



Words & Photos: Tim Beynon

# BRAZILIAN DREAMS

**N**ext month's TYF will see the start of an exciting new three-part coaching series from the increasingly popular Brazilian Soccer Schools. The brainchild of founder and all-round extrovert, Simon Clifford, BSS and futebol de salao is now booming across the globe. This month, and as a preview to the new series, he told us a little bit about of story behind the Brazilian dream.

Sitting in the bar at Garforth Town FC – the club he owns – Simon Clifford is surrounded by books on Brian Clough and a much scribbled-upon film script. Sharing a table with a couple of his colleagues the Brazilian Soccer Schools

founder is making a list of all his staff members and looking slightly harassed in the process.

Clifford is the football consultant on a forthcoming cinematic version of David Pearce's excellent book, *The Damned United*, and, in a matter of weeks, he is having to find and train the film's football-playing cast. Based on the story of Clough's 44-day reign at Leeds United in 1974, Clifford is giving his entire staff a part in the flick and is holding casting sessions for the remainder of the players. He even offers your humble Editor an opportunity to play for Man City which, not wanting to show up the rest of the cast, is reluctantly declined.

This isn't Clifford's first foray into the world of cinema either, putting his list to

one side for a moment he proudly recalls details of how he transformed Keira Knightley from an actress to a footballer for *Bend It Like Beckham*. He even has Knightley's signed training vest in a display case in his office, alongside similarly scribed boots and shirts from football's biggest names, Pele included.

Five minutes in Clifford's company is enough to understand why he has achieved so much. Here is a forthright man in possession of confidence and self belief by the bucket load, passionate about all he does, not afraid to knock the establishment or established principles, driven by success and clearly media savvy.

"I was born in Gisbrough in North Yorkshire," he reveals as we discuss his early roots. "At school I was in an Under

**“I felt sorry for other kids who weren’t in these Academies though, so we started up a soccer school which was free for kids to come along to”**

11 team when I was eight, so I was reasonable at football, I played through primary school, got in to the district side and then went to secondary school. Then, I think in about 1982 when I was 11, I first fell in love with Brazilian football. It was the year of the World Cup and of that fantastic Brazil team with the likes of Socrates and Zico.”

So Clifford’s love of South American football began at an early age but, while the exploits of the Brazil team in the World Cup had sparked a passion that would last a lifetime, his own sporting endeavors actually veered away from football. Fed up of being accused of being selfish on the football pitch, Clifford turned to athletics and, as a fan of Steve Ovett and Seb Coe, set about applying himself to distance running, a sport where he could focus on himself as an individual.

“At about 14 I was running about 40 miles a week,” he says. “By 18 I broke a national record for 10,000 metres and by then I was running about 110 miles a week and training three times a day.

“By the time I got to Leeds University at 18 I was probably in the form of my life. However, I met a girl while I was there – who is now my wife – and my training went from three times a day, to twice a day, to once a day, to nothing. Instead, I threw myself in to my sport science degree and I did really well, got a first and took as many options as I could that looked at football, which I had always passionately followed although the athletics had become such a big part of my life.

After finishing his degree and weighing up his options Clifford eventually settled on following his wife in to teaching, spending five years as a PE teacher, a time he remembers fondly.

“I absolutely loved it,” he says. “I used Brazil as my inspiration with the kids I was teaching. I remember sitting them all



down to watch the BBC’s video Boys From Brazil and telling them all that that’s how we are going to play.”

His lifelong fascination with Brazil and his academic studies in to the coaching methods of other countries took a different turn, however, when the club he supported his whole life, Middlesbrough, recruited a certain Juninho. Determined to meet and befriend the diminutive Brazilian Clifford introduced himself to his father, asked him whether he could interview Juninho, visited their family home and there the foundations of a great friendship were laid.

“I ended being a bit of a safe friend for him I think,” says Clifford. “I wasn’t a footballer, I didn’t really go out and socialise and I think his Dad encouraged our friendship. So almost every evening I would drive from Leeds to where he lived and we would just talk about football and about how youth players develop in Brazil.”

Clifford and Juninho’s friendship grew stronger and the primary school teacher ended up travelling with him to Brazil where they made a BBC documentary that looked in to Futebol de Salao – a small-sided game played with a small, limited-rebound ball. Clifford’s enthusiasm and passion for the Brazilian way of coaching stepped up another level and, upon his return to the UK and once the TV documentaries had been aired, he found himself invited to take sessions and work with almost every Premier League club. Mitre also offered to make the persuasive Clifford the Futebol de Salao balls he’d need.

“That made people sit up and take notice,” says Clifford. “I felt sorry for other kids who weren’t in these Academies though, so we started up a soccer school which was free for kids to come along to. We had about 50-80 kids who would come along.

“So then I thought about how I could spread this out more. I didn’t really have

any money and then someone suggested franchising and I looked in to it. I made it £500 to get a franchise and created 28 in the first year, and that was the start of it really. In the months that followed Lego approached me and offered me around £1m to sponsor the schools, and without that I don’t think I would have gone forward. Now the business has expanded further and I have added a lot to it.”

Brazilian Soccer Schools now coach over one million children in 61 different countries with graduates going on to make it to the top of the game. Manchester City and England defender, Micah Richards, is arguably Clifford’s proudest achievement and the former BSS graduate often returns to work with him and to help with the Soccer Schools programme.

The BSS programme, claims Clifford, is now the most complete development programme of any sport anywhere in the world. Its syllabus is by no means exclusively Brazilian either, encompassing

much of Clifford’s own input there are four main aspects to it; Futebol de Salao, emphasis on individual skills, increased time training and physical training.

The three part series that Clifford has compiled for TYF encompasses all of these elements.

“In the first article I would like to look at how to transfer a skill or a move in to a game situation, under pressure, when you’re tired and under physical stress,” he explains. “In the second piece I would like to look at long passing. A long pass is one of the most beautiful things in the game, but anyone can learn it and I’d like to look at the passing and receiving of long passes.

“In any game you have to know that you are capable of executing that pass and that your team-mate is able to receive that type of ball. Again you work from person to person and build it up in to situations when they’re under increasing amounts of pressure. Then you look at

different parts of the body to bring the ball down because you must caress it down to the floor. I’d like to look at this because it is one of the strongest elements of our coaching.

“The third article in the series, meanwhile, will look at physical training without the ball. We start players on physical training aged nine because football is a hard, tough, physical game and you have to be physically prepared for it. So I’d like the final article in the series, which I’m looking forward to starting next month, to look at that.”

As hordes of children arrive outside Garforth Town’s cosy clubhouse for an evening of Futebol de Salao our conversation eventually draws to a close. Simon Clifford picks up his script and assorted oddments, apologises for having to fly off and leaves us to watch a BSS session in practice. Led by one of Clifford’s senior coaches, the talented bunch of youngsters – seemingly ranging from around 10-16 – demonstrate a spectacular array of skills and tricks, coupled with incredible strength and enthusiasm. Indeed, if Clifford’s players and staff are all as talented as this then the cast of the forthcoming film will be streets ahead of the original players they’re doubling for! This journalist, meanwhile, can breathe a sigh of relief at passing up the chance of being seriously humiliated.