



FERNANDO FIGHTING ON

TEARS streamed down his face. I admit I cried for a moment too. The sight of Fernando Ricksen huddled in a wheelchair as he was paraded around the pitch at the end was almost too much to bare...

We were at Fleetwood Town's Highbury Stadium and it was a few minutes after the final whistle of an entertaining clash between a team of legends from Rangers – for whom Fernando once starred – and an English Select. For the record the English team won 3 – 2 but the score line hardly mattered. What mattered was that almost 5,000 Rangers fans had turned up to support Fernando in what was a very touching fund-raising exercise.



FERNANDO RICKSEN AND FRIENDS

He is suffering from motor neurone disease and the money raised thanks to the generosity of all concerned – Fleetwood Town FC, organiser Stan Gordon, the players, playon's own Mark Halsey who refereed and those supporters on a sunlit Saturday afternoon - goes to the MND charity in his name.

Fernando is aged 40 now and a poor, frail figure who struggles to communicate. He was diagnosed with MND four years ago and as players of both sides gathered around him for a group picture – Darren Anderton, Mark Walters, Gavin McCann, playon ambassador Colin Hendry, Paul Walsh, Jorg Albertz among them along with England's manager Paul Ince - it was difficult to remember how he once was.

Here was a strapping, courageous, often inspirational right back who won a treble with Rangers reduced to crippled form. It was a hard sight to take. The Rangers fans cheered his name. But I was not the only one with a tear in my eye as we looked on. Far from it indeed.

Fernando had smiled most of the way through as supporters filed up to have their photographs taken with him but by the end his tears spoke a thousand words, showing how much it meant to have so much love around him.

I was at Fleetwood to spread the word on playon but as I watched events unfold I realised with greater clarity than ever how important playon truly can become to retired players of any sport. In fact it might mean everything to some of them.

Of course we want our players and ambassadors to have fun and enjoy the playon experience. Of course we will look forward eagerly to our first participation in a tournament at the Hong Kong Sevens...then many more of them, world – wide, under the playon banner. It is going to be a fascinating, rewarding journey for all of us in many ways.

The playon App and Save to Play are clearly an integral part of playon membership but our stated aim is not just about encouraging players to save. In some cases it will be about helping them save themselves from themselves.

Depression, bankruptcy, alcoholism, divorce and loss of communication and camaraderie can all be elements of retirement for sportsmen. We at playon aim to ensure that when our members and ambassadors make the decision to move on - Gary Stevens describes it as being like a bereavement - they are not alone, but supported and part of a whole new team.

Fernando Ricksen's case is, we appreciate, especially upsetting and tragic. But hundreds, thousands of other sportsmen also face difficult problems once the game is up.

Fernando had the support of his peers at Fleetwood. His Rangers "family" was there for him. And it is exactly that kind of support, camaraderie and understanding that we at playon want to provide for every one of our players and ambassadors. When you are with playon you are with family.

OUR PARTNERS



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