

Luis Felipe Scolari

Never be afraid to change

Until his recent release from Chelsea, Luis Felipe "Big Phil" Scolari had a long run of success as a coach. He won the 2002 World Cup with Brazil after a very successful coaching career in Brazil, Kuwait and Portugal. He has won 15 medals with his clubs since he began his coaching career in 1982. He was announced as coach of Bunyodkor, Uzbekistan's champion club, on June 9.

There are people who think being a national coach is the best job in the world. Would you agree?

It is obviously a good job. I'm not going to deny that, but you have to consider the huge responsibility that goes with it. In some situations you have even more responsibility than a prime minister or a president.

Why do you say that?

Because the whole world talks football and knows something about it. People talk about politics, health or the economy much less. Of course, you have a good job if you're a national coach, but to get it you have to work hard and achieve lots of good results. So again: Being a national coach is nice, but don't think it's easy.

It's better than working as a club coach, though. There's less hullabaloo, less stress.

You could say that, but you'd be wrong. Though you're not on the training ground every day, you're still kept very busy, and you hardly have any free time. You have to watch players, as individuals and within the group. Then there's the psychological aspect. In short, there are innumerable details you can't afford to ignore. You have to be alert all the time.

What do you need to be a good national coach?

An in-depth knowledge of football, in particular. You also need good people around you, a good image and a wealth of experience if you are to gain the trust not just of the players, but also of the entire country. And finally you need to be passionate about what you do.

What has priority for a national coach – tactics or motivation?

First, a coach should pick players who fit in with his philosophy of the game. After that, of course, he has to concern himself with player motivation and psychology. One of the hardest things to do is to get to know a player well enough to give him the best possible attention.

It's clear that psychology is of fundamental importance to you.

Absolutely! Nevertheless, you shouldn't forget that it's easier to work with good players than with bad ones. Working on the mental level is much easier than on the sporting level. If you have to teach a player how to shoot or what positional play is all about, you lose no end of time. But you can convince a player of something using just a few words. The worst thing is dealing with a bad player who thinks he's as good as the others.

In 2002 you won the FIFA World Cup™ with Brazil. In 2004 with Portugal, you came within a whisker of winning the European Championship on home soil in Lisbon. What were those contrasting experiences like?

Unbridled jubilation was followed two years later by mass depression. Yet amidst all the sadness I realized that it was an important first step for Portugal on the way to becoming a more competitive team that is capable of reaching more finals. Despite the crushing feeling of defeat, I knew we had done a very good job. I was sure it wouldn't be our only final. Indeed, we had a good World Cup straight after that. We've qualified for EURO 2008 and we intend to go far in that competition. Portugal has more confidence than ever before.

A change of mentality?

Definitely. And that is exactly what we were aiming for. The Portu-

guese National Team is now very strong mentally. Qualifying for EURO 2008 wasn't easy. There were some awkward moments, but we still achieved our goal. A few years ago we would have failed. Finishing runners-up at EURO 2004 has had its effect.

How far can Portugal go at UEFA EURO 2008?

I believe we can reach the final, although we'll have to beat some tough teams along the way, both in the group stage and in the quarter- and semi-finals. Many people are talking solely about the final. The fact is, however, that every team wants to get there, not just us.

Would a good finish for Portugal augur well for the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa?

Most certainly, especially when you consider that the phase between two major tournaments is incredibly tricky. It's a particularly challenging time for any national coach. You should never be afraid to make changes or introduce younger players. Although you lose experience whenever you make a change, you win new talent for the future at the same time.

Your policy of reducing the average age of the Portuguese National Team has gone almost unnoticed.

