

Tribute to John "Ian" Porterfield

Contributed by Juma Bridgewater
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Ian Porterfield, the former Trinidad and Tobago national team coach died on September 11th 2007. I was lucky enough to meet Mr. Porterfield back in 2000, before T&T qualified for the semi-final round group with Mexico, Canada and Panama.

I was fortunate because "Porters" agreed to an unscheduled interview even though it was between a morning and afternoon training session and despite the fact that I had no media credentials. I was literally a man off the street yet he was very accommodating and treated me with professional courtesy.

I believe that Ian Porterfield sometimes gets a bad rap from local fans, partly because he replaced Bertille St. Clair and partly because of the eventual failure in the Hex. I hope that this archived correspondence gives fans, young and old, an opportunity to get a better measure of the man.

May he Rest in Peace.

To the casual observer, Ian Porterfield comes across as an unassuming Scot, a seeming misfit in a culture that has elevated "shit-talk" to the level of a national treasure. However, Mr. Porterfield is here to coach a football team and if the topic of discussion ranges toward the popular game he will talk your head off. This is not evidence of idleness or some disguised loquacity, as he certainly has a job that has proven too much to handle for all of his predecessors. Instead it is a natural result of the fact that he knows so much about the game. At age 54 and with 22 years management experience, one expects him to be knowledgeable, but the accuracy of his recall is astonishing. He doesn't speak with the monotonous drone of an oral encyclopaedia either, for there is a passion which fuels the mental sharpness, clearly an attribute of the fondness he has for each memory.

Unfortunately, the only thing that most locals know about Mr. Porterfield is that he is a foreign coach. This is the mantra of his detractors who prefer Bertille St. Clair, the previous national team coach, lauded as being the most successful in our country's history (he took us to the Under-20 World Championships in 1991). Popular perception of him wasn't helped by the well-publicized condemnation of St. Clair's dismissal by national footballing icon Dwight Yorke. However the fact that Yorke has shown no reluctance to play for Porterfield has received far fewer headlines. Porterfield appears to have captured the players' confidence quite easily though and you get the feeling that he places more value in this than he does in the opinion of Joe Public. His rapid acceptance was probably a consequence of the approach he has taken to developing a relatively young T&T squad. He believes that the local players, whose mentality has been questioned on more than one occasion, need support. "They need a bit more support and encouragement than others", and so he doesn't adopt the hard talking, aggressive style of man-management that might work elsewhere. His astute cultural assessment of the local scene is helped by the width of his experience.

Porterfield has a unique resume. He has coached and played in England and Scotland at both First and Second Division level, but for the past seven years he has been something of a football missionary coaching Zambia, Zimbabwe and Oman. He knows the difference between club and national team management. When prompted to state his preference, he comments that he misses the day to day involvement of the club game. He does not hide the affection that he holds for his time in Zambia, his first overseas venture. One is even tempted to wonder if the driving force that has kept him away from his family for seven years is the belief that he can gain that kind of professional satisfaction again.

Zambia was a national team job that operated like a club. He had the players in camp every day. The fans supported the team with the kind of fervour normally reserved for the big cross-town club rivalries in other parts of the world. It is common for Manchester United players to be booed while on England duty by their own compatriots because club is

often closer to the heart than country. In Zambia such sentiments were unheard of. This support was galvanized even further in the wake of the 1992 plane crash that crippled the Zambian National team. Ranked among the worst sports-related plane disasters, along with those that decimated the 1948 Torino team and the Munich Air disaster of 1958, Zambian football would have been excused for a resultant decline. The opposite happened. In 1993 the British government paid Porterfield's wages and assigned him to the national team. In the same year they came within a point of qualifying for the World Cup. Porterfield describes the Zambian culture as being different to the one here in Trinidad & Tobago. He assesses the Zambians as having things harder than we have it, and the players and the crowd want it more.

This is no unfair sleight to the Trini mentality, just an honest assessment. Take for example, the last game of qualification for the 1994 World Cup. Needing one point, Zambia traveled to Morocco and lost by one goal to nil. Despite that disappointment the team then entered a four month camp to train for the African Nations Cup where they again recorded their best result losing by one goal in the final to the Nigeria team that would go on to win its World Cup first round group with Argentina and Bulgaria. As an observer of local football for many years I find this most remarkable. I remember our own 1-0 debacle in 1989 and I can not forget the almost empty stadium the following July at the second Shell Caribbean Cup Tournament, just 8 months later. Imagine what a night July 27th 1990 would have been if we supported football with the dedication that the Zambians show, imagine the crowds of November 1989 trying to leave a burning city under siege. In fact, had we qualified for the tournaments in 1994 or 1998, the small size of our population would have been a less amazing statistic than the fact that the qualification effort would have been driven by such minimal support.

Would he appreciate that type of support? The answer is an obvious yes. He made a point of thanking the nation for the turnout after the first leg against Haiti and it is clear that the signs are right for a return of the atmosphere that was present in 1989. That level of support and the cohesiveness of the Strike Squad should be all that we should seek to rekindle, lest we are burned by the old fires of naivete and amateurism.

Therein lies the feature of Mr. Porterfield that makes him most valuable as the leader of this team. Professionalism has been a part of Porterfield's football since his first days at Raith Rovers in Scotland all those years ago. After all, we have always placed a great emphasis on the overseas-based players and the improvement we expect with the advent of local professionalism, it only makes sense to complete the equation with a manager who fits the bill. Throughout the interview he discussed the need for a vision, and there was no doubt of his firm belief that qualifying for the World Cup would be the best thing to ever happen to Trinidad and Tobago. He is also less prone to the kind of misplaced impudence that has hurt us in the past. Porterfield never hesitated before saying "if we do the job" on each of the many occasions that we talked about the second leg against Haiti. This had nothing to do with a lack of confidence and everything to do with Porterfield's understanding that, in football, anything can happen. His most common quote has been that "there are no easy games", which was a curious statement when the games in question were against perennial lightweights Netherlands Antilles and the Dominican Republic.

Perhaps the greatest thing about Mr. Porterfield is the genuineness that he exudes. You can tell which things irritate him and he makes no attempt to hide it. When invited to comment on his "informed" critics he is genuinely courteous in his refusal to get drawn into a petty debate. As a manager he has enough respect and professional courtesy not to respond. "Come and see how we train, come see what we do, our drills." he says emphatically. Clearly professionalism, for him, is more than just a word, just as football is more than just a sweat. If that spirit can really be infused into our National Team, the World Cup cause will be well served.

Note: The above article was previously published in the Trinidad Guardian on December 6th, 2000.