

Ron Saunders – A Toffee and a Hornet

by Rob Sawyer –
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Ron Saunders' life in football, best known for managerial feats at Aston Villa but also as a player for Everton and Watford, is a lesson in the value of perseverance.

Saunders was born in Birkenhead on 6 November 1932 and attended Park High School. He was a natural sportsman, playing rugby, cricket and football (representing Birkenhead Schoolboys). He turned down Tranmere Rovers to follow his uncle, George Saunders, to Everton – joining as an amateur in 1949. He would travel to training and matches on the Mersey ferry with Jimmy Harris.

Although not particularly tall, Saunders was described in the *Echo* as: 'a strong built lad with a good shot in either foot and a nice turn of speed.' After scoring regularly for the reserves he was elevated to the first team in place of the suspended Dave Hickson at Ninian Park on 12 February 1955. Although Cardiff defeated Everton 4-3, the *Echo* noted: 'Saunders, in my opinion, had a grand game and almost scored when he hit a fast, rising shot which Howells caught under his bar.'

Two further senior outings followed in that season: a 1-0 victory over Spurs at Goodison and a heavy away defeat to Newcastle United.

With little chance of dislodging Jimmy Harris at centre-forward, Saunders moved to non-League Tonbridge in 1956 before ex-Toffee, Archie Clarke, took him to another Kentish club, Gillingham. Six

● Ron Saunders (third from the right, bottom row)



● Ron Saunders leading Aston Villa out against Everton before the 1977 League Cup final

productive years (145 goals in 236 League appearances) followed at Portsmouth before Bill McGarry took the prolific forward to Vicarage Road in 1964; he scored twice on his debut and ended the season with an impressive 18 goals in 39 league outings. Having never fully settled in Hertfordshire, Saunders moved on to Charlton Athletic in 1965 before embarking on the managerial ladder at Yeovil Town in 1967.

His journey took him to Oxford and then on to Norwich City, who he got promoted to the top-flight and reached the League Cup final. A short, unhappy, spell at Manchester City (which did include another League Cup final) preceded his arrival at Villa Park in 1974. He would get the Villains promoted from the Second Division at the first attempt and won the 1975 League Cup – a feat repeated in the thrice-played 1977 final against Everton. Saunders' crowning achievement was winning the League Championship in 1980-81 but he would walk away from Villa just four months before the European Cup was won. He rounded-off his managerial career with Birmingham City and West Bromwich Albion but, like our own Harry Catterick, Saunders is sometimes unfairly overlooked when the great managers are discussed.

