

US navy men taking a crash course in the thrills and spills of Scottish football

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Body

THE rumble of planes overhead serves as some sort of odd comfort, but the boys from Annapolis know they have entered an alien culture.

The lads from the United States ***Naval Academy*** may at one time be asked to serve on land, sea and air. There are potential jet pilots among them. But, on a Saturday in March, they conduct the most friendly of invasions on the banks of the Clyde.

From Jurgen to Yoker, from Pele to Davie Cooper, from soccer to fitba', the midshipmen of the US have been introduced to the realities of the SPFL and beyond.

Their week in Scotland included games against sides from Celtic and Dundee United, training at Benburb, and then at Holm Park, home of Clydebank and Yoker Athletic.

It is all part of the spring break for a college soccer programme.

'They came to us about a year ago to organise it,' says Eric McAleer, who prefers to be described as a Clydebank season-ticket holder but, more relevantly in this instance, is senior vice president of WorldStrides, a company who take student athletes on breaks around the world.

McAleer, who once played for Falkirk, East Stirling, Beith and Pollok, has forged an extraordinary path in the USA. He founded WorldStrides before selling to a private equity firm. He continues to work at the company who routinely send 7,000 aspiring footballers around the world every year.

The trip by the members of the ***academy*** in Annapolis adhered to the structure built by McAleer.

'I weigh up various factors,' he says. 'I ask the coaches: "What are your objectives, what do you want to achieve, what standard do you want to play at?"' The ***naval academy*** was thus confronted by sides from the top level of the SPFL, while also having training sessions that help build team morale. Visits to Celtic Park and Dumbarton for games has also introduced them to a culture of football that the students have certainly studied but not experienced.

Anne Sharpe

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'This is a very busy time,' concedes McAleer who was born and bred in Clydebank. 'We have 450 players in seven countries at the moment, including Portugal, Italy and Germany. We have the men and women's teams of a college playing at Bayern Munich today.'

These unfortunates will have to silently grieve the missed opportunity of not experiencing the delights of the Chookie Hens and the Bankies. But what they don't know can't hurt them.

In truth, there are substantial upsides to coming to Scotland. McAleer points out that the travellers have been immersed in a country that holds football as its most important sport and has a history that can intrigue, even beguile.

'Davie Cooper was my hero,' he says. McAleer has travelled the world, but standing under a Clydeside sky he can recall moments of watching the marvellous winger in full stride at Clydebank.

'My football life began here and has continued in America,' says McAleer, who left at the end of the last century to begin a coaching career on the other side of the pond.

His contacts book is filled with names of those Scots who have climbed to the top of world football.

'I talked to the lads at the welcome meeting and pointed out that the English Premier League, the strongest division in the world, had four managers from Glasgow alone not so long ago.' Sir Alex Ferguson, Owen Coyle, Davie Moyes and Kenny Dalglish were following in the illustrious footsteps of such as Bill Shankly and Matt Busby.

The coaches and players from USA are all, however, familiar with this back story.

Freshman Luke Palmer makes the almost mandatory verdict of 'awesome' when he reflects on his visit to the land that invented football.

He has four years of study to complete and then five years in the navy ranks to serve before he can consider another path. He views this not as a sentence but as an opportunity.

'I am going to keep myself open as to what I do,' he says in his early days as a cadet. 'The potential to be a pilot is on the table and that would be really cool. But I have time to figure it all out.'

He is on a scholarship at Annapolis, with his football skills paving the way to a new route in life.

'I have played soccer my whole life and it has given me this opportunity,' he says. His grandfather went to Annapolis, and Palmer says: 'It was never something I would turn down.'

The Scottish game has given him immediate lessons. 'It is more technical,' he says of the games against Dundee United and Celtic. 'These kids do not make bad touches or misplaced passes.'

At the end of the practice, the lads board a bus to watch Celtic against Motherwell.

'I know a lot about Celtic,' he says. 'I grew up with a Scottish coach and I watch Celtic in European games. It will be a great experience to see them live.'

'The visit to Scotland is breaking new ground for coach John Hackworth whose credentials include being an assistant at the US national team under Jurgen Klinsmann and managing both Philadelphia Union and St Louis City.

On December 5, 2025, Hackworth was named head coach for the Navy Midshipmen men's soccer team, becoming just the seventh head coach in the 105-year history of the programme.

'I'm 56 and it is the first time I have been in Scotland, though I have been in England and Ireland,' he says. He has a firm grasp of the importance of the game to Scotland. 'I have a lot of Scottish mates and they have told me about it,' he says.

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He has close links, too, to fellow countrymen working in Scotland. His most famous association is with Klinsmann, who coached USA from 2011 to 2016.

'I have been blessed to have so many influences from all over the world,' he says. 'Jurgen, obviously was a first-class footballer and very unique coach and leader. It was a privilege to be on his staff and work under him.'

Growing up in Tampa, he immediately fell in love with football, watching the local Rowdies where his favourite player was Rodney Marsh and he saw Pele play with the New York Cosmos.

He worked with Cameron Carter Vickers at under-age level, and Auston Trusty played alongside his son. He is impressed with the personality and the progress of both.

They chime with his philosophy as a coach. 'It is about finding players who love the game - whether they be seven or 37 - and recognising that passion and adding to it,' he says. 'How much do they love it? How much do they want to grow?' The visit to the birthplace of football is just part of discovering the answer to these questions. The hubbub of player noise under the descending planes into Glasgow airport suggests a firm salute to the joys of football from the midshipmen far from home but close to what they love.

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Graphic

Well travelled: Hackworth worked with Jurgen Klinsmann
A long way from home: the midshipmen train at Clydebank

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