

March 9, 2014 The Irish Mail on Sunday

# The Title

## SPORT ON SUNDAY

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### Out in

# AFRICA

## Irishman McKinstry is helping Sierra Leone reach for the next level



**WIDE-EYED BOY FROM FREETOWN:** Brima Kamara (13) used to break rocks for builders



**A**LMOST 7,000 fans packed the stadium in Freetown, Sierra Leone to watch Irishman Johnny McKinstry take his first training sessions last year with the national team. Armed with whistles and megaphones, they made more noise than McKinstry says he's heard at some matches back home.

It was a big jump for the 28-year-old from his first job training Lisburn Distillery on cold winter mornings outside Belfast. Thrown into the job as coach during the World Cup qualifiers, he just had to get on with it.

His first opponents were the group favourites: 'We played Tunisia - my opening game with the Leone Stars. Just prior to kick-off we'd walked out for the anthems and there were over 35,000 people in the stadium.'

'It was a packed ground on a sunny day and I was walking around the pitch. I did a full 360; I just rotated around. And part of me thought "Crikey, Johnny, you've come a long way in 10 or 12 years".'

Sierra Leone lost - and failed to qualify for the World Cup - but McKinstry has big hopes for the Africa Cup of Nations, which starts in May. The country might be better known in Ireland as the scene of a brutal civil war, captured in Leonardo DiCaprio's Blood Diamonds, but for McKinstry it's all about football.

'Sierra Leone is in the bottom five of the UN Development Index for poverty so the Leone Stars winning

By **Niamh Griffin**

FROM SIERRA LEONE

gives people a bit of hope, a bit of joy. For us to get to the Africa Cup of Nations in 2015 would be a huge, huge thing for this country,' he says. Sierra Leone has only qualified twice for the biennial event in more than 50 years, the last time in 1996.

McKinstry has worked since January 2010 with the Craig Bellamy Foundation, a boarding school for promising footballers set up by the Cardiff City player. He and his team - including Donegal physiotherapist Brendan Culhane - look to take the raw talent spotted on the streets and bring them as far as trials for Premier League teams.

Young players have been his focus since his work with underage teams at Newcastle United while studying in the north east of England. This afforded him a chance to spend a few months in Ghana - a connection which led him to Sierra Leone years later.

But first came an unusual posting to New York, where two years with the Red Bulls kids' teams left him ready for a bigger adventure. He relishes the challenge of working

with youngsters but leapt at the chance to take on the suddenly-vacant Sierra Leone role last year.

He spent his childhood playing soccer and rugby but realised at around 15 or 16 years of age that he wasn't going to reach the top level in either sport. 'I won a few medals here and there but I was never going to be a professional. I decided I wanted to stay involved in soccer specifically.'

He laughs at his own seriousness, and you wonder what careers teachers thought of this boy who wanted to coach Premier League teams.

'It's a sport that can bring people together. There is nothing else that can get people on their feet as quickly as a soccer game can.'

'I think in Ireland people can appreciate that. Back when the Republic team got to the '94 World Cup, they were maybe not the best team in the world but definitely pulled off very good results. I think that is the beauty of soccer,' he explains.

Sitting in the stifling heat, McKinstry talks excitedly of the first international he attended. 'We beat Portugal 2-1, with Jimmy Quinn scoring an outrageous goal from, like, 40 yards out.'

Other memories, like a 3-1 drubbing by Germany in 1997, still bring a grimace to his face. Even now, living thousands of miles away from Windsor Park and the Aviva, his season tickets still arrive at his parents' house every year. His friends take them up with payment in beers on McKinstry's rare visits home.

He recalls games between Northern Ireland and the Republic: 'I was at Lansdowne Road the day we won 1-0, the day of the memorial match for the Omagh tragedy, when Danny Griffin scored against Shay Given - the luckiest goal he will ever score.'

He won't hear talk of a national Ireland team:

'I would an all-Ireland football team perform better? Maybe it would. Could I see myself sitting in the stands, supporting that team? I don't think I would have the passion for it, not for any political or any other motivation.'

'I cheer on either Northern Ireland or the Republic when they're on TV. When the Republic get to World Cups or European Championships, I think it's fantastic for Ireland as a whole for one of the teams to be doing well.'

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**IRELAND'S TOP SPORT COLUMNISTS ON SUNDAY**

Shane McGrath & Joe Brolly

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