Soccer - The Universal Language?

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Letter from a Brazillian Living in England to an English Man living in Brazil

I am a Brazilian living in the UK and would like to ask you a 'wrong way round' question. Instead of asking you to "translate" the South-American football to British fans, I'd like to ask you to do the opposite - explain the British football to someone more used to South-American football.

When I watch Premiership games I go through a sequence of sensations. First I get dizzy with the pace of the game, then I get annoyed (why don't these guys stop giving the ball to the opposition so easily?!), then finally I get bored because of the general lack of flair.

I understand that different countries have different football cultures, but do you think the British supporters will ever enjoy a more slow, ball-possession football style?

Eduardo Cypriano

Tim Vickery's Response

Football, as I never tire of saying, is a universal language which we speak with different accents. I think that's one of the reasons the game is so popular - it's so fluid that it can be interpreted in different ways.

British football is the product of the world’s first industrial society, heavily labour intensive. Muscle power and reliability were important on the factory floor or down the mine, and these are the values that also shaped the British approach to playing and watching the game.

Getting the ball forward quickly is part of this philosophy, part of a mindset which is collective and direct, which happily swaps the certainty of possession in deep areas for the possibility of possession higher up the field.

What is missing is maybe not so much flair, it is changes of rhythm - and surprise. When I watch English football I want to see teams use a surprise pass to play their way through rather than forcing their way through all the time.

But at the same time we need to be careful about placing too much emphasis on national stereotypes. The fact that everyone wants to win means that in football ideas bounce back and forth between cultures.

The coach of Sao Paulo,
Brazil's most successful
team, said recently that he doesn't like possession football, that he wants his team to be quick and aggressive when they win the ball.

It's something you'd expect an English coach to say!

And then from England
there's the example of the great Liverpool sides
of the late 70s and 80s.

They incorporated some of the things they acquired playing in
European competitions and became one of the great patient, passing teams - much enjoyed by their supporters.

Cheers, Tim

Tim who lives in Brazil
can be heard on Talksport and he is a regular contributor to the BBC.