

# TOTALLY FRANK

From road sweeper to goalscoring hero, from title-winning glory to booze and drug binges, from Page 3 girls to prison. The life of playboy footballer Frank McAvennie has never been dull...

■ WORDS: Richard Lenton



May 14, 1988, Hampden Park. Frank McAvennie celebrates after scoring two late goals in the 2-1 defeat of Dundee United to secure the Centenary Double for Celtic

**A**s the mind-boggling figures flashed up on the TV screen recently, Frank McAvennie took a sip from his glass of wine and allowed himself a wry smile. Sky Sports had just splashed out in excess of £1.3billion to secure live Premier League rights. Twenty-three years earlier, when Big Mac was in his pomp, top flight chairmen and the BBC and ITV were squabbling over a four-year deal worth £16million. The result? An almost incomprehensible TV black-out from August 1985 until January 1986.

No-one was more frustrated than McAvennie about the stand-off. The man who should have been a household name in England following his spectacular goalscoring exploits for West Ham in the early part of that season, was reduced to a semi-mythical figure, known only to the most ardent of football fans.

At the start of that 1985-86 season, English football was at its lowest ebb. The Bradford Fire was fresh in the mind, and English clubs had been banned from Europe following the tragedy of Heysel. Football chairmen were throwing radical ideas – many of them draconian – into the mix in an attempt to rid the game of hooliganism. Electric fences were given serious consideration...

The mood was sober as the season kicked off, not merely because of a ban on the sale of alcohol at grounds. But one man whose insobriety – certainly between Saturday night and Wednesday anyway – was never called into question, was McAvennie's.

The former road sweeper was virtually unknown when he joined the Hammers from St Mirren that summer for £340,000, but the Glaswegian with the flowing blonde locks soon became the darling of the East End. By November 23 – the day after his 26<sup>th</sup> birthday – he'd already bagged 17 goals. And it wasn't only on the pitch where McAvennie was scoring. A regular in Stringfellow's and Brown's, his reputation as a playboy grew with every tabloid tale of

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### FRANK MCAVENNIE

#### CV

- » St Mirren: 142 games 48 goals
- » West Ham: 153 games 49 goals
- » Celtic: 85 games 37 goals
- » Scotland: 5 games 1 goal

#### HONOURS

- » 1988 Centenary Double with Celtic
- » Member of Scotland's World Cup squad in 1986

boozy nights with a bevy of buxom birds.

McAvennie helped guide the Hammers to third place in Division One that season, but a year later he was on his way out of Upton Park to join boyhood heroes Celtic following a contract dispute. At Parkhead he was an integral figure in the 1988 Centenary Double winning team, scoring two late goals to secure a 2-1 victory over Dundee United in the Scottish Cup final, but he was on the move again a year later, rejoining West Ham in order to be closer to his Page 3 girlfriend, Jenny Blyth. However, in one of his first games back in a claret and blue shirt, McAvennie suffered a broken leg in a challenge with Chris Kamara, and he was never the same again.

As his career ended, following a second spell at St Mirren in 1995, McAvennie struggled to cope with post-pitch life, and was rarely out of the headlines – for all the wrong reasons. But more of that later... Let's go back to the beginning – not the very beginning, but 1985 and football's winter of discontent. McAvennie had taken the First Division by storm, scoring a bagful of goals for the most exciting West Ham side in 20 years. The problem was, no-one knew who the hell he was...

**I remember Saint n' Greavesie did a feature on you, standing on a bridge in London and asking passers by if they knew who you were. No-one had a clue did they?!**



"I was wearing a pink jumper, and I still didn't get any attention! At the time only West Ham fans recognised me, apart from after a game in Liverpool when they beat us about 7-1, and I got chased down the street by a bunch of blokes! I was with a girl, but luckily this taxi drew up beside us before they could get us."

**Is it true you were thinking of going back to Scotland after only a few months at West Ham?**

"I didn't settle at first. Everyone thought I was going to fight them because of my accent, it was proper Glaswegian back then. It annoyed me that no-one could understand me. Luckily John (Lyall – the manager) organised a team night out, we went to a nightclub and that was it – I fell in love with everything about London."

**You soon got a reputation for going out on the razzle dazzle...**

"The good thing about the lack of TV was that I was enjoying myself in the nightclubs, but nobody knew me. I didn't go drinking after a Wednesday night, so as far as I was concerned I stuck to the contract, which was that you were not meant to drink 48 hours before a game. I didn't go out after Wednesday – I just went out Saturday until Wednesday!"

**What were your favourite haunts in London at the time?**

## "I WISH NOW I'D NEVER TRIED DRUGS. YES, I HAD FUN WHEN I WAS ON THEM, BUT I HAD GOOD FUN WHEN I WAS DRUNK TOO"

"I loved Peter Stringfellow's and Brown's and still go there. They were like local bars to me; I got to know everyone in there."

**Favourite tippie?**

"Vodka, always vodka. I love the Russian stuff."

**Who did you go clubbing with from the football world?**

"Sometimes I'd bump into Charlie Nicholas, but I never went out with any of the boys really. Charlie was a big idol of mine actually. Ian Bishop was a good drinking mate in my second spell at West Ham, but Mo Johnston (during his Celtic days) was probably the best because he never ever suffered in the mornings in training like we did. I used to drink for three days and recover in one, now it's the other way round!"

**But it certainly didn't affect the way you played?**

"I couldn't have played the way I played with the amount of energy I put into it if I'd done half of what I was supposed to have done could I?"

