



BRIT ABROAD:

An exclusive insight into Michael Loftman's Zambian adventure...



An article by Chaka Simbeye for Left Back Football



About Chaka and about this article.



'From Lusaka to Lewes...'

Chaka Simbeye is, like all contributors at Left Back Football (for now, at least), an aspiring football writer from the University of Sussex's journalism course. He is in his third and final year which means he has a brain as jam-packed with Jürgen Habermas' theory of the public sphere, as it is filled with his incredibly deep football knowledge.

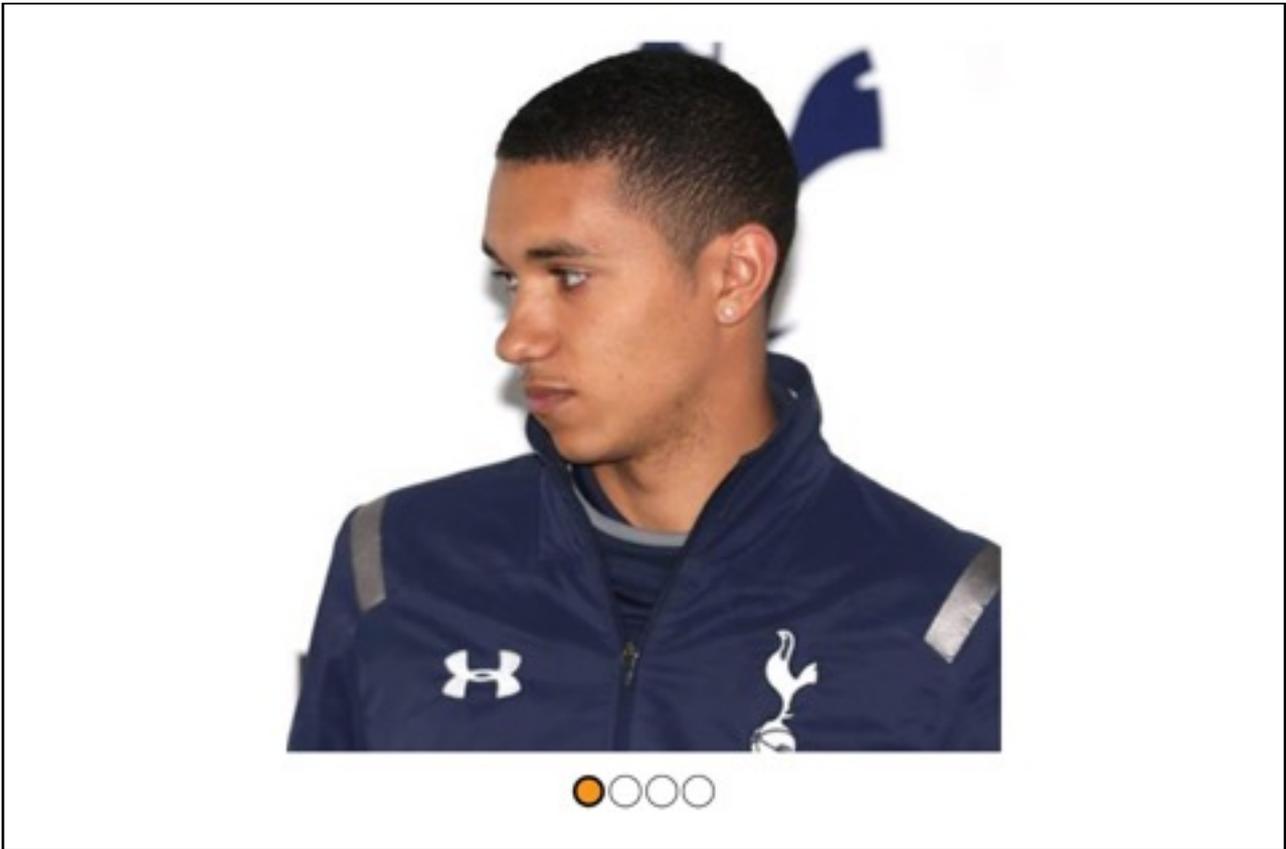
Chaka moved to Brighton to study in 2014 from his native Zambia, the country in which he conducted this intriguing interview with the young football coach in question, Michael Loftman. The pair share similarities in that their ambition has led them to foreign lands - Loftman has stumbled onto the sun-basked lands of Zambia, whereas Chaka now battles wind, rain and play-off heartache in Brighton, from the seafront to the Amex Stadium.

