

# **Sam Wadsworth – A Football Tale**



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**Darwen-born Sam Wadsworth, rejected by his club Blackburn Rovers after four years fighting in the trenches of the First World War, fought back against illness and disappointment to become Captain of England.**

**THERE** wasn't much over an hour to go before Sam Wadsworth's big chance of resurrecting his football career. But, as the train he had jumped aboard at



**Blackburn steamed on through the Pennines, he realised to his horror that he was leaving Nelson and his first game for them far behind.**

**"What's the next stop?" he asked the holiday special passengers in desperation. "First stop Barnsley!" they told him cheerfully as he slumped against the door.**

**But luck was with him. The train slowed and stopped just outside Sowerby Bridge to take on a new driver and fireman. And**

**Sam was off in a flash, just managing to jump aboard a train going in the opposite direction.**

**Luckily it didn't stop and wait at Todmorden and pulled into Burnley with half-an-hour to spare. He was off again, dashing for a taxi. But there wasn't one to be seen. He ran up to Manchester Road and stopped the first car that came along. He explained his predicament and his luck held. "Hop in!" said the driver. And off they raced to Nelson's ground just in time for Sam to make an impressive debut.**

**"What a fine sportsman that motorist must have been!" recalled Sam many years later. "He saved my bacon." The driver little realised that he was saving the career of a man who was to become a star of the 1920s and Captain of England.**

**Sam Wadsworth is probably the most successful sportsman ever to be born in Darwen, head and shoulders above such heroes as Classic-winning jockey Albert Whalley and Open golf champion Dick Burton.**

**And yet very few people have heard of him. Local libraries, newspapers, historians and sports enthusiasts can come up with very little to piece together Sam**

**Wadsworth's rise from a humble back-yard to the captaincy of England and such unforgettable moments as leading out the national team in front of a roaring 92,000 crowd at Hampden Park for a Scotland v England clash in April 1925.**

**Like most youngsters, little Sam Wadsworth loved to kick a ball around in the back yard of his terrace home in Darwen. It was non-stop. "You'll kick out more boots than the factories can ever turn out," his dad James used to tell him.**

**It wasn't a steady climb to the top for the Darwen lad. In between there was the horror of the First World War. Sam was working as a clerk and playing with Blackburn Rovers Reserves when, as he said, "the dark clouds came".**

**He was only 17 but told the recruiting sergeant he was 18. "Come back in a month and tell me you're 19," said the sergeant. Sam did just that and he quickly joined his older brother Charlie in France. "It was my duty," he said simply.**



**Service in the trenches of Belgium and northern France as a gunner with the Royal Garrison Artillery left Sam with a shrapnel wound in his left ankle, suffering from blackouts and traumatic stress problems.**

**His lengthy fight back to fitness, both mental and physical, made his later success in England colours all the more remarkable.**

**Sam Wadsworth was born at No 11 Hollins Row. It backed on to Blackburn Road at the top of Hollins Road where Sandringham Road now stands. He was born in 1896 and sister Jane (Jennie) the following year. Charles was the older brother and then came Alice and Nellie.**

**The first team young Sam played for was St Cuthbert's in the local schools' competitions. He trained in his back yard with an old tennis ball and later his father, himself a keen sportsman who played Rugby Union with Vale of Lune, made him train with a football boot on his left foot and a slipper on the other.**

**On Saturdays his father took him to Ewood Park to watch stars such as Bob Crompton ply their trade. Later he had a spell with Darwen Woodfold in the Blackburn and District League.**

**Many years later, in tape recordings of his life, which he made when well into his 50s, Sam Wadsworth recalls those early days with pride and affection. The ingrained team spirit and friendship and sense of duty and fair play would stay with him always.**

**He was 16 when he made his debut for the town team, whose Anchor Ground was just across the field from his home, in 1912. "I didn't cut much ice among the seasoned pros," he recalled. But Darwen won comfortably. Within 18 months Blackburn Rovers had moved in to sign him and he played regularly as a 17-year-old in the Reserves, watched by crowds of five and six thousand.**

**His debut was at Ewood against Manchester City Reserves. "It was a boy's dream," he recalled. He walked down to the ground from Lynwood. "I was the first there. I was the first to get changed." South African Alex Bell and Johnny Orr took him under their wing. "Just do as we tell you and you'll be all right, sonny" they told him.**

**Sam made the first goal, thanks to Scottish inside-forward Johnny Orr. Off he had raced down the left wing. "Pull it back, sonny!" shouted the old hand. Sam did and Johnny smacked it into the back of the net. In the closing minutes, with Rovers leading 3-1, Orr returned the compliment, putting him through and shouting: "Go on, sonny! Go on!" Said Sam, "I went like the wind and hit it hard to make it 4-1."**

**"It was," he recalled in his own modest way, "a very happy ending."**

**With the outbreak of war, all League soccer was suspended and promising footballer Sam Wadsworth like so many more young men went off to fight.**



**The horrors of that conflict can today be only vaguely imagined. Few came out of it unscathed and Sam was no exception. His elder brother was killed in 1918. He had been wounded but had bravely volunteered to go back. "I came home, but Charlie didn't. He lies in Belgium. I had lost my only brother and my best friend and supporter."**

Although the War ended in November 1918 Sam recovered slowly from the trauma of the conflict and the loss of his brother. He seldom recounted the desperation of those years in later life and, in hours of tapes he left, just says: "I began to realise that I had to forget all the rough times when we still stood up for more. I had to get on with my life."

But it was late in the summer of 1919 before he could face the thought of taking up his promising football career.

He caught the bus from his home in Darwen, arrived at Ewood Park, took a deep breath and knocked on the door. Bob Middleton, Rovers long-serving club secretary, told him sadly: "Sorry, Sam. I have not a vacancy. You may have a free transfer."

