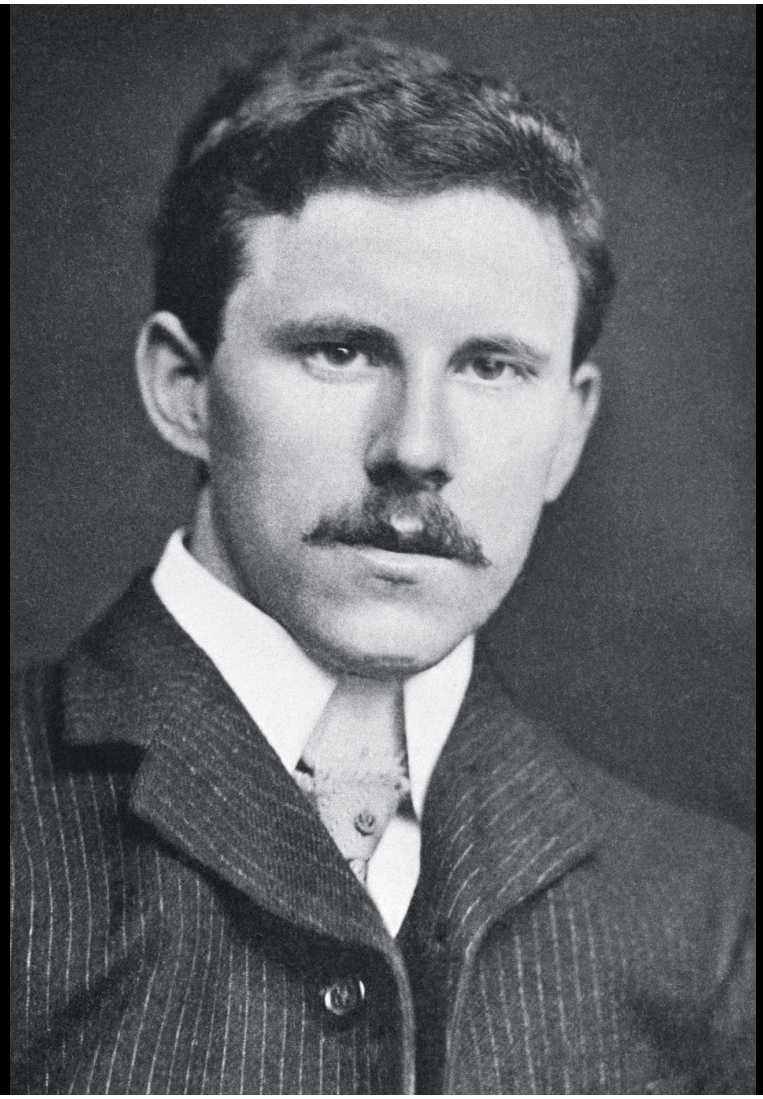

A perfect gentleman

Vivian Woodward was a prolific goalscorer for Spurs and England, but it was his insistence on maintaining both a rigorously fair approach and the amateur spirit which has secured his enduring legacy in the history of English football

The son of a well-to-do architect, Vivian John Woodward made a name for himself as an architect, too; among his designs was the main stand of the Antwerp Olympic Stadium, in Belgium, which was built for the 1920 Games. Yet it is as an outstanding all-round amateur sportsman that Woodward will be best remembered.

He was born on June 3, 1879 in Kennington, in London, just yards from the Oval Cricket Ground, which in those days also hosted The FA Cup Final – one of the few showcase football events in which he would never get to play.

Woodward is rightly considered among the very best centre-forwards ever to play for his country. He was to score 29 goals in 23 full England internationals between 1903 and 1911 – a record that was not broken until the 1950s – plus a further 57 goals in 44 amateur internationals, and captained the Great Britain football team to the gold medal at both the 1908 and 1912 Olympic Games.

As a Tottenham Hotspur player, his 75 goals in 171 senior matches can be favourably compared with another of the club's finest strikers, Jimmy Greaves, even if Woodward's eight years at Spurs, during which they joined the Football League, yielded no major silverware apart from his first season, 1900/1901 – when he took no part in the victorious FA Cup campaign. Yet he played in only 39 defeats, which testifies to his ability to lead the line and inspire the other players around him.

In his three-quarter-length shorts, which were considered old-fashioned even then, he was one of a dying breed of gentleman amateur footballers. He was called 'Sir' by team-mates and even opponents, and earned universal and absolute respect for his courtesy, insistence on fair play and refusal to make a penny out of his sporting prowess – often even declining to be repaid the cost of his fares – while fully supporting those sportsmen who chose the professional path.

He was slight of build, yet, at 5ft 10½in, relatively tall for the time and a master header of the ball. "It is easier to escape your policemen when the ball is in the air," he would say, "especially if you are a couple of inches taller than they are".

His lethally elegant performances relied on speed of thought, clever interplay and an ability to place a shot rather than blast it – shades of Greaves again. Although he was frequently the victim of fouling by defenders who felt unable to contain him, he neither complained nor retaliated, nor allowed team-mates to do so on his behalf.

He seldom played at the start of the football season because of his commitment as a leading batsman and wicketkeeper for South London's Spencer Cricket & Lawn Tennis Club; he also excelled at tennis, billiards and that Edwardian novelty craze, rollerskating – a range of sports that required balance, co-ordination and coolness under pressure.

