

THERE is an almost missionary zeal to Johnny McKinstry's devotion to his job in Sierra Leone.

The country of six million people, and its neighbours Liberia and Guinea, sits at the centre of the Ebola outbreak which presently stalks the globe.

More than 1,000 people have been killed by the highly contagious virus since the country declared a state of emergency on July 31.

Yet in spite of the very grave dangers just outside his doorstep, McKinstry has resisted calls from his family to return home to his native Lisburn, vowing to honour a promise he made to the parents of the young footballers under his charge that he would protect them.

Although just recently sacked as head of the country's national team last month, the 29-year-old football coach has run the Craig Bellamy Foundation in Tombo – a fishing town some 30 miles from the country's capital city Freetown – for the last five years.

The academy is currently in lockdown, with a self-imposed quarantine currently in place in the 15-acre site.

Supplies naturally run low, and he and a driver fortnightly brave the gauntlet of disease and death to go out and get provisions – yet despite the sense of dread all around, he insists morale is good.

Like a colonel defending his besieged garrison, McKinstry will not abandon his troops.

"Ebola is a very serious issue here and it's not being overhyped, a lot of people have died because of it," he said.

"At the academy here, we are in a self-imposed quarantine where we moved all of our staff on site, so even our cooks and our security and grounds people, those who lived in communities around us, are now on site.

"The kids go to school here, they train here and they sleep here. Once every 10 days or once every two weeks, usually I will go in with our driver and our van to pick up supplies in town.

"But otherwise, we remain on site because Ebola is a disease of contact and if you remove the contact, you remove the risk.

"So we have put those things in place just to make 100 per cent sure we are looking after the kids, it's working very well and we're all doing well."

For the ignorant Westerner who has never set foot in Sierra Leone, the west African nation, wracked by civil war from 1991 until 2002, conjures images of poverty-stricken villages, dusty outposts and sweltering hardship.

But while McKinstry admits that many Sierra Leoneans endure lives of extreme privation – the average wage is just one dollar a day – there



PASSING IT ON
Johnny McKinstry coaching elite young players at the Craig Bellamy Academy



PRE-MATCH TALK
Johnny with Craig Bellamy ahead of a Leone Stars tie with Swaziland back in May



SAY WHAT YOU SEE
Johnny is surrounded by local media after the final whistle of a Leone game



PREPARATION
Johnny gives instructions to his squad before their game with Seychelles in July



ON THE BALL
Sierra Leone's Alhassan 'Crespo' Kamara in action against Tunisia in June 2013

Northern Ireland man Johnny McKinstry is still living the football dream in Sierra Leone.. despite being in lockdown because of Africa's Ebola crisis

is a joie de vivre which is a world away from the stereotype.

He loves the country and his job, even if he, his staff and his players are more or less imprisoned in their own complex.

He said: "The United Nations development index ranks Sierra Leone 178 out of 184 countries so poverty is everywhere but at the same time, people get on with life.

"Yes people are struggling but that doesn't mean they don't have a smile on their faces, they are very warm people.

"Yes, you have to do without certain things, you don't have access to the internet 24 hours a day, you don't have power 24 hours a day.

"In my football academy, we have a generator for when the electricity isn't working but little things like that you become accustomed to.

"But it's a beautiful country, we have amazing beaches, amazing people and food, so it's a wonderful part of the world."

If one day, McKinstry reaches the very pinnacle of the game, few could begrudge him his day in the sun.

If one day, he realises his dream of leading his team out into one of Europe's most daunting amphitheatres to the strains of the Champions League anthem, no one could say he hasn't earned it.

And set against the determination which has characterised his young life so far, it's not as far-fetched as it may sound.

McKinstry was just 27 when he was made the national team boss of Sierra Leone, yet his is no fly-by-night tale of opportunism.

Granted, there's been a little serendipity in his meteoric rise from youth team coach to the youngest international manager in the world, but McKinstry has largely been the architect of his own destiny.

He has consistently thrown caution to the wind and embraced new challenges, from upping sticks

to join the New York Red Bulls academy at the age of 22, to putting down roots in one of most volatile and impoverished countries in the world.

