

BENJAMIN HOWARD-BAKER: GOALKEEPER, OLYMPIAN, CORINTHIAN

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(EFC HERITAGE SOCIETY)



A focus on Everton's first England No.1...

Jordan Pickford became only the fourth Everton goalkeeper to represent England at senior level last month. He was preceded by Goodison greats Gordon West and Ted Sagar, but before them came the remarkable Benjamin Howard-Baker. If Brian Labone was 'The Last of the Great Corinthians', then Benjamin Howard-Baker blazed the trail for him.

Benjamin was born on 13 February 1892 at 4 Worcester Drive in Anfield. He was christened at the nearby St Margaret's Church and grew up on Melbourne Avenue, West Derby. He followed his father, Benjamin Senior, into the family's drysalter business (drugs and chemicals supply).

Tall and athletic, he specialised in the high-jump discipline for Liverpool Harriers – he could also turn his hand to hurdles, javelin, pole vault and discuss. He held the British high jump record on three separate occasions – his 1921 record of 1.96m standing for 28 years.

The Daily Telegraph lauded him as 'The Liverpool jumper with the figure of Apollo'. He was selected to compete for his country at the 1912 and 1920 Olympic Games in Stockholm and Antwerp respectively. He came 11th in the high jump in 1912; eight years later, he finished sixth in the high jump and eighth in the triple jump.



Benjamin Howard-Baker in his GB vest at the 1920 Olympics

At football, as a centre-half, he represented Lancashire and had trials for England amateurs in that position. He played for Marlborough Old Boys and Liverpool Balmoral before being on the books, as an amateur, of Blackburn Rovers. He would not make any first-team appearances for the Ewood Park outfit before war intervened.

An ankle injury sustained on military duty forced him to switch to goalkeeping and it was in this position that he played for Preston North End and Liverpool at reserve-team level. At Anfield his route to the first team was barred by the great Elisha Scott but after impressing for the Reds in a reserve derby fixture, Benjamin was signed by Everton in November 1920.

He made his first-team debut the following February in a 1-0 win against Chelsea at Stamford Bridge. *The Liverpool Daily Post & Mercury* reported of the debutant: 'Let it at once be said that the well-known amateur made a highly successful first appearance.' In his second game, a 2-0 defeat to Tottenham, it was noted that: '...he was heartily cheered for several brilliant saves.'



(Second left) with his Corinthian FC teammates

Throughout his time with professional clubs, Benjamin had a parallel goalkeeping career with amateur institutions, firstly with Northern Nomads and, subsequently, with the famous London-based outfit, Corinthian FC (better known as Corinthians).

His form for Everton and Corinthians earned an England selection on 21 May 1921. He kept a clean sheet in a 2-0 victory over Belgium at Stade Oscar Bossaert. His second – and final – England appearance came four years later but he would also make 10 appearances for the England amateur team. By then he had swapped Merseyside for West London. It came as a shock when Benjamin left Everton for Chelsea in October 1921. The reasons for the move are unclear but were most likely linked to his family's business interests in the capital.

With his propensity for producing spectacular saves and juggling the ball, basketball-style, he became a firm favourite for Chelsea. Predating the modern "sweeper keeper" by over 80 years, Benjamin drew on his pre-war outfield experience by frequently charging out of his area to clear the ball – he was reputed to have the longest kick in the land. Benjamin even scored from the penalty spot against Bradford City in his sixth Chelsea appearance, but was dropped from spot-kick duties after a miss against Arsenal later in the season.

Five years after his move south, the charismatic custodian made an unexpected return to Goodison. An injury crisis on the eve of the 1926/27 season left Everton bereft of fit goalkeepers.



Benjamin offered his services and his release from Chelsea was promptly arranged.

The 34-year-old generally acquitted himself well but the team, shorn of Dixie Dean after his serious motorbike crash, struggled. After five straight defeats at the start of the season Benjamin became the first goalkeeper to captain Everton, leading his side to a goalless draw against West Bromwich Albion.

A rare highlight in a troubled campaign was a 1-0 Merseyside derby victory. *The Liverpool Post & Mercury* observed: 'Baker did his work well in the Everton goal. He was several times under severe pressure, but he was confident all through.'

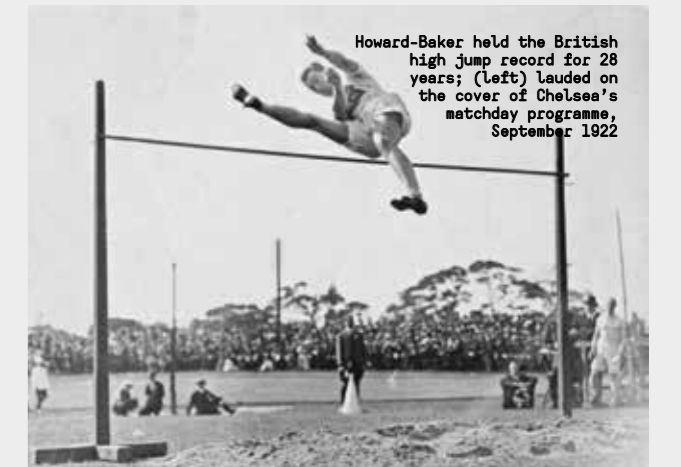
In October 1926, Benjamin lost his place to Arthur Davies after a poor showing in a Lancashire Cup fixture. He then rounded off his club career with a solitary appearance for Oldham Athletic. He would make a farewell Goodison appearance in March 1929, playing for Corinthians against Everton in a friendly match. The hosts won with virtually the last kick of the match but, according to *The Daily Courier*, the erstwhile Evertonian excelled: 'The champions might have scored several goals had it not been for the brilliance of Howard-Baker, who affected some remarkable saves, though luck was with him on more than one occasion. It was judgement, however, that enabled him to negotiate shots from Troup and Critchley in particular.'

Not one to rest on his haunches, Benjamin subsequently embarked on a career in tennis – winning the doubles event at the Welsh Indoor Open in 1932. A true sporting polymath, he had previously played for Liverpool Cricket Club (whose Aigburth ground backed on to his garden) and excelled at water polo. All the while he continued working in the family business, becoming a highly regarded figure in Merseyside business circles.

He continued to take an interest in Liverpool Harriers and his former football clubs. He was a guest at Goodison for the March 1973 Merseyside derby, watching two Emlyn Hughes strikes seal a win for the Reds. He passed away in 1987 at the grand age of 95.

In 1962, Basil Easterbrook of the *Lancashire Evening Telegraph* eloquently summed up Benjamin's remarkable sporting life: 'Howard-Baker loved football, but very properly he only sought it as a balance from his other life as a manufacturing chemist... Baker played for fun outside of the shadow of the pay envelope.' Benjamin ranks alongside C.B. Fry and fellow-Merseysider Max Woosnam as one of Britain's greatest sporting all-rounders.

Further reading:
Benjamin Howard-Baker – Sportsman Supreme
by Bob Phillips (DB Publishing)
Photo credits: Bob Phillips



Howard-Baker held the British high jump record for 28 years; (left) lauded on the cover of Chelsea's matchday programme, September 1922