

We Can Learn A Lot From Samba Stars Who Put In Graft To Master Their Craft

[Jan 13 2008](#) By Gordon Waddell

NEIL MACKINTOSH'S eyes light up like fireworks. "I've seen the future," he says. "And his name is Tyrone."

It will come as no surprise that the future lives in Brazil. A 12-year-old kid born in South Africa, moved to Sao Paulo. Next stop? Wherever the hell he wants. He's that special.

Contrary to the myth though Samba stars don't just inherit all their gifts from God. They graft for their genius.

And what makes them world-beaters is they graft harder than anyone else in the game to get there.

For years the rest of the world has believed every kid in Brazil rose to super stardom playing keepie uppie on Copacabana beach or knocking a ball up against the wall of their tin shacks in the poverty-stricken favelas.

But Mackintosh - the SFA's head of youth development - wanted the truth. And on a fact-finding mission to three of their top clubs he found it.

"I was knocked out," Mackintosh admits. "I was asked that if I wanted to investigate the best youth development in the world, where would I go? I said Brazil. They produce the best players.

"And I couldn't believe it when I was sent to find out why. Most people think it just happens for them because they have millions of kids to choose from.

"Nothing could be further from the truth.

"I spent 10 days visiting Fluminense, Sao Paulo, where I was shown round by their director of football Marco Aurelio Cunha, and Atletico Paranaense.

"I had unbelievable access at all three clubs mainly thanks to Andy Roxburgh hooking me up with Carlos Alberto Parreira who put in a word for us.

"And while I didn't find them doing things hugely different to us they do it more. Much more. The facilities were also a real eye-opener and the detail, the care they put into their young players is magnificent.

"It is a myth that they rely purely on God-given talent."

Mackintosh has already started presenting his findings to the powers that be - and his briefing is one of the most revealing hours any football fan could sit through.

Right down to his tip for the top. "Unbelievable," he laughs "He's 12, from South Africa. Sao Paulo took him to Brazil, he stays with a family, goes to school every day, trains every day and is a great kid to speak to as well.

"They were playing a team of kids two years older, all brilliant - and Tyrone stood out a mile. He reminded me of John Collins at his peak but at the age of 12!

"The same movements, decisions, he plays the game like an adult. A kid of that ability would be able to take everyone on in the match he was playing and score at will.

"But Tyrone didn't - he plays the game. One-twos, overlaps, crosses, nutmegs defenders, sets team-mates up, scores - and that was in the first 10 minutes.

"It's why teams like Man Utd and Real Madrid are watching him."

The statistics are frightening. In 2006 Brazil exported 851 players across the world.

Last season 116 were playing in the Champions League.

That kind of conveyor belt of talent takes time, effort and money.

Mackintosh said: "The three clubs were all different. Sao Paulo are the giant, Fluminense are based in Rio and Paranaense are a regional club in the south although they were more interesting - they have to work harder to produce and sell talent because of their size.

"But they all pay great attention to detail. Take their facilities.

"At Fluminense they deliberately keep one pitch in absolutely shocking condition.

"It makes the player really focus on the ball and how it reacts.

"Sao Paulo's centre was amazing but Paranaense's was pick of the bunch. The facilities are frightening - Murray Park eat your heart out.

"They take over a player's life and look after his every need.

"As well as all the pitches and pools and gyms they have accommodation on site and even their own barber, dentist and church.

"They have three lanes in their pool - one's ice cold for baths but they can run in it too.

"Then they have a normal bit for swimming and another one they lower bikes with paddles into for leg work!

"The detail is frightening, even in the food. Malnutrition is an issue when they first sign young players.

"But they know what each kid's programme is so on a Monday they will be doing physical work for example. They know how many calories they burn.

"The kids go into the refectory and swipe their personal card through a machine at the door.

"By the time they walk to the end of the room their meal is ready, designed to replenish exactly the energy they've spent in training.

"The club's giving kids things they never had and get commitment and desire like you've never seen."

But Mackintosh was there to learn about technique. What he found wasn't rocket science - just sheer hard work.

He sighed: "Most clubs start working with kids at age 10. They can sign them then but not professionally until 16, the same as here.

"The difference is they train almost every day from age 10 to 16.

"They train between 12 and 20 hours a week - we're lucky if our Under-19s do 12.

"Their 10-year-olds do as much as our Under-19s. I told them that and they asked 'How will you ever develop a player?'

"The numbers are amazing as well. They carry between 35 and 40 kids per age group. In Scotland, say in an Under-15 team, you have a squad of 18 where four are quality and the rest are jersey-fillers.

"They have 35 quality players who can't let their standards slip because they have someone who's after their bed, contract, life.

"That's how focused they must be, for so many it's a way out."

The hours spent working on technique pay off - as Mackintosh saw with his own eyes.

He said: "It can be the simplest thing. Every club I went to has a wall. They have two lines - one nine feet away, one 18 feet away.

"And one of the tests is see how many times they can play a ball against the wall in a minute.

"Between 40 and 50 touches would be a good average.

"These kids? Between 70 and 80.

"More than one a second from nine feet. Unbelievable. They had this question - *forca v art?* - which means strength v skill. They always say skill wins but both matter. The technical ability of Paranaense's Under-17s was amazing."

The big question now for Mackintosh is how to put into practice what he has learned.

He said: "Brazil has six million footballers - more than we have people. But I have a lot to pass on to our youth directors.

"One thing worth doing is playing more futsal - fives using a smaller ball - with younger players. The Brazilians think it's a massively helpful tool to develop technique.

"And player and coach exchanges can happen. Their people are up for it although I haven't spoken to our clubs and it could be expensive.

"Sao Paulo take young players from all over the world for three months at a time and feed them through their system. To me that would be a good investment.

"Any team that can sell £50million worth of talent in 10 years from a set-up that costs just over £500,000 a year to run must be worth looking into.

"But while we have a long way to go I was pleased to find out we're doing the right things to get there.

"We just need to do more of it."

"Brazil's development of players is amazing. Their A 10-year-olds do as much work as our Under-19s"

Have your say on the latest news and sport in our [Forums](#)