Another reason that he missed so many Spurs games was his obligation, not only to his architectural practice, but also to turning out for Chelmsford for whom he continued to play concurrently with Spurs in the early part of each season. They were one of many sides he represented in Essex, where he was regarded as a local hero and affectionately known as 'Jack'. Woodward had moved to the region as a boy and had gained a fine reputation while playing for Clacton Town. Spurs spotted his talents when he was playing for the Essex county side and as a member of the Harwich & Parkeston team in The FA Amateur Cup.

Woodward made his Tottenham Hotspur debut, aged 21, in a 1-0 home win over Bristol City on April 6, 1901, after getting his chance when Spurs opted to rest most of their first team because of an FA Cup tie only two days later. Yet he did not play regularly for Spurs until the 1902/1903 season, during which he also won his first full cap for England; he scored twice in a 4-0 victory against Ireland. He would rapidly become not only the country's top scorer, but also English football's greatest ambassador; in 1905, while on a football tour of America with the Pilgrims, an amateur team, he was invited to discuss the sport with a local enthusiast – Teddy Roosevelt, the United States President.

Over the next decade Woodward was an immensely popular club player; his finest season for Spurs was the club's first in the Football League, when he scored the first goal of their opening game, a 3-0 home win over Wolverhampton Wanderers on September 1, 1908. His prolific Spurs partnership with Joe Walton helped him to finish the season as top scorer with 18 goals from 27 league appearances. His goals helped the team gain promotion to the First Division and won him the Football League's Player of the Year award for 1908/1909. By then he had sat on Tottenham Hotspur's board of directors for two seasons, the second of which involved him picking the team after Spurs decided to dispense with a manager.

It was a huge shock, therefore, when, a month into the summer of 1909, with the promise of First Division football approaching, he resigned from Spurs and retired from top-flight football to focus on his architectural practice. Initially he played for Chelmsford, but in November 1909 he surprisingly returned to top-flight football with Chelsea, his former team's London rivals, who were facing an injury crisis.

"Mr Kirby, the chairman of Chelsea, wrote to me a few days ago pointing out … how difficult his club found it to complete a side, especially in attack," he explained to *The Athletic News*. "He reminded me that three seasons ago I promised that, if ever I was a freelance, I would come to Chelsea if they thought I could be of any service to them." Woodward felt he had to honour his promise; besides, his Kennington home was closer to Chelsea than White Hart Lane. A crowd of 35,000 people welcomed Woodward's return to White Hart Lane in the last match of the season, which, in one of those turns of fortune that all football fans know, both teams needed to win to stay in the First Division. Spurs claimed victory 2-1, so Woodward's assistance had not quite done the trick for his new club. But buoyed by a successful England tour of South Africa, which convinced him that his top-flight career was not over at the age of 31, he returned to Chelsea the next season and helped them win promotion in 1911/1912. Gallingly for Spurs fans, he even scored against his former team on December 27, 1913.

On September 8, 1914, following the outbreak of World War I, the Territorial Army recruited No 889 Private V J Woodward, of the 5th City of London Rifle Corps. He

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transferred, as a second lieutenant, to the 17th (Service) Battalion (1st Football) of The Duke of Cambridge's Own (Middlesex Regiment), nicknamed 'The Diehards', on February 9, 1915 – a unit that also included Walter Tull, another former Spurs player.

During his Army training Woodward was one of many enlisted footballers who were still able to play football; he was granted leave to play for Chelsea in the so-called 'Khaki' FA Cup Final in April 1915, but declined selection because he did not want to take the place of his team-mate, Bob Thomson, who had played in the earlier rounds. The last match of the 1914/1915 season, before the professional game was suspended until the end of the war, ended with Chelsea losing 3-0 to Sheffield United.

In November 1915 the Football Battalion transferred to France, and in January 1916 Woodward was wounded in the leg by a grenade blast during fighting. He was one of the unit's 37 casualties, four of them fatal. He returned to the trenches seven months later, and the next year, approaching his 38th birthday, applied to become an Army physical training instructor. He ended the war as a captain, and coach of the British Army football team. In 1919 he played his final competitive games for Chelsea in the London Football Combination and, upon demobilisation that year, returned to Clacton where, aged 40, his football career eased to a close in the Essex local leagues.

He had also retired from architecture to become a dairy farmer at farms in Weeley Heath and Frinton-on-Sea, near Clacton. Yet he did not cut all ties with football: he joined the Chelsea board in 1922, and remained a member for eight years. Later the Great Depression of the 1930s had a devastating affect on his dairy farm business.

During World War II, Woodward served on the Home Front as an ARP warden, but in 1949, aged 70, his health began to fail and he moved into a nursing home in Ealing, under the care of The FA. His declining years were sad and lonely: because he had never married, he tended to be short of company.

Woodward died on February 1, 1954, the day after the death of G Wagstaffe Simmons, his friend and a former fellow Spurs director, who, in 1947 had written of him: "What a fine sportsman he was … always the essence of courtesy, an interesting companion, well-read and able to converse on a wide range of subjects, I look back with much satisfaction on my long association with him … There is much talk these days about sham amateurism. I know that Woodward was a purist of the purists. It would have been an insult to him to offer the barest fraction above his nominal expenses. Indeed, it was often difficult to persuade him to accept even those. Shall we look back on his like again? He was everything that was best in the pastime of which he was so brilliant an exponent. On and off the field he was nature's gentleman, and a higher tribute than that cannot be paid to any man."