And it's not finished yet. I can assure you that the Portugal side at EURO 2008 will contain the odd surprise or two, but we will still continue to rank among the world's top five national teams. Only three or four players from the 2002 team are likely to feature. In Brazil, I was criticized for naming some young players in the national squad: Gilberto Silva, Kleber-son, Kaka and others; all players without any World Cup experience. Even President Teixeira drew my attention to it. Sure, experience is important. France won the World Cup with very experienced players. But a mixture of youth and experience is always the best option. And that is exactly what I'm after. So far my strategy has worked, but you can founder as well.

Is the difference between Brazil and Portugal merely one of quantity or is quality a factor, too?

It's merely one of quantity. In terms of technical ability, Portugal is excellent and plays in a similar way to Brazil – lots of touches, lots of quality work, lots of movement. Like Brazil, Portugal doesn't place the emphasis on power and physical strength as many European teams do. The only difference is that Brazil has 200 million people and Portugal just 10 million. That obviously has an effect on the players available for selection.

But apart from quality and quantity, Brazil must have another secret.

Do you know what the secret is? In Brazil, a ball will make 200 children happy. One ball is all you need. That's what's made football so popular. Other sports find it difficult in Brazil because they are fairly expensive. All that space and, of course, the lovely weather in Brazil are other reasons for the success. Taken together, you are left with a culture that is totally geared to football. Every Brazilian is born with football in his blood. That is perhaps the biggest difference compared with Europe.

The competition in Brazil is so tough that Brazilian players are increasingly turning out for other national teams. Is that a problem?

The authorities should put a stop to that practice, in my opinion. FIFA President Joseph S. Blatter can play an important role in this connection. If it were up to me, you would have to include the national leagues in any such rule. Only four or five foreigners should be allowed per club, for example.

What is your view on the use of new technologies in football? How far should we go?

Continued on page 35.

Is there a formula for success? Are there any shortcuts to success?

I certainly don't think there are any shortcuts to success. You have to accept risk, take chances and be committed to your goals and dreams.

What is more important, game preparation or in-game adjustments?

Soccer is unique in that preparation and in-game adjustments have to be intertwined. Without the benefit of timeouts, unlimited substitutions and specific plays, it's important to prepare your team. It's important to prepare your team both for the situations that occur during a game and those that occur during a season. Game adjustments are an integral part of preparation. Often, the events of the game will dictate which adjustments have to be made. By preparing for these events in advance, your team will benefit. Ultimately, it's a player's game. Coaches live for practice, and players live for the game.

How important is discipline on a soccer team?

Discipline is incredibly important. Our philosophy is one of mutual respect and trust. We respect our players as men and unique individuals. We trust that they will make the right decisions on and off the field. We also realize that occasionally discipline needs to be reinforced. Although we don't have a lot of "rules," we have very high expectations. We try to not let discipline get in the way of leadership.

How does a coach win respect from players?

I think the best way to do it is by being prepared, being a hard worker, being a positive influence, and by being honest and caring.

How important is goal-setting? Team goals? Coaching goals? Win-loss goals?

Goal-setting provides direction, motivation and purpose. We spend a lot of time on our individual and team goals. Feedback, reinforcement and adjustments are an important part of the process. We set short- as well as long-term goals that are specific, measurable and relevant.

What was the biggest mistake you have made in your coaching career?

I'm constantly making and learning from my mistakes. But I don't dwell on them. We have never lost a game, but we have occasionally run out of time when we were behind!

Have you changed as a coach during your career?

I have changed as a person and as a coach. There is a natural maturation. I was 25 when I was named the head coach at Wright State. During the past 20

years, I've continued to learn and develop as both a person and a coach.


What advice would you give to a coach just starting in the profession?

If you are fortunate to find something in your life that you really enjoy doing, put your heart and soul into it. There is no "T" way in coaching. You are responsible not just for yourself, but for the lives and development of your team. It is an awesome and incredible responsibility. For the person just starting out, I would suggest that you realize that it's not about you. It's about the team.

How has the game changed during your career?

