

THE FRED KEENOR STORY

Cardiff City legend Fred Keenor can justifiably be described as the greatest Bluebird of them all. Although he was never considered one of the most gifted footballers of his generation, Fred's fighting spirit, his will to win and his inspirational leadership qualities enabled him to carve out a remarkable career at the highest levels of the British game.

The tough-tackling defender spent the best part of two decades at Ninian Park, during which time his name became synonymous with both Cardiff City and the Welsh national side. In April 1927, the Bluebirds became the first and so far only team to take the FA Cup out of England thanks to a 1-0 victory over Arsenal at Wembley. Images of Cardiff captain Keenor proudly cradling the coveted trophy after that famous triumph have proved some of the most enduring in the history of Welsh sport. As calls for a statue to commemorate the great man and his achievements increase, Dave Sugarman of the Cardiff City Supporters' Trust reflects upon the playing career of one of Welsh football's most iconic figures.

Frederick Charles Keenor was born in the Roath district of Cardiff in July 1894. The son of a stone mason and one of eleven children, he began playing football while attending Stacey Road School and captained his school team for three years. In April 1907, he gained the distinction of playing for Wales against England in the first-ever schoolboys international. The historic match took place at the Hillary Street Ground in Walsall, where the English youngsters scored a 3-1 victory over their Welsh counterparts.

At the age of seventeen, Fred was turning out for Roath Wednesdays in the Cardiff junior leagues when he was snapped up by Cardiff City director Walter Riden, who had once been his schoolmaster at Stacey Road. He originally signed for the Bluebirds on amateur forms before joining the club's professional ranks in November 1912. His initial contract paid him the princely sum of ten shillings a week while he learnt his trade with the reserves in the Western League.

He made his first-team debut in December 1913 during a Southern League First Division clash with Exeter City at a wet and windy Ninian Park. The match ended in a 1-1 draw and nineteen year-old Fred made a favourable impression despite the treacherous playing conditions. The Western Mail's football correspondent reported: "The most pleasing discovery of the afternoon was young Keenor. His was a highly promising first appearance."

Fred established himself as a regular in the Cardiff side during the 1914/15 campaign as they finished third in the Southern League table, but like all professionals of that period his career was suspended at the end of the season due to the escalation of the First World War. He enlisted in the 17th Battalion of the Middlesex Regiment, which was better known as the 'Footballers' Battalion,' and was posted to Northern France before being sent into action at Delville Wood in July 1916 during the infamous Battle of the Somme. After many days and nights in the trenches facing a continual bombardment from the German artillery, Fred sustained shrapnel wounds to his left leg and right shoulder. The leg injury was such that he feared his professional career was over, but following several months of convalescence in a Dublin hospital he was able to rejoin the Army and start playing football again.

Upon his return to the British mainland, Fred was stationed at a depot in Chatham, where he became a member of the Army's physical training staff. He signed for Brentford as a guest player in time for the start of their 1918/19 London Combination campaign and made nineteen appearances for the Griffin Park club as they surprisingly won the league ahead of teams such as Arsenal, Chelsea and Tottenham.

Once the War had ended and he'd been demobbed, Fred returned to South Wales and rejoined Cardiff's Southern League squad. He made his senior debut for the Welsh national team in October 1919 during a Victory International against England at Ninian Park and produced a solid display in the right-half position as Wales recorded an unexpected 2-1 triumph – their first over England in thirty seven years.

In March 1920, Fred was a member of the Welsh side who chalked up another 2-1 victory against England, this time at Arsenal's Highbury Stadium. It was only the second occasion that Wales had won on English soil and, following earlier draws against Ireland and Scotland, was enough to secure the British Home International Championship title for the first time since 1907.

At the end of 1919/20 season, most of the teams in the Southern League's First Division became members of the Football League's newly-formed Third Division. However, Cardiff City were voted straight into the Second Division during a specially-convened meeting of the League's management committee. It was a massive leap forward for the club and the beginning of a golden era in which Fred was to play a starring role.