The War marked the end of a glorious era for Blackburn Rovers: Sam Wadsworth was not to be part of the new era.

"It had been all I had lived for over four years of life and death in the mud of Belgium and France. My heart was broken. My life's dream had gone with the wind. I was very bitter after nearly five years service. It was not very nice treatment."

When young Sam got home, he recalled, his father was there waiting for him or he would have thrown his one pair of boots on to the fire. "Dad, I'll never kick another ball," he vowed.

However, Sam had fought hard to overcome the trauma of the First World War and his father was determined that his recovery was not going to be dashed.

He managed to arrange a trial for his son with Nelson who were then playing in the Central League and the lad grasped the chance with both hands. He did well in the trial and had a very good game on his debut once he had managed to get to the ground! It was his first-ever game at left full back.

Sam played in several positions for Nelson, mainly at centre-half and left-back, and it wasn't long before top clubs came sniffing.

Ambrose Langley, the Huddersfield manager, made a good offer it was £1,600 in April 1921 and after three games in the Reserves he made his first-class debut against Chelsea, but only after patiently convincing the chap on the gate that he was actually the club's new left-back and not some chancer trying it on.

By then the soon-to-be-legendary manager Herbert Chapman had taken over and



Sam, 5ft 8ins and 12st 6lbs, became a regular in one of the greatest club teams of all time. They won the FA Cup in 1922, three successive Championships in 1924, 25 and 26 and were runners-up in 1927 and 1928.

The Cup win was very sweet as Town knocked out Blackburn Rovers in the Third Round on the way to Stamford Bridge. The first leg had ended 1-1 although everybody except the referee

agreed afterwards that Sam Wadsworth had scored a late winner, which was scrambled away from behind the line by goalkeeper Walter Sewell.

Town made no mistake in the replay, winning 5-0. "They should have given you your goal, Sam," said Rovers centre-forward Percy Dawson as they trooped off. "It would have saved us this hiding."

Wadsworth played a total of 312 games for Town and scored four goals no mean feat for a full-back in those days!

He became England's regular left full-back, making his debut against Scotland at Villa Park in April 1922, and he captained the team on his last four appearances. He won nine caps in an era when international matches were much fewer than today. A rare clash with a team other than one in the Home International series was against Belgium who were given a 6-1 hiding in March 1923.

Sam had learnt of his first selection for the prestigious Football League side when he read it in the evening paper. He learnt that he had been appointed captain of England when he saw it chalked on a shopkeeper's board while out in Huddersfield with his wife, Gladys.

"I was pleased. But we didn't fuss over these things in those days," he recalled. "I still continued wearing the same size of hat."

Wadsworth was injured in the three-game FA Cup semi-final in March 1928 against Sheffield United and didn't get to play in the final against Blackburn Rovers, the once-loved club that had shown him the door. He had reported fit but the doctor didn't think he should risk it.

**He could only watch as Jack Roscamp bundled ball and 'keeper Billy Mercer into the net in the first minute. Huddersfield, struggling with injuries and illness, folded. Their League season tailed off and they were pipped for another title by Arsenal.**

**The knee injury virtually ended Wadsworth's career although he had a few games with Burnley whom he joined in September 1929. It was a hard time for the Wadsworths. They had lost all their money in a failed garage venture, which his wife, whom he had met and married while playing for Nelson, had urged him not to go into. Her health suffered with the worry.**

**He was struggling and desperately missing his playing days when the FA told him that the Delft club in Holland were looking for an English manager. It was the start of a successful new career.**

**He moved to Holland in April 1934 and was manager of PSV from August 1935-1938 when he joined another Dutch side DWS. He had a second spell with PSV from 1945-1951 and was highly regarded in Holland.**



**He returned to Huddersfield in 1951 as manager of PSV who were playing Town in a "Festival of Britain" match. At a banquet after the match Huddersfield director Dick Parker said: "Sam came into a team of stars and it was not long before he was a star in a team of stars. All throughout our great period he was, in**

**my opinion, the greatest left-back playing football."**

**Sam Wadsworth stayed on in Holland and died there of pneumonia in September 1961 aged 64. An obituary in the Huddersfield Examiner the following day said: "Wadsworth had several wonderful attributes, among them a masterly sense of positional play. He was a wonderful kicker of judgment which made him supreme in the art of setting his own attack going from defensive positions."**

**Samuel John Wadsworth was also a gentleman a rare breed these days. He says in his recollections: "I was taught not only how to live well, but how to lose well."**

**He offers advice to younger players: "Never think you are the best. Always be ready to learn; always listen to good advice. I never think I know it all. I'm well into my 50s now but I can still learn and I enjoy it.**

**"Please try to be sportsmen. Always play fair; be always ready to congratulate your conqueror and you'll never be sorry for it. I've always played fair and tried to play fair. Even today, many years since I left the field of play, I am still welcome in all circles. Why? Because I played fair. You do the same. You'll never regret it."**

**"I've enjoyed every minute. Memories never to be forgotten," he concluded.**

### **My Uncle Sam...**

**Charles Holden, now 78, has many fond memories of Uncle Sam. He recalls that he and his wife escaped from Holland to Hull on almost the last boat out before the Germans overran the country. All their possessions were in a large handbag. They worked in London on the War effort but moved back to live with their relatives in Blackburn Road after they had been bombed out.**

**Charles has several of his uncle's England caps and medals and remembers him being technical adviser to the Dutch FA during and after his spells as manager of PSV.**

**"He was a real gentleman and very popular with the folk over there," says Mr Holden. "His grave was a mass of flowers and tributes."**