackie told the BBC in an interview shortly before his death. “It kept me sane.”

In 1995, the club decided to honour the man that had done so much to keep it alive. A secret committee, led by coaches and administrators, organised a This is Your Life event in Belfast’s Balmoral hotel, hosted by former Northern Ireland and Wolves player Derek Dougan. Three hundred people, some venturing from as far as Scotland and Canada, gathered to honour Jackie’s life and work.

Everything that Plunkett might have given Maxwell, he returned in spades. An award for BBC Northern Ireland’s ‘Unsung Hero’ in 2006 was just recognition of a legacy that, at the time of writing, sees Plunkett field over 40 teams of boys and girls. Last year, the club was even presented with a UEFA Grassroots Award, bringing international acclaim to a club he had sustained from Ladybrook living room decades earlier.

“We’re a club that caters for girls and boys, from four years of age right through to senior level,” Plunkett coach Brendan Mervyn told UEFA.com in 2017. “No matter where they’re from or what their ability is, we try to give them game time and football on the pitch.”

“The coaches, they all teach you loads of lessons that you’ll carry throughout your life,” said Emel Melville, one of Plunkett’s players, during the same interview. “Respect for your coaches, your teammates, and they’ve also taught me how to work as a unit.”

“Make no mistake, the award is just the outworkings of the foundations laid by Jackie,” McKee states. “He instilled values, memories, pride and standards into a generation. At every stage of the club’s evolution, we have always planned meticulously to ensure we carry on the values and foundations Jackie held dear so the club can continue to provide the irreplaceable service it does to our community.”

Every day, Jackie Maxwell woke up to pain and suffering. Every day, he fought against it. Every day, in doing so, he made his community and his club just that little bit better. That both of them are in such rude health is a fitting testament, not just to his life but to the value of never giving up.







