

**GERRARD'S**  
BLUEPRINT

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# GERRARD'S BLUEPRINT

The Tactical Philosophy Behind  
Rangers 55th Title Triumph



# Contents

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## The Number Six

‘We’ve changed slightly the way we are playing, not a lot, probably the movement of five or ten yards with the two wide attackers, full-backs being a bit more adventurous. We’re really trying to emphasise the midfielders getting on the ball and playing together, and I think that has been a really welcome addition to the team. Not playing with a traditional battling, holding midfielder and going more with a footballer in Steven Davis and I think he’s really jumped to that challenge as well.’

*Michael Beale, The Scotsman, April 2019*

The initial transformation on the pitch was immediate over that first summer with Gerrard in charge, but from the January 2019 transfer window onwards it was clear that gradual evolution was a key focus of the entire club.

This was evident both on and off the pitch throughout his tenure, from sports science to the embedding of a modern, flexible tactical approach under the watchful eye of Michael Beale, to the sharp upturn in quality – and most importantly suitability – of the first-team squad. No stone was left unturned, and every marginal gain was analysed, deconstructed, and put back together again in the ongoing quest for glory. One could argue with a fair degree of certainty that throughout this time, the most challenging – and therefore potentially the

most satisfying – on-pitch transformation materialised in the centre of midfield. As a famed midfielder himself, it was only natural that Gerrard put a key focus on this area of the team from the off.

The central midfielders who featured most frequently in the early months under Gerrard were Ryan Jack, Ross McCrorie and three of the summer signings – Lassana Coulibaly, who joined on loan from Ligue 1 Angers, Liverpool loanee Ovie Ejaria and Canadian international Scott Arfield. The team was set up in that basic 4-3-3 formation outlined in the 2018/19 Season Overview section and in these embryonic times, the roles and duties for the midfield three were pretty conventional and functional, none more so than the lone defensive midfielder, or single pivot as it has come to be known.

Ross McCrorie, the former captain of the under-20 team, had progressed through the ranks, making his debut in the season previous to replace Bruno Alves in a League Cup tie against Partick Thistle. Then manager Pedro Caixinha described McCrorie as ‘the future of this country, not only this club, as a centre-half’. High praise indeed for a 19-year-old making his debut. Unfortunately, the Caixinha regime fizzled out shortly after, and under caretaker manager Graeme Murty, McCrorie enjoyed a mixed spell playing as either a defensive midfielder or at centre-back. A couple of heavy defeats to Celtic in quick succession did his central defensive prospects significant damage at the end of the season, but he was still considered a key prospect for the future and certainly a player who it was hoped would play his part in the squad as the new era dawned. During those dark pre-Gerrard times, there was a tendency to try to search for any glimmer of hope amidst the gloom and as a Rangers fan and youth academy prospect McCrorie would come to symbolise that.

‘We had a player playing at centre-back position when wasn’t his real position, who was 19 years of age and thrown in at the deep end, who could have been destroyed in terms

of his career,' Gerrard told the *Scottish Sun* just one day after his team's first competitive game, against FK Shkupi. It was clear to see that he didn't see McCrorie playing long-term at Rangers as a centre-back, despite the proclamations of previous managers.

McCrorie started Gerrard's first two games playing alongside Ryan Jack in a 4-2-3-1 formation. Coulibaly offered a similar physical profile to McCrorie and was also used in this role at times, so it was clear that the coaching staff had identified their skillsets as key to their tactical approach in the early weeks. McCrorie, however, quickly found his appearances in the team limited as the weeks progressed, with the manager favouring players with more ability on the ball when Rangers had possession in the attacking phase.

The number six in Gerrard's team was expected to contribute fully in both the defensive and the offensive phases of play. In the early months, the player situated in this role at the base of the midfield would be classed as more of a traditional destroyer when Rangers did not have possession, using his physique and mobility to harry opposition midfielders, win the ball back and recycle play. This player would also be responsible for providing defensive cover for both full-backs. Therefore, playing as a single defensive midfielder, he would be required to shift laterally across the defensive midfield area depending on any pockets of space that may present themselves for opposition attackers to exploit.

The single holding midfielder also needed to provide a solid base for the team's attacking play. As most teams will not solely build attacks using their centre-backs' passing range, it is vital to have a deep-lying midfielder who is proficient in possession and can position himself intelligently to receive and make passes quickly. This ensures clean build-up play through the lines against teams who sit deep in a defensive block. This is especially important when you consider that Rangers pushed their full-backs aggressively high and wide when in possession,