Players and coaches within Northern Ireland are sometimes charged with parochialism, afraid to venture beyond their own borders – but McKinstry does not stand accused.

He is at the vanguard of a new managerial set here determined to broaden their horizons and push the boundaries.

Brendan Rodgers' ascent to the Liverpool hot-seat owes a significant debt to his decision to serve an apprenticeship in his early twenties traversing the length and breadth of Europe to study the game.

And McKinstry sought to do something similar; only instead of the polished temples of Clarefontaine and La Masia Rodgers visited, he sought out the less

celebrated footballing arenas of the United States and Sierra Leone.

"The Irish League was my first football education but I knew to work full-time in the game, I would have to look outside of Ireland," he said.

"I went to university in England but I also knew breaking into football in the United Kingdom is very difficult, it's a lot about who you know and the contacts you have so I knew I had to go and prove myself outside the United Kingdom and outside of Europe even.

"So I had always envisaged that this would take me around the world and so it has proved.

"But my ambition has always been to coach at the top level, whether that be at the World Cup or the Champions League or one of the top leagues in Europe.

"That's the aim, I'm in no massive rush but I'm looking forward to my next challenge, wherever that might be."

McKinstry's switch from New York to Sierra Leone in January 2010 was not the culture shock it might otherwise have been, he says, as he had already spent a summer sampling west African life a few years before.

So when the chance to get involved with the Craig Bellamy Foundation came up, he simply couldn't turn it down.

Although it doubles as a refuge from Ebola at present, the academy is at its heart an oasis of western philanthropy where some 27 secondary school age footballers are coached to an elite level while receiving a high standard of education, all for free.

"My relationship with football in Africa goes back to 2005. I came out one summer to do stuff in Ghana, the academy there, 'Right to Dream', were looking for a new head coach and I was still at university at the time," explained McKinstry.

"So they invited me out in what

was sort of an elongated interview for six weeks and I did a lot of coaching and got to know everybody.

"Ultimately, at the time, I wasn't quite ready for it in terms of the overall management position, and I accepted that and came back and finished my degree but I kept in touch with the people who ran that academy.

"And as it turned out, they were hired as the consultants to set up Craig's academy in Sierra Leone.

"I was out in New York at the time when I got the phone call and it was one of those things. I didn't know a great deal about Sierra Leone but it seemed like an interesting project and I knew what you'd get from west Africa in terms of the passion and the enthusiasm of the players and the untapped talent they have here.

"It just seemed like a great opportunity so I packed the bags and left the Manhattan skyline

behind for rural west Africa. "The amount of talent out here is immense, and as the structures for football improve, you are going to see a lot more top African players on the world stage."

It says something about McKinstry that his proudest moment in the game was not his appointment to the Sierra Leone hot seat, nor guiding them to their highest ever FIFA world ranking position (50th) during his 18 months in charge, but rather seeing two of his protégés from the academy called up by their country.

He said: "Last year, Sierra Leone under-20s called up two of our academy boys. They were only 16 years of age at the time and one of them made his debut.

"To see him pull on the Sierra Leone shirt was such a big moment for him and his family and his community – that's probably been the proudest I've been in football." McKinstry may harbour big and

bold ambitions, but he's inextricably linked to the grassroots game, both through his role with the foundation in Sierra Leone, and with his back story in Northern Ireland.

He fell in love with the game growing up as a Lisburn Distillery fan, following the club through thick and thin during his teenage years.

"I had that pleasure growing up, from nine or 10 years old I went and watched them," said McKinstry.

"It's a family thing, my uncle and my grandfather supported the Whites so they passed it down to me. I used to go every Saturday with my uncle, and follow them up and down the country – going to the likes of Limavady on a Saturday afternoon brings back memories."

From the Ballyskeagh terraces to the front line in Sierra Leone's burgeoning football scene, McKinstry's is quite the story.

GOLDEN GOALS

Leone Stars go 2-1 up against Tunisia in June last year and Johnny is all smiles



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