The 1920/21 campaign proved a remarkable one for the Bluebirds. Fred scored one of his side's goals in an opening day 5-2 victory at Stockport and was a virtual ever-present as they cruised to promotion at the first time of asking. City finished runners-up to Birmingham and also enjoyed an excellent FA Cup run that thrilled the Welsh public. After defeating Sunderland, Brighton and Southampton in the early rounds, they were drawn at home to First Division Chelsea in the quarter-finals. A crowd of over 50,000 crammed into Ninian Park and witnessed a terrific contest, which City won with an early Arthur Cashmore goal. Fred and his team-mates then fought out an arduous 0-0 semi-final draw with Wolves at Anfield before losing 3-1 in the replay at Old Trafford.

Having done so well during their debut Football League season, the Bluebirds initially struggled in the First Division. They lost their opening six games of the 1921/22 campaign and by mid-October were rooted to the bottom of the table, but they staged a miraculous recovery from that point onwards and after a series of impressive victories over the likes of Chelsea, Manchester United and champions Liverpool, they eventually finished fourth. The team's love affair with the FA Cup continued as they reached the quarter-finals, where they were beaten 2-1 by Tottenham in a White Hart Lane replay watched by a sell-out 53,626 crowd.

The Bluebirds consolidated their top flight status in 1922/23 by finishing ninth. Alongside Fred, the squad included some very talented individuals such as Irish goalkeeper Tom Farquharson, Scottish full-backs Jimmy Blair and Jimmy Nelson, English half-back Billy Hardy and Welsh forward Len Davies. City looked ready to mount a serious challenge for the First Division championship and that challenge materialised during 1923/24.

The team made a fantastic start to the campaign and were beaten only once in their first twenty two matches. Despite a dramatic dip in form during March, when they collected just one point from five games, they were sitting pretty at the top of the table going into the final day of the season. A victory over mid-table Birmingham at St Andrews would have secured the title, but the Bluebirds could only manage a 0-0 draw. Crucially, Len Davies had a penalty saved by Blues keeper Dan Tremelling midway through the second half.

Meanwhile, championship rivals Huddersfield Town beat strugglers Nottingham Forest 3-0 at Leeds Road. The result meant the Yorkshiremen finished on the same number of points as Cardiff. In those days, the method of determining league positions when clubs were level on points was by goal average, which involved dividing the number of goals each team had scored by the number they had conceded. The calculations revealed that Huddersfield had won the First Division title by just 0.024 of a goal, which has since proved the narrowest margin in the entire history of the top flight.

Fred gained some compensation for City's disappointment when he captained Wales to the 1924 Home International Championship title. Under his leadership the Welsh side achieved a clean sweep of victories, beating Scotland 2-0 at Ninian Park, England 2-1 at Ewood Park and Ireland 1-0 at Windsor Park.

Having got so close to the championship in 1923/24, Cardiff's league form was erratic during 1924/25 and they dropped to eleventh in the table, but despite their inconsistency they enjoyed a fabulous FA Cup campaign which took them all the way to the final. They needed three attempts to see off Third Division North champions Darlington in round one before defeating Fulham, Notts County, Leicester and Blackburn en route to Wembley. City's opponents in the final were Sheffield United, who were also occupying a mid-table position in the First Division.

Tens of thousands of excited Welshmen invaded London on the day of the match but they returned home disappointed following a dour contest that failed to live up to expectations. Sheffield won the Cup thanks to solitary first half effort from English international winger Fred Tunstall, who capitalised on a dreadful defensive blunder by City half-back Harry Wake. Captain Jimmy Blair confessed that nerves had got the better of the Bluebirds, while Fred vowed to return to Wembley and win the trophy for his countrymen. He told the press:

“Just because we lost in our very first Cup final, I don’t think there is any cause to get down in the mouth. I can say here and now that one day soon Cardiff City will bring that Cup to Wales.”

The side surprisingly struggled for much of the 1925/26 campaign and suffered a number of heavy defeats, including a 6-3 reverse at Blackburn, a 5-0 hammering at Arsenal and a disastrous 11-2 walloping at Sheffield United – a defeat which ranks as the worst in the club’s history. Nevertheless, they managed to steer clear of the relegation places and eventually finished sixteenth.