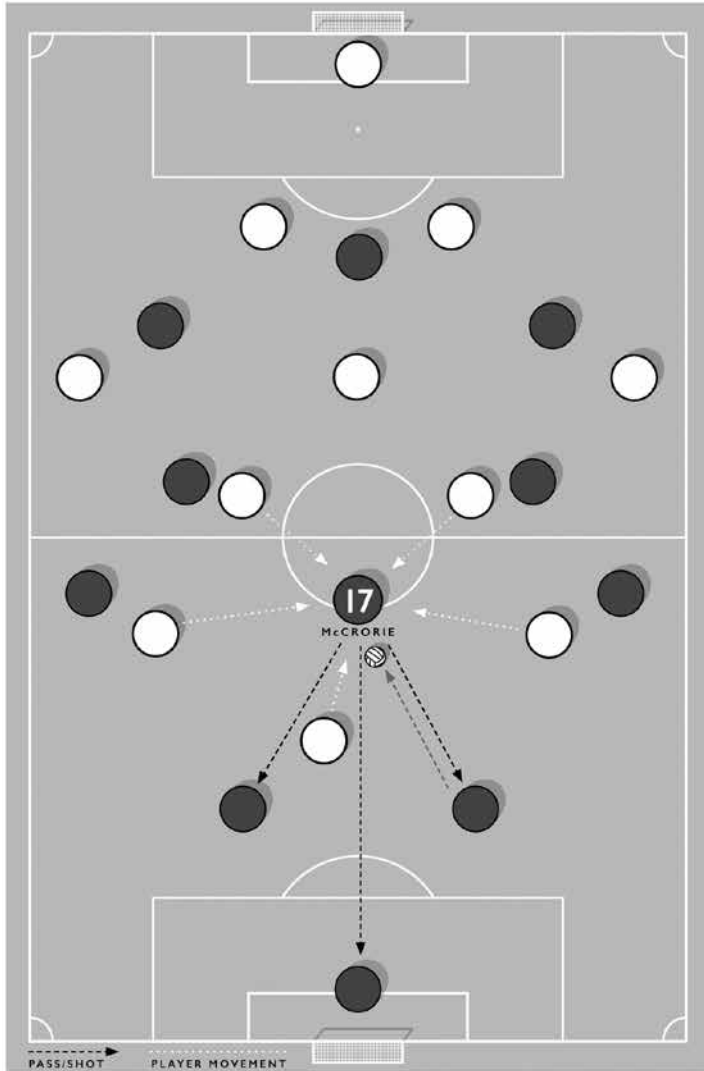
meaning the number six was often the only option available to receive a pass. In these scenarios, having a player in this role who was press-resistant, could receive the ball under pressure and pass through the lines could be considered more advantageous than a traditional defensive midfielder.

### **Figure 34**

When selected in the team, Coulibaly and Arfield would act as a pair of aggressive, hard-running box-to-box midfielders tasked with attempting to control the midfield and progressing the ball into the attacking third of the pitch. Coulibaly played his part in this team in that first season; however, as with McCrorie, there was a strong argument that he did most of his good work out of possession. Most assumed that he wasn't at the technical level required in the creative sense to become a first-pick Rangers midfielder.

As Ovie Ejaria found out, though, having essentially the opposite skillset wasn't quite enough either. Rangers utilised the Liverpool connection to bring in Ejaria on loan, and he repaid that faith with the goal that sent the team into the Europa League group stages. This was a monumental achievement given that the squad had been thrown together in a very brief pre-season and had to negotiate four qualifying rounds so early in the season. Ejaria's ability on the ball in midfield was certainly something that could be beneficial to Rangers, as having a player in there who was more than capable of picking a pass and carrying the ball forward in attack was desirable. Still, as you would expect from a young loanee, the midfielder possibly lacked the consistent quality to impact games in Scotland every week. This wouldn't be the first time Rangers would look to use a player with this type of skillset, another indication of the coaching staff's desire to mould the team into their style over a period of time. Despite playing regularly, Ejaria's impact was limited before he elected to cut his loan short and return to Liverpool in early January 2019.

## MIDFIELD DESTROYER



In Gerrard's first season, the deepest-lying central midfielder could be classed as more of a destroyer than a ball-playing number six which caused issues during attacking build-up.

FIGURE 34

That same month, Rangers moved to heavily reinforce their central midfield options by recruiting former captain Steven Davis as he re-joined initially on a six-month loan from Southampton. Ex-Arsenal midfielder Glen Kamara also signed on a pre-contract from Dundee, a deal which was made permanent a few weeks later in the window for the princely sum of £50,000. Despite the stuttering start to the calendar year and a league title challenge that quickly fizzled out, the return of Davis provided a calming influence in the number six role and while he took his time to readjust to the physical demands of the league, his quality was never in doubt. His signing necessitated that slight change in style, too; gone were the battling qualities of a McCrorie or Coulibaly at the base of midfield, and in their stead was a specialist deep-lying playmaker.

Irrespective of his excellent technical ability, Davis's positional awareness and reading of the game was a key factor of his role when out of possession and allowed Rangers to use his passing skills in that defensive midfield role. He was not tasked with regularly breaking from his deep starting position and pressing the opposition into losing the ball. Instead, he played to his strengths and remained vital in anticipating danger nearer to Rangers' goal either intercepting a pass or tackling the attacking player to regain possession.

