

GEORGE GRAHAM
Arsenal



Spearheading Arsenal's success and on the fringe of full England status

JOHN RADFORD

talks to Peter Morris

IT'S hard to spot him off-field as the strong-running, hard-shooting personality player currently thrilling the Highbury crowd. He looks a lot slimmer, a lot paler, for one thing, and the fierce aggression so evident in Arsenal's raging attack this season is simply not there.

This John Radford who so nearly made the England team against Bulgaria before Christmas is a soft-spoken character, quite unlike some of his footballing forebears from South Yorkshire who were hard cases indeed, both on and off the field.

As yet, he hasn't taken on the fashionable trappings of the 1969 star-player-type. He is a modest fellow, almost self-deprecatory in talking of his career which began humbly enough with a local youth team in his native Hemsworth, near Pontefract. But make no mistake, John Radford is worth his weight to Arsenal

these days. As a front-runner, along with George Armstrong and Bobby Gould, he is giving close-packing defences a little more than they can cope with in most matches.

In seasons 1966-67 and 67-68 he scored only 21 goals in Football League, League Cup and F.A. Cup games. Then he was operating mostly as an inside-right. This season, at the time of writing, he had already netted 13 in League and League Cup, plus another one for England's Under 23 side since being switched to the right-wing.

"But," he says, "I'm not really a winger I have the freedom to roam anywhere and no definite commitments."

His contribution towards Arsenal's feat of reaching the League Cup Final for the second year running and simultaneously mounting the strongest title challenge from Highbury for many seasons has been invaluable.

None more so than his League Cup semi-final goals against Spurs this season. He got the only one at Highbury and the equaliser at White Hart Lane which put Arsenal through on 2-1 aggregate and sent their fans into a delirium of madness (and near mayhem).

Radford rates these goals the most memorable of his career to date—even transcending the hat-trick he hit inside five minutes against Bolton in the League Cup last season and another he collected against Wolves in only his third League game for the Gunners some three-and-a-half years ago.

A strong player in the air with heading powers of accuracy and timing as good as anyone in the business, Radford is notably dangerous with either foot off half-chances in the six yard box and beyond.

"You must be looking for shooting chances all the time in the six yard box. That's where most of the goals come," he explains.

Yet the season before last he admits, "I could hardly get a goal . . . in fact none of us could."

So why the exciting transformation? "It's hard to put a finger on it . . . I suppose both manager Bertie Mee and coach Don Howe have exerted the influence although we've got much the same players."

Certainly Arsenal have shaped into the best side Radford has played with in his six years with the club and already more away games have been won than in the whole of last season.

Arsenal's job has not been made easier by the manner in which the current backslide to defensive football is choking and frustrating attackers all over the country.

Says Radford: "For instance, we are finding it a lot harder to break through in our home games. Some teams are bringing back eight or nine men into their penalty area—just to play for a point. We are always going for a win although in away games we, too, have to concentrate more on defence than on attack—but that's the way it usually is. The difference is that we are mounting incisive attacks from a defensive position and if we can make three good chances from our counter attacks we are perhaps taking two of them. It's often enough to win us the game," he explained.

But Radford deplors the defensive complex. "If both sides are playing attacking football you are bound to see a good game," he says.

He instanced the Arsenal-Everton match before Christmas when both sides thrilled a 40,000 crowd with exhilarating attacks—a game which Arsenal won only because, on the day, they were more adroit in taking chances than an Everton who set up almost as many.

"Liverpool and Manchester United are two more teams who are always willing to come to you even when they are playing away," he says.

Radford, now an integral part of Arsenal's machine in the new drive for success, takes particular delight in playing against Manchester United.

"As a kid I supported them and I hoped one day to play for them but they never came for me so that was that."

Now on the fringe of the England team—and surely it must be only a matter of time—John Radford owes much of his success to two people. The sportsmaster who switched him from centre-half to centre-forward in his school team and Chelsea manager Dave Sexton who spent so much time helping Arsenal's young forwards, of which Radford was one, during his Highbury coaching days.

Both can share some credit for spotting an England player of the future. So, too, can Arsenal for persevering with him as an apprentice at a time when they were inclined to be overloaded.

RADFORD (far right) opens scoring in Highbury classic against Everton



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