FRIENDS REUNITED – THE PAIR WHO FOLLOWED A SIMILAR PATH

Words // Paul McParlan

St Johnstone achieved their highest league placing of third in the Scottish First Division in the 1970/71 season. The side featured the gifted winger John Connolly and the talented striker Jim Pearson. It was the start of a football odyssey which led to them playing together again at Everton and then at Newcastle United.

Everton bought Connolly from St Johnstone for £75,000 in March 1972, the last signing made by manager Harry Catterick.

Connolly made his debut at Goodison Park in a 0-0 draw with Leicester City and the following season he played 41 league games and notched seven goals, making him one of the team's joint top scorers! Fans changed the words of a TV advert for the clothing firm John Collier to sing, "John Connolly, John Connolly, the winger to watch!"

Catterick's replacement, Billy Bingham, wanted more attacking options so, in July 1974, he paid £90,000 to bring Pearson from St Johnstone. Pearson made his debut at West Ham in August, coming off the bench to replace... John Connolly!

Everton won 3-2 and it was the only game in which Joe Royle and Bob Latchford both scored for the Blues. The great Colin Harvey got the other goal – his last-ever for the Club.

In January 1975, during an ill-tempered FA Cup tie against non-league Altrincham, Connolly was the victim of a brutal challenge that left him with a double fracture of his leg.





Jim Pearson (above) and John Connolly

Some said that tackle cost Everton the title that season and it was a year before he could play again, never hitting his former heights. Frustrated by his lack of opportunities, Connolly departed in September 1976, a decision he later regretted.

Pearson stayed at Goodison until 1978. His ability to deliver deft passes and win aerial challenges made him popular with fans but, unfortunately, a series of niggling injuries halted his progress. Although he bagged only 19 goals for Everton, he acted as the perfect partner for our main marksman, Bob Latchford. Pearson would later recall wryly, "I did all his running, and he got all the glory!"

The Scottish striker moved to Newcastle United in August 1978 to help their promotion push and found himself playing alongside Connolly again, who had joined the Magpies that summer. Sadly, after playing 14 games and scoring four goals, continuing problems with his knee ligaments forced Connolly to quit football at the age of 27. After football, he had a successful career as the UK football consultant for Nike.

John Connolly and Jim Pearson were two exceptionally skilful footballers who played together at three different clubs. The two are still good friends today, as Connolly said, "Aye, Jim used to follow me wherever I went! How he missed out on Birmingham City, I'll never know!"