Fred succeeded Jimmy Blair as team captain before the start of the 1926/27 season but the Bluebirds continued to struggle and were hovering just above the relegation zone when he was dropped from the starting line-up following a 5-0 defeat at Newcastle on Christmas Day. He responded by submitting a transfer request, which was accepted by the board in mid-January. For a while it looked like Fred’s Cardiff City career was over, but he won back his place in the side in early-February and was taken off the transfer list shortly afterwards as the club’s fortunes began to improve.

The upturn in the team’s league form coincided with the start of another outstanding FA Cup campaign which culminated in a second trip to Wembley. After overcoming Aston Villa in the first round, the Bluebirds beat Darlington, Bolton and Chelsea before meeting Second Division side Reading in the semi-finals at Molineux. The men from Elm Park had defeated Swansea in the quarter-finals, but their hopes of a Welsh double were crushed as City strolled to a 3-0 victory.

In the other semi-final at Stamford Bridge, Arsenal beat Southampton 2-1 with goals from English internationals Joe Hulme and Charlie Buchan. As was the case in 1925, many thousands of Cardiff supporters travelled to London for the Cup final, but this time their team enjoyed better luck. The Gunners were level on points with the Bluebirds in the First Division table, so the game promised to be a tight affair, and that’s how it turned out. Arsenal enjoyed the majority of the possession, but with Fred, Jimmy Nelson and Billy Hardy in superb form, City’s defence stood firm.

The decisive moment of an uninspiring encounter occurred in the seventy fourth minute. Left winger George McLachlan switched the ball inside to Scottish centre-forward Hughie Ferguson, who attempted an innocuous-looking right-footed shot from the edge of the area. Arsenal keeper Dan Lewis appeared to have it covered, but with Len Davies bearing down on him, the ball squirmed from his grasp and trickled over the line. It was a bizarre goal and a personal disaster for Rhondda-born Lewis, who had made his international debut for Wales two months earlier.

Despite a renewed effort after Ferguson’s strike, the Gunners failed to find a way past the City rearguard as Keenor and Co hung on for a famous victory. A multitude of ecstatic Welshmen flooded onto the pitch at the final whistle to watch Fred climb the Wembley steps and collect the trophy from King George V. The Bluebirds had become the first team to take the FA Cup out of England, and ironically they had done so on St George’s Day.

After the presentation, Fred reflected on his side’s success and told the press: “I think we were very lucky to win because, to be candid, I think Arsenal deserved to do so. It was a rather poor game for a final but we do not expect these matches to provide the most skilful display. So much depends on the result that we get anxious, and I’m sure we all were today. However, I am very glad we have won, if only because we are taking the Cup to Wales for the first time.”

City followed up their Wembley triumph by claiming the Charity Shield in October 1927 with a 2-1 victory over leading amateur side Corinthians at Stamford Bridge. The team’s league form improved during the 1927/28 campaign and they finished in sixth position, but their FA Cup defence ended in the fifth round when they were beaten by Second Division outfit Nottingham Forest.

Fred’s list of honours increased further in 1928 as he captained Wales to another Home International Championship title. He guided the side to victories over England and Northern Ireland after a draw against Scotland in the opening fixture.

The Bluebirds began the 1928/29 season brightly, but they started to struggle when several key players suffered long-term injuries. By the midway stage of the campaign, the team was deeply entrenched in a relegation battle and they eventually finished rock bottom of the table. Curiously, they had conceded fewer goals than any other side in the division, but their dismal scoring record resulted in the end of the club's eight-year stay in the top flight.

Following a mediocre season in 1929/30, when they finished eighth in the Second Division, City endured a nightmare campaign in 1930/31. By that time, a number of the players had reached the veteran stage of their careers and they were unable to reproduce anything like their best form. The team was in trouble from the moment the season began and they were relegated long before it ended thanks mainly to a dreadful run that saw them manage just one win in their last seventeen matches.

Fred made his final appearance for the Bluebirds in April 1931, during a 0-0 draw with Tottenham at Ninian Park. With the side already doomed to relegation, the game was watched by just 6,666 spectators. It was a sad end to a magnificent Cardiff career, during which Fred had played an amazing total of 505 matches in all competitions and scored 22 goals.