The thought process was clear, as were the tangible benefits of the move from a destroyer to a playmaker. Despite Davis advancing into his twilight years as a player, he was still an accomplished midfielder who now played in a deeper position on the pitch than Rangers fans would have been used to seeing him in from his previous stint. During his first spell under Walter Smith at the turn of the last decade, Davis was utilised in a more energetic role on the right of the midfield – similar in style to the role Claudio Reyna played at the club during the late 1990s. At the grand old age of 34, though, his pace had started to erode; therefore, a deeper role was gradually introduced during his time at Southampton.

The player who returned took a while to get up to speed with playing regular football again following a stop-start 18 months prior, but Davis would go on to perform that classic number six role in such a crucial, composed way.

Rangers had neatly evolved from utilising a holding midfielder or destroyer playing at the base of midfield to a player who wanted to be proficient in taking the ball from centre-backs and building attacks from deep, a small but significant change. Irrespective of that, Davis provided a much higher level of ability in this position, which was of sizeable benefit to the team.

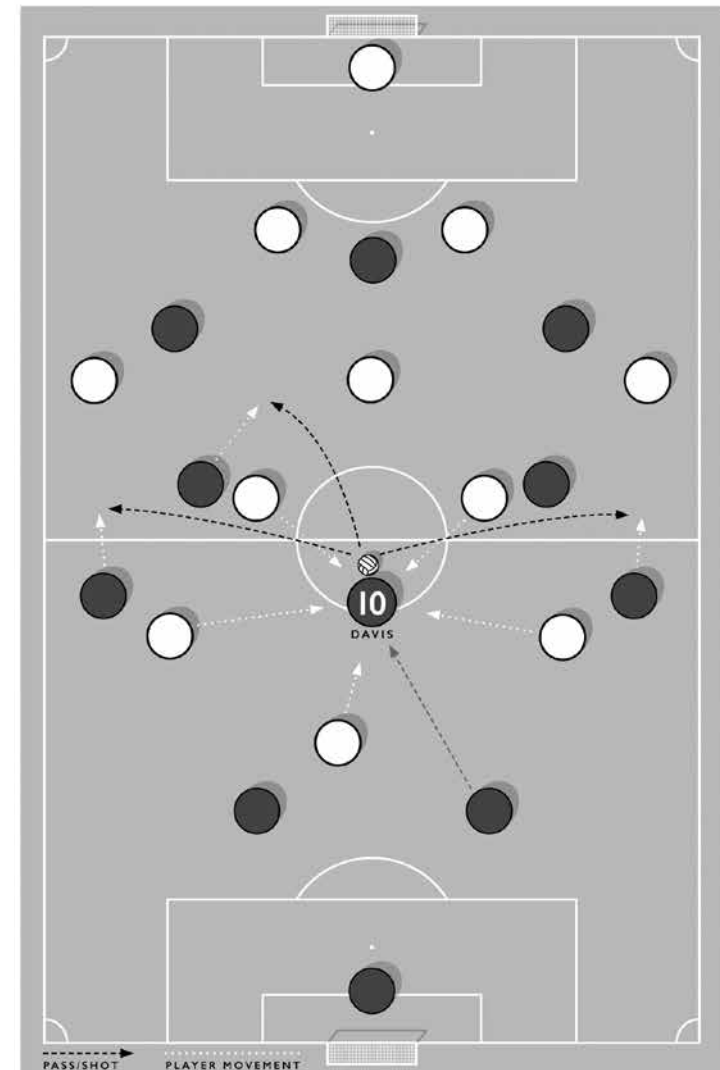
Davis had the vision and technique to receive the ball, scan the pitch, and play the pass in one fluid movement, which opened up so many more options to Rangers when progressing the ball forward. With such abilities both on and off the ball, Davis effectively became press-resistant, meaning opposition attackers would very rarely be able to force him into losing possession as he was too quick of feet and of thought to allow this to happen. As a centre-back, having a player who can receive the ball in any manner of situations and on either foot provides a considerable level of comfort, and Davis was one of the best at doing just that.

An under-rated aspect of Davis's job as the deep-lying playmaker was his ability to pick a pass into the attacking areas of the pitch. His role in build-up play should not be understated as while he was not exactly famed as a proficient dribbler capable of beating two men, he could take defenders out of the game with a quick shift of the hips and cute pass through the lines to the attackers.

### *Figure 35*

There were also times when Rangers elected to play with two defensive midfielders forming a double pivot in front of the defence. More often than not, Kamara would drop slightly deeper next to Davis and act as an energetic foil. Davis would

### DESTROYER TO PLAYMAKER



The introduction of Steven Davis as the number six was key and his range of passing added a new dimension to Rangers' play.

FIGURE 35