The following article is a fine one and we're pleased it has found a home on our little website. Please read it now.

Greg Stanley, Editor



BRIT ABROAD.



'From London to Lusaka...'

Michael Loftman's career path till this point has been full of great experiences and spontaneity.

“You have to go and prove yourself whether that means going to another country or a really lower league.”

A former Global Development Coach at Tottenham Hotspur and Assistant Sports Scientist at Watford, he made the decision to leave a job at Dagenham and Redbridge to gain managerial experience in the distant lands of Zambia. A holiday in the landlocked country in Southern Africa was enough to lure him into working in this beautiful part of the world, leaving Greater London to experience a culture that would be conducive for his career.

"At Tottenham, I used to travel around the UK and teach teams the Tottenham philosophy and they would come visit us from Japan, Holland and Belgium. Our job would be to educate them on the philosophy that Tottenham use for the U21s all the way down to the U5s," says Loftman in an exclusive interview with **Left Back Football**.

He mentions a familiar face in English football that helped him make the first steps in his career as a young coach at Spurs, and also disseminated some information that he has carried with him to Zambia and will do for the rest of his career.

"I worked with Chris Ramsey and he is the main person who looked after me there. The most important thing that he taught me is that developing individuals is different to getting results. If your objective is to develop individuals, the information you deliver to players is different from the information you deliver to players to get results."

At only 26 years-old, Loftman has gained experience way beyond his years but the chance to make large strides at such a young age in Zambia proved too good to turn down. Loftman's life since the age of 17 has always revolved around coaching, spending the next seven or eight years obtaining his coaching badges whilst earning extra money during his course coaching at non-league level. He also moonlighted as a London DJ but each step he has taken since has been to enhance his ability to drop football knowledge, not floor-fillers.

"I did my work placement for my final year of University at Watford, helping out their sport scientists. Initially, it was strength and conditioning/fitness work - then I started helping the coaches from the under 9s to the under 16s."



The enthusiastic young coach would later make the journey to Zambia, facing an arduous process in landing a job at Lusaka Dynamos, a top-flight club in the nation's busy capital city. The African sun bathes both the bustling centre of Lusaka and the townships that border it. These surroundings are at times, far different from the centre and would require development if they are to mirror the wealth of the inner city.

Once settled in Roma Villas (pictured), a lush yet isolated microcosm of Lusaka, he would become the technical director of the Dynamos. It's an area somewhat distant from the city's industrious core, and a job somewhat distant from the touchline. Yet his first opportunity to test himself in the managerial hot seat was closer than he could have imagined...



Loftman, the 26-year-old football manager.

In March after a run of poor results the club owner, Hanif Adams decided to part ways with their coach and it was Loftman who got the opportunity to manage the club and steer them away from relegation. Adams likes to oversee the whole managerial process as owner and moved into the vacant technical director role, himself - sitting with Loftman on the bench during games, being in the locker room for team talks while also being within earshot for post-game press briefings. For the young manager, though, having the owner watching his every move was nothing to fear.

"What is there to be scared of? There is nothing to worry about, every club is different and the way they run to the club is up to the club, itself. My job is to do the work on the coaching field and on match day and as long as I can do my job, there are no problems."

"I put so much pressure on myself that nobody can put more pressure on me, win or lose regardless of who's watching. Whether a million people watch or ten people watch, I'm putting so much pressure on myself that it doesn't matter."

Loftman's team spent most of his time there hovering just above the relegation zone, but only 5 points from 7th place in a league with 16 teams. The team picked up heavy losses to league leaders Zanaco (6-1) and Power Dynamos (a club as strong in Zambian football as their name suggests), whom beat them 4-1. Yet, a surprise win against fourth placed Green Buffaloes (3-2) arrested their run of poor form which throughout, Loftman maintained his stance with the Zambian press that his team would not be relegated.

“Whether a million people watch or ten people watch, I’m putting so much pressure on myself that it doesn't matter.”



"We were five points from seventh if you looked at the table. If you looked in the second round we had played three of the top four already as we played Buffaloes, Kabwe Warriors, Zanaco and Power. The only team we would've had left is Zesco, then we would only be playing the teams in and around us. The points difference was one or two points, I was sure if we played how we played against Buffaloes, we would've been okay."

"I don't necessarily believe in carrying confidence from games as we prepared differently for different fixtures. After Monday, we normally moved on and what we spoke about doesn't exist anymore - we move on to the next