**In your first spell at Upton Park, you formed a terrific partnership with Tony Cottee in a fantastic West Ham team. Why did it all click?**

"I was totally different from Tony. I was brought up defending from the front, so at West Ham I was chasing and closing people down and Tony was just standing there. I was obviously annoyed, but we had a meeting and sorted it out and obviously we went on to score lots of goals together. We just complimented each other."

**Was that West Ham side of 85-86 the best team you played in?**

"I would think so, but the Celtic team I played in when we won the Centenary Double in 1988 was magnificent as well. It would have been a hell of a game between the two, put it that way. Me and Andy Walker scored a lot of goals for Celtic; we scored 54 goals that season which was a bit special."

**But to finish third in the English top flight... I think West Ham fans would take it now...**

"God yeah! But nowadays it's single strikers at a lot of clubs; you don't get partnerships. In those days it was Dalglish and Rush, Speedie and Dixon, Sharp and Lineker. I was offered a lot of bonuses for goals, but it would have taken a lot of my game away. If my partner was there in a good position I'd pass it rather than go round the goalkeeper – I was more of a team player so I didn't take bonuses. I would rather have my wages."

**If English clubs hadn't been banned from Europe, West Ham would have been in the UEFA Cup – which had a lot more prestige then. How well do you think you'd have fared?**

"We had players who could get the ball down in midfield like Alan Devonshire and Mark Ward, and Alvin Martin, Ray Stewart and Tony Gale were great at getting the ball down and playing from the back. I think the Liverpool side was so good in Europe because your Alan Hansen's and Mark Lawrenson's could get the ball down, and we were the same. I think we would have done alright. When we went to QPR and Luton and played them on a plastic surface we played them off the park because we could get the ball down and play."

**It was a surprise when you left West Ham to join Celtic in 1987, although they were your boyhood team...**

"Yes, it was great to join Celtic, but my first game at Celtic Park was horrible for me. It was so quick. Then in my third game I got sent off against Rangers! Two of my mates had a bet that I wouldn't last 90 minutes! That made me laugh."

**What's it really like to play in an Old Firm game?**

"You can't explain it, it's still the best game in the world – the

**“LOU MACARI WASN'T A GOOD MANAGER, AND HE HAD ABOUT AS MUCH CHARISMA AS MY BIG TOE”**



**Frank scores the only goal of his international career (against Australia) to seal Scotland's place at the 1986 World Cup**

supporters make it that. The noise and the atmosphere is incredible; it's like Liverpool vs Everton, Liverpool vs Man United and Sunderland vs Newcastle rolled into one, with a bit of religion thrown in."

**You left Celtic after a couple of years to go back down south to West Ham. But why did you opt against joining Arsenal who were pushing for the title?**

"I'm loyal. West Ham fans were great to me. They were struggling and I wanted to save them from going down. But I couldn't have known that John Lyall would get the sack and Lou Macari would take over. If I'd known I wouldn't have gone, but hindsight's a wonderful thing."

**You also lost a year of your career after breaking your leg in a challenge with Chris Kamara, which obviously didn't help...**

"I was actually only injured for seven months, but after I got the okay to start training, Lou Macari sent me out on a four-mile road run on Christmas Day and knackered my leg up. It's still knackered. Macari wasn't a good manager and he had about as much charisma as I've got in my big toe."

**At least you said farewell to the Hammers faithful in style with a hat-trick in your last game (home to Notts Forest in May 1992)...**

"I came on at half-time after Mitchell Thomas pulled a hamstring. Mitchell told me before the game that he was going to do that and he was going to get me on at the break, so I was well pleased. What a way to finish – a hat-trick. You can't write scripts like that."

*If only that hat-trick against Forest was the abiding memory football fans have of Mr Francis McAvennie. However, after his career petered out following second spells at Celtic and St Mirren, Macca's life spiralled out of control in a drug-fuelled cycle of crime, scandal and reckless behaviour.*

*In 1994 McAvennie admitted that he'd begun snorting cocaine while still playing football. Convictions for drug possession followed, then there was the strange tale of Frank's £100,000 being*

*seized by Customs, who insisted that the cash had been earmarked to fund a major drugs deal.*

*In the winter of 2000, a decade after the five grand a week striker splashed out £400,000 on a sprawling country pad with his Page 3 ladyfriend Jenny Blyth, he admitted being flat broke. Mind you, at least he was flat broke and a free man. A few weeks beforehand, after spending a month on remand in Durham nick with a motley crew of murderers and paedophiles, McAvennie was acquitted of conspiracy to supply £110,000 worth of ecstasy tablets and amphetamines. He'd been staring down the barrel of a ten-year stretch at Her Majesty's Pleasure...*

*"I've made mistakes, huge mistakes, and done a lot of stupid things with coke," he said at the time. "I wish now I'd never tried drugs. Yes, I had fun when I was on them, but I had good fun when I was drunk too. Look at the trouble cocaine's got me into. It's not very funny being in court looking at doing a long sentence because I'm associated with drugs..."*

**Why was it so difficult to adjust to life away from the pitch?**

"It was a terrible time. It took me about five years to readjust and get my act together. I missed the adrenalin rush and the adulation, which just stops overnight. It's frightening and I didn't make the money out of the game that they do nowadays. I'm not complaining – the boys before me didn't get as much as me. But money in football now is life changing in a matter of months."

**When you talk about 'life-changing', I imagine your time in Durham prison must have done that to you...**

"It was after that I realised my friends were not my friends. I pick my friends now rather than letting them pick me. Maybe that's what kick-started my life. I'm happily married, living in Newcastle and enjoying life again. Couldn't be happier."

**Frank is promoting Pro Fantastic Golf – an event which sees football fans battle it out on the golf course in their club colours in front of the TV cameras. To get involved visit [www.profantasticgolf.com](http://www.profantasticgolf.com)**