



Jun 30, 2015 00:00 BST

Graduate goes after his goals

While studying for a Sports Science degree at Northumbria University, Johnny McKinstry never imagined that eight years later he would be the national coach for Rwanda's international football team.

Johnny's dream of becoming a football player started in Lisburn, Northern Ireland when he was a toddler. After realising he didn't have what it would take to have a career as a professional footballer, he decided to look for other opportunities to work in the game which led to him taking a degree in Applied Sport Science with Coaching at Northumbria.

He took advantage of the opportunity to expand his coaching experience

outside of his studies, working with a variety of youth teams and professional teams which led to him working with the New York Red Bulls after graduation.

Today – at just 29 years old – he is the team coach for Rwanda's national team and hopes to become a Premier League manager in future.

Johnny explained: "I've always loved football but knew by the age of 15 that I didn't have what it took to become a professional player and make a career out of the game. I felt that I knew and understood the game so started doing some coaching at a young age. I achieved my Junior Team Manager award and Mini Soccer qualifications by the time I was 16 and this started me on the path I'm on today.

"When I finished high school I was looking at a few different universities and I settled on Northumbria for a few reasons. Firstly because the sports department was very highly regarded in terms of what was on offer throughout the UK. And, as everyone knows, Newcastle is a great, vibrant city which is very student friendly, so there were a lot of opportunities not only to enjoy my studying and nightlife but also to get involved in coaching outside of university.

"Whilst on my course I was doing a lot of coaching outside of university hours with a variety of teams including Newcastle United, their 'football in the community' scheme with primary schools, Easter and summer camps and for Gateshead's Felling Magpies under 16s club. ,

"I was also involved in the Men's football programme for a few years and in my final year at Northumbria I coached the University's men's football team, taking them all the way to winning the national BUSA Vase competition which was amazing.

"It was a great opportunity for me to coach at a competitive level at Northumbria and with community and local teams. I was fortunate to get such good opportunities to refine my craft at an early age."

After graduating in 2007 Johnny went to America to work with the New York Red Bulls major league soccer team. It wasn't long after his move to the US that a coaching post in Sierra Leone came up, leading an academy that was

being established by former Newcastle United footballer Craig Bellamy. He was given the role of technical director, but after two years took over the running of the whole organisation, reporting directly to the board of directors with responsibility for budgets, hiring staff, health and wellbeing, as well as the football.

After working in Sierra Leone for three years, the job of national team coach came up and Johnny was successfully appointed to the post. He led the Sierra Leone team in the FIFA World Cup qualifiers and then into the African Cup national qualifiers. He has since been appointed coach for the Rwandan national side, meaning he has amassed significant experience in the UK, USA and African football leagues.

He added: “Now at Rwanda, I think this is a very good opportunity for me and the players with lots of potential. It is no longer a small nation – they have lifted themselves up to a higher platform and people are starting to take notice. This job will give me the pressure and challenge I want in an environment where people have expectations.”

Jonny is currently on the way to completing his Pro-Licence at level 5 – the qualification needed for managers in the Premier League, which will enable him to coach at top European league levels. He believes that he will have an advantage over other managers in future, thanks to his many years of experience in coaching.

“Today you see so many men in their late 30’s go straight in management after retiring from professional football, and I wonder if they are really equipped to cope with the requirements of coaching and managing from the top level,” he said.

“With me it might be another 10-15 years before I end up hopefully in the Premier League or something similar, but by then I will have 20 years’ experience of top level coaching in many different continents dealing with thousands of different scenarios and cultures .

“When I hopefully find myself at Premier League level I won’t just be coaching English players – they will be multinationals from all over the world so the experiences I am gaining from America, Asia and Africa will come together and I will be able to solve any problems that come in front of me. You never know, I might even end up back in Newcastle – watch this

space!”

Northumbria University’s sports degrees have produced leading athletes and sportspeople including Britain’s most successful female track cyclist and Olympic gold-medallist Victoria Pendleton, former England rugby captain Martin Corry and world champion athlete Steve Cram.

Sports students have the opportunity to undertake exciting placements within organisations across the globe, including the International Olympic Committee, the World Association of Sport Management and the Football Association. For more information about sports degrees at Northumbria [click here](#).

Northumbria is a research-rich, business-focussed, professional university with a global reputation for academic excellence. To find out more about our courses go to www.northumbria.ac.uk

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