

Gordon Banks: nation mourns humble hero of '66

Immortal: A statue of Banks stands outside the Bet365 stadium in Stoke.

Legendary England goalkeeper Gordon Banks has died aged 81. Part of the team that won the 1966 World Cup, he was admired as much for his character off the pitch, as for his skill on it.

“Legend and a gentleman” declared the *Daily Express*, *The Telegraph* simply called him “the greatest”, and the *Daily Mirror* went for “the hero who could fly”. Rarely does the death of one person — particularly a sportsman — provoke such a **unanimous** outpouring of praise and tribute.

But Gordon Banks was no ordinary man.

As a goalkeeper, he was peerless. A member of the World Cup winning squad of **1966**, he only let in three goals in the tournament and was voted FIFA’s Goalkeeper of the Year six years in a row between 1966 and 1971.

His greatest individual moment came in 1970 — defying physics to save a **goal-bound** header from Brazilian legend **Pelé**. The save is widely regarded as the greatest in football history.

“They won’t remember me for winning the World Cup. It will be for that save,” Banks once quipped. Even Pelé looks back on it fondly. “I am glad he saved my

header,” he said, “because that act was the start of a friendship between us that I will always treasure.”

Indeed, Banks’s incredible skill on the pitch was matched with uncommon **modesty**, good humour and quiet determination off it.

Many point to his rise from humble beginnings. “We were a very poor family,” Banks recalled in an interview. He left school at 15 for a job shovelling coal.

After breaking into the Chesterfield reserves, he soon won a professional contract at Leicester City, reportedly dancing for joy when he discovered his weekly wage was **£15 per week** (England’s current goalkeeper, Jordan Pickford, earns £60,000 per week).

Such success came from hard graft. In his years at Stoke City, Banks was known for putting in extra hours after training.

An eye **injury** ended his career at the premature age of 33, but by then his England exploits had earned him a place in national folklore.

And while, upon his death, tributes poured in from footballers and journalists, perhaps the most touching came from his once formidable opponent: Pelé. “Rest in peace, my friend,” he wrote, “yes, you were a goalkeeper with magic. But you were also so much more. You were a fine human being.”

Why is the death of Gordon Banks so meaningful?

Legend

Perhaps it is about nostalgia? For many people, England’s World Cup triumph represents a time of national glory and confidence that has since faded. Could the political and social uncertainty we are experiencing today explain our longing for sporting icons like Banks? Could he represent a time in our history that has passed?

Or is it more about his personal qualities? As a goalkeeper he was the heroic last line of defence, and his modesty is a trait seemingly lacking in many modern athletes and celebrities. Should we call Banks a hero? Or perhaps, a role model?

YOU DECIDE

1. Is it right to call Gordon Banks a hero?
2. Could you describe a football match as art?

ACTIVITIES

1. What does it mean to be a role model? Discuss this question in pairs or small groups. Share your ideas with the class. What modern role models can you think of? What qualities might they share with Gordon Banks?
2. Think of someone you admire from the past. For example, it could be a historical leader, writer, activist or athlete. Write your own obituary for them, describing their finest qualities and achievements.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

“Out of all the unimportant things, football is the most important.”

Pope John Paul II
What do you think?

Q & A

What do we know?

Gordon Banks died on Tuesday after a fight against kidney cancer, at the age of 81. Of the 11 players who started the 1966 World Cup final, he is the fourth to pass away. He won 73 caps for the national side between 1963 and 1972. The International Federation of Football History and Statistics named Banks the second-best goalkeeper of the 20th century, after the Russian Lev Yashin.

What do we not know?

England got close to repeating the heroics of 1966 last year when they got to the semi-finals of the FIFA World Cup in Russia. We do not know if the achievements of Gordon Banks and his teammates will ever be repeated. England's next attempt will be at the 2022 World Cup in Qatar.

WORD WATCH

Unanimous

When people are in complete agreement.

1966

England famously defeated West Germany 4-2, with striker Geoff Hurst scoring a hat-trick.

Goal-bound

See the save for yourself by following the link in Become An Expert. Pelé was so sure that the ball was going in that he reportedly shouted “Goal!” as he headed the ball.

Pelé

Widely regarded as the greatest player in the history of the game. He scored 650 goals in 694 matches.

Modesty

The quality or state of being unassuming in the estimation of one's abilities.

£15 per week

Adjusting for inflation, this is the equivalent of earning £342 per week today. This is just above today's living wage, and many times less than the earnings of modern professional footballers.

Injury

He sustained the injury in a car accident, which caused glass to damage his eye.