The game has changed in a very positive way. The advancement of our player-development systems over the past 20 years is incredible. Coaching methods, science, physiology, travel, tournaments, professional and national teams, etc., have provided players with incredible opportunities. The sky is the limit for the growth and further development of the "American" player and the game in our country. MLS has provided the U.S. soccer community with a compass pointed north. The success of our national teams, male and female, has been a tremendous source of pride and validates the "process." Will we always debate the methods and outcomes? That's healthy. The fact is that on any given day you can turn on the TV, surf the web and see incredible soccer being played. And almost always, there is an American on the field!

How about between youth players and elite players?

The biggest difference between coaching professional players and college players is just that: "professionalism." At the beginning of the MLS, when the teams were dominated with college players who for the most part were coached by ex-college players, there was no reference point for them on how to be a "professional." When a Thomas Dooley, Robert Warzycha or Brad Friedel were added to the locker room, things changed in a positive way, both on and off the field. The difference isn't small, it's huge. There is a natural Darwinism that occurs to be successful at each level. Going from college to professional isn't just about talent. There are a lot of very talented players who don't make it. There are close to 800 college teams and only 15 teams at the top flight in the United States. To be a professional player today means that you have to successfully compete with other players from all over the world every day, for all 12 months of the year. College players seldom, if ever, deal with that level of expectation. However, when a goal is scored or a save is made and you see the smile, or the jump for joy, that's the same at every level! 

Luis Felipe Scolari

Continued from page 33.

Only to the point where it can't be influenced by people. I say "no thanks" to any technology that is controlled by human hand, particularly as it would be highly susceptible to manipulation. But I have no problem with a "chip" in the ball or something that people can't influence or which improves the transparency of the game.

Where has football developed more? In the physical or in the technical sense?

Most definitely in the physical sense. Today, any physically strong team can pose a problem for a technically superior side. Teams have a very similar training setup these days. There is hardly any difference in the physical condition of the players. This forces the technically better teams to think and act more quickly, and that isn't easy at all. So we are seeing more and more surprises in the global game. It's becoming more and more difficult for good teams to qualify for major tournaments.

You mentioned Kaka earlier. When you selected him for the 2002 FIFA World Cup, did you ever think he would soon become the best player in the world?

With 18- or 19-year-old players, it's too early to say whether they will make it to the top because a number of factors have to be right. But it was already obvious that Kaka had enormous potential.

Although Cristiano Ronaldo lost out to Kaka in the voting for FIFA World Player 2007, he's playing better than ever for Manchester United. A Cristiano Ronaldo in such form must be of great value to you.

Without question. He's a key player for both Manchester United and the national team. Cristiano is an example of a "boy" who has matured quickly, as a player and as a leader. I'm absolutely convinced that Cristiano will be among the world's best players over the next three, four, five years and, in the long term, as captain and one of the leaders in the Portuguese National Team.

The FIFA World Cup in South Africa will soon be upon us.

It's a huge event of tremendous importance for Africa, a continent that needs this boost for the development of its game. They are rich in talent, but lack the structural prerequisites and nerves of steel needed to make the ultimate breakthrough.

Brazil is also preparing to host the world of football in 2014. A different situation to Africa, but...

[interrupting] Just as important, especially for the development of the country. The country is looking forward to the responsibility, and I haven't the slightest doubt that it will be well organized under Brazilian management. This event is enormously important for the infrastructure of the entire country. It was also about time the five-time winners were awarded another World Cup.

What is Luiz Felipe Scolari like off the pitch?

Totally calm and relaxed. I spend most of my time at home with my family. A quiet life with no particular highlights.

Anyone who saw you against Ivica Dragutinovic [Scolari went for the Serb during a European Championship qualifier] would think differently!

It wasn't my greatest moment, but I won't let anything happen to my players.

Your wife Olga is said to have brought you to reason when she showed you the pictures.

That's correct. She was most unhappy with my behavior. But protecting my players is indeed one of the few things that can make me lose control. 

Reprinted from FIFA.com.