

KEVIN BEATTIE (1953-2018)

October 2018

Kevin Beattie, the former Ipswich Town and England footballer who has died aged 64, was described by his manager Bobby Robson as being, with the exception of George Best, the finest British player he had seen. He was seemingly destined for greatness, but his career was ravaged and then abruptly ended by injury, plunging him into personal crisis – which he ultimately surmounted with the same strength he had shown on the pitch. Beattie joined Ipswich at 18, having come down from his native Cumbria by train with no idea where East Anglia was and carrying just his boots in a brown parcel. The Portman Road faithful rapidly took him to their hearts after he made his debut at centre-half in a victory over Manchester United in 1972.



Kevin Beattie playing for Ipswich Town against Sheffield United 1974.

Remarkably quick over 10 yards, he could out-leap most strikers (despite standing less than 6ft) and was blessed with both an eye for raking passes and a ferocious shot in his left foot. Openly discussed as the heir to Bobby Moore, even Duncan Edwards, he was called up at 18 by Alf Ramsey to train with the England squad. In 1974 he was voted the first PFA Young Player of the Year.

A certain amount of glory with unheralded Ipswich duly followed. Playing with the likes of Mick Mills, Paul Mariner, John Wark and Frans Thijssen, he forged a notably potent partnership in central defence with Allan Hunter. The team challenged for the league title on several occasions, and Robson believed they only lost it in 1977 when Beattie missed their final six games after setting fire to himself while burning leaves in his garden. The next year, as underdogs, the team won the FA Cup by defeating Arsenal – Beattie admitted he spent the match desperate for a smoke – but by then his right knee was already failing. Five operations in four years followed, and as many as three cortisone injections during every match. Beattie was forced to withdraw numerous times from England squads and, having made his international debut in 1975, won only 9 caps.

In 1981 he broke his arm in the FA Cup semi-final against Manchester City. He accordingly missed the team's Uefa Cup final triumph against AZ Alkmaar, watching both legs from the stands, and having made 296 appearances never played for Ipswich again. At 27, his career was effectively over, but his struggles just beginning.

Thomas Kevin Beattie was born in Carlisle on December 18th 1953. One of nine children, he grew up in difficult circumstances, and later recalled times when there was no food on the table for two or three days unless his father, who drank too much, had won at dominoes.

Although notionally enrolled at St. Cuthbert's High School, Carlisle, there were occasions when Kevin failed to go to school as he had no shoes. A teacher bought him his first pair of football boots. At 15 he was invited for a trial by Liverpool, but no one met him at Lime Street Station so he took the next train home. Years later, Bill Shankly admitted at his benefit match, in which Beattie played, that not signing him had been one of his greatest mistakes.

Beattie subsequently became a publican, but began to drink too many of his wares and had to be given the last rights after collapsing with pancreatitis. Unable to walk more than half a mile, drawing benefits and latterly caring for his wife Maggie, who has multiple sclerosis, he also attempted suicide.

In recent years, though convicted of benefit fraud in 2012 after not declaring his radio commentary work, Beattie was proud of having faced up to his demons and was open about his problems in the biography he collaborated on, *The Greatest Footballer England Never Had: The Kevin Beattie Story*. Its ghostwriter, Rob Finch, successfully petitioned Michel Platini – who had been in the St. Etienne team beaten by Ipswich in the 1981 Uefa Cup quarter-final – belatedly to award Beattie a winner's medal. He was also regularly voted by fans as Ipswich's greatest player and had long planned to have his ashes scattered at Portman Road. He is survived by his wife, whom he married in 1974, and three daughters.

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