Although the 1930/31 season was a disaster at club level, Fred did enjoy one moment of glory when he led the Welsh national side to the most improbable result in its 133-year history. Throughout the Twenties and early-Thirties, the majority of Home International Championship matches were played on Saturday afternoons, which meant they clashed with the Football League programme. At that stage, clubs were under no obligation to release players for internationals unless they were called upon to do so by their own national associations. Consequently, English sides often refused to let their Irish, Scottish and Welsh stars play for their countries on the same days as League fixtures.

In October 1930, Wales failed to raise a team of professionals for their match against Scotland in Glasgow. The Scottish side was virtually at full strength, but the Welsh line-up included several inexperienced amateurs from non-league clubs such as Colwyn Bay, Llanelli and the Cardiff Corinthians. The press dubbed the team 'Keenor and the Unknowns,' while bookmakers offered odds against them with a five-goal head start. One newspaper columnist predicted the Scots would declare when they reached double figures, but the game didn't turn out as the pundits expected.

Wrexham striker Tommy Bamford stunned the Ibrox crowd when he blasted Wales into a sixth-minute lead. Hearts forward Barney Battles equalised shortly before half-time, but from that point onwards Scotland found it impossible to break down the visitors' rearguard. City reserve keeper Len Evans produced a string of breathtaking saves and the rest of the Welsh team defended magnificently as they fought their way to the unlikeliest of draws. The Western Mail claimed the side's performance was "the pluckiest in the history of international football," while thirty six year-old Fred was described as "a great and heroic captain whose hard tackling inspired his team-mates, and who kept the forwards supplied with the right kind of passes."

Following his release by Cardiff in May 1931, Fred was signed by Crewe Alexandra in time for the start of their 1931/32 Third Division North campaign. His capture was viewed as a major coup for the Gresty Road club and a crowd of 8,127 turned out to watch his debut against Wrexham, which was a remarkable figure considering it was more than double Crewe's average gate for the previous season. He captained the Railwaymen to a 3-0 victory over the Robins and went on to make 124 appearances in all competitions during three years with the Cheshire side.

The veteran defender collected the last of his 32 Welsh caps when he was called up to face Scotland at Tynecastle in October 1932, and he performed admirably as Wales triumphed 5-2 despite playing for eighty minutes with ten men after an injury to winger Charlie Phillips. Surprisingly, it was only the second time Wales had won in Scotland, the first occasion having been in 1906.

Fred played the 485th and final Football League match of his career in May 1934. Tranmere Rovers were Crewe's opponents on that occasion and he scored one of the Alex goals in a 3-1 victory witnessed by a crowd of just 1,742. After leaving Gresty Road, Fred spent the 1934/35 season as player-manager at Oswestry Town, who were competing in the Birmingham & District League alongside clubs such as Hereford, Shrewsbury and

Kidderminster. He then spent a year with Southern League side Tunbridge Wells Rangers in the same capacity before finally retiring from the game in May 1936 at the age of forty one.

Unfortunately, Fred became seriously ill in August 1937. He'd been suffering from diabetes for several years, although in typical Keenor fashion he kept his condition a secret from his family until he collapsed at his home in Kent and was rushed into hospital, where he remained unconscious for five days. A benevolent fund was set up by the Football Association of Wales to assist Fred's dependents while he recovered and many of his friends from his playing days contributed. Happily, after a lengthy stay in hospital, he was able to regain his strength and resume a normal working life.

Fred returned to his native city in 1958 and worked for several years as a storeman with the Cardiff Corporation's building department. He was an occasional and hugely popular visitor to Ninian Park until his death in a residential home at the age of seventy eight in November 1972.

The legendary Fred Keenor was undoubtedly one of the greatest servants that both Cardiff City and the Welsh national team have ever had. Not only was he a tremendous sportsman, but he was also a fine ambassador for his city and his country. It's been almost seventy three years since Fred hung up his football boots, but while many of his achievements are still talked about, they have yet to be properly commemorated. Hopefully, that situation will soon be resolved and he will be rightfully honoured by the people of South Wales with a memorial that is long overdue.