

By Richie Gillham

DICKIE DOWNS: “THE INDIA RUBBER MAN”

John Thomas Downs was nicknamed Dickie (or Dicky) but was also called ‘The India Rubber Man’ because of his ability to produce acrobatic overhead kicks and for his mastery of the sliding tackle.

Dickie made 284 appearances for Barnsley, and in their famous FA Cup run of the 1909/10 season, the Second Division club played Everton in the semi-final. They drew 0-0 at Elland Road and then beat the Toffees 3-0 at Old Trafford in the replay.

The final against Newcastle United at Crystal Palace finished goalless. The Manchester Guardian reported some felt the selection of Goodison Park as the venue for the replay was unfair to Barnsley, as local supporters would not be neutral in light of Everton’s elimination. Nevertheless, the game was played at the home of the Blues in front of 60,000 fans. Dickie and his Barnsley side lost 2-0 but he eventually got an FA Cup winner’s medal in 1912 with a defeat of West Bromwich Albion in a replayed final at Bramall Lane.

During the First World War, he enlisted with the Royal Army Medical Corps in December 1915 and mobilised in November 1916 before being discharged a month later. He joined Everton for a £2,500 transfer fee on 3 March 1920, having been placed on the Terriers’ transfer list at his own request, and replaced Tom Fleetwood as club captain the following season.

Downs went on to play in his only international for England at Roker Park, alongside fellow Everton star Sam Chedgzoy, in a 2-0 win against Ireland. Dickie had previously represented the Football League in a 4-1 defeat to the Scottish League in Glasgow in March 1913, while still a Barnsley player, and added a further appearance as an Evertonian.

After 97 games for the Toffees, Dickie



signed for Third Division Brighton & Hove Albion in August 1924 - a year after turning down a move to Clapton Orient. He played 16 games for the Seagulls before announcing his retirement in May 1925. However, in 1927, Dickie made a comeback, of sorts. The Liverpool Echo reported on him playing for his first club, Shildon Athletic, in a drawn game against Spennymoor United in the Durham Benevolent Bowl.

In his autobiography, A Lifetime in Football, Charlie Buchan wrote about

the impact of Dickie’s mastery of the sliding tackle: ‘In my opinion, this tackle, which I first saw introduced by Dickie Downs, has done more than anything else, except the change in the offside law in 1925, to alter the character of the game’. According to Buchan, this type of tackle, although completely legal, increased the pace at which the game was played and led to greater physical contact.

Dickie Downs passed away in 1949 at the age of 62.