

JOHNNY TAKES ON AFRICAN ODYSSEY

SIERRA LEONE'S WORLD CUP BID IN HANDS OF LISBURN COACH



Suited to the role: Johnny McKinstry is making waves in west Africa despite having never played or managed professionally

If you watched it in a movie, you would say that the script was too far fetched but the extraordinary story of Johnny McKinstry is true.

At just 27, this week the Lisburn native will take charge of Sierra Leone in a World Cup qualifier and this despite having never played or coached football at professional level before.

Johnny's appointment in April made headlines around the world.

The virtually unknown Northern Ireland man, whose diverse CV includes stints at Castlereagh Colts and New York Red Bulls, replaced experienced Swedish coach Lars-Olof Mattsson.

McKinstry got the job after he impressed Sierra Leone's footballing hierarchy whilst working for the Craig Bellamy Foundation.

The former Liverpool and Manchester City striker, looking forward to playing again in the Premier League with Cardiff next season, runs a non-profit football academy in the capital Freetown.

McKinstry explained: "I have been coaching in Sierra Leone for just over three years now, working as Academy Manager for the Craig Bellamy Foundation where I am responsible for the identification

BY KEITH BAILIE

INTERNATIONAL FOOTBALL

and development of the country's best young players.

"Having followed the progress of the national team closely over the last three years, I was well placed to take the job on.

"Now that I have been entrusted by the FA, I feel confident that we will be able to improve the team's standing within world football, and with a bit of luck, have a good crack at reaching the next stage of the World Cup qualifiers."

The Leone Stars host Tunisia in Freetown on Saturday, before travelling to the Cape Verde Islands a week later.

McKinstry needs two wins to keep the World Cup dream on track, but he is confident he can guide the national side to positive results.

"I've been doing a lot of planning for the upcoming games. I already knew a lot about the strengths of the Sierra Leone squad, as I have watched them closely in recent years, and I have gone about determining how we can exploit the weaknesses of both Tunisia and Cape Verde," he says.

Sierra Leone's most famous player, former Inter Milan

striker Mohamed Kallon has admitted that he had never heard of McKinstry, but the Lisburn man believes the players will respect and respond to his coaching.

He said: "I am not concerned about entering the international environment. Players appreciate quality, hard work and honesty. These are three things that they will get from me from the moment we get together ahead of the first international.

SOUNDBITE

JOHNNY MCKINSTRY

Sierra Leone sit well above Northern Ireland in the world rankings and I do believe that they possess players of a better quality in key positions

"My aims as manager of Sierra Leone are the same as they have been for every team I have ever coached, and that is to win the next game.

"That is not to say the upcoming games will be easy, but I believe that Sierra Leone possess the quality to succeed."

McKinstry (pictured), once described by Sir Bobby Charlton as 'one of the most exciting young coaches in the UK', will lead a team that is actually higher in Fifa's rankings to Northern Ireland — they are

67th, — a full 52 places above Michael O'Neill's side.

McKinstry, who is contracted until the end of August, believes the Fifa rankings are correct, stating: "Sierra Leone obviously sit well above Northern Ireland in the world rankings, and I do believe that they possess players of a better quality in key positions at the present moment. Domestically things are not in such a healthy state, with the national league not presently operating."

The Sierra Leone Premier League has been on hiatus since 2012, due to severe financial difficulties. The governing body is currently attempting to secure the required sponsorship, to allow the league to recommence.

McKinstry, who turns 28 in July, has ambitions that stretch beyond West Africa, but for now he is focusing on improving the Leone Stars.

"I want to go as far as I can in this game. As the last decade has proven, it is hard to tell exactly

where that journey will take me, but I am confident that the path ahead will be an enjoyable one to travel down. Hopefully it will pass through the 2014 World Cup in Brazil with Sierra Leone. If it does I will be delighted, as will six million others here in West Africa."

Off the field, Johnny has never been happier. He currently resides in the capital Freetown, a city which is still recovering from the effects of a violent Civil War, that stretched from 1991 to 2002.

"Sierra Leone is a great country. Obviously it has its development challenges which it is working through, but it is improving all the time.

"I feel privileged to live in a place where I have access to some of the world's most beautiful tropical beaches, which can be enjoyed in 30c temperature pretty much all year round. The warmth and friendliness of the people

of Sierra Leone is really incredible, as well."

While Johnny may be focusing on World Cup qualification, he hasn't lost touch with his roots. McKinstry is an avid Lisburn Distillery supporter, who still follows the Whites from a distance.

"I was a Distillery fan from the age of 8 or 9, and for a period of about 10 years hardly ever missed a game, home or away. That experience has undoubtedly shaped my views on the game, and it is an apprenticeship that I am very grateful for," he said.

Like all Distillery fans, Johnny was disappointed to see the Whites relegated from the top flight, but he believes new boss Tommy Kincaid is the right man for the job.

He said: "I'm pleased to see the return of Tommy Kincaid to the club. Tommy was assistant manager for a number of years when I was stood in the terraces, and I am confident that his return as manager will coincide with an upturn in fortunes at New Grosvenor."

While his beloved Distillery prepare for the Belfast Telegraph Championship Johnny McKinstry will be looking forward to taking on Equatorial Guinea this August. If he can secure three victories, it might be a while before he returns to the terraces of Ballyskeagh.

