

Stanley Matthews's last league goal

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April 1963, high on the Stoke End terraces of the old Victoria Ground. Stoke, playing Luton, were challenging for promotion from the old Second Division, and needed to win. Luton, I think, were already doomed to relegation.

I can remember the Stoke team of that era today. O'Neill in goal; Asprey, Allen, full-backs; Clamp, Stuart, Skeels, half-backs; Matthews, McIlroy, Mudie, Viollet, Bebbington, forwards. Tony Waddington, the manager, had brought Matthews back from Blackpool a couple of years before, and had spiced the team with a number of other senior players who still had some good years left in them. Scottish international Jackie Mudie, like Matthews, had come from Blackpool; English international Eddie Clamp was a much feared Wolves hard man; Northern Irish international Jimmy McIlroy was a legendary inside forward for Burnley when it was one of the leading clubs in the land; English international Dennis Viollet had been one of the second generation of Busby Babes at Manchester United.

Stoke were one up at half time, an unsatisfactory goal where a defender had hooked the ball out from under the crossbar but it was ruled to have crossed the line. We were behind the goal, and could not judge. Early in the second half, McIlroy came into possession deep in the Stoke penalty area. He set off down the field, shuffling in his inimitable way, and nobody could lay a boot on him. Around the centre circle, he threaded a long ball down the middle, Matthews came off his wing, collected it, and took it round the goalkeeper, and the crowd stood up and roared. In truth, though, it was McIlroy who had created the goal.

Stoke won promotion and Matthews continued to play, though not normally in the first team. There were no substitutes in those days, so if you were picked you played for the full ninety minutes and if somebody went off injured the team played on with ten men. But against Fulham a couple of years later he came back to plug a gap left by injuries, and became the first and to date the only man to have played top-level English football at 50 (Billy Meredith had played his last game for Manchester City at 49).

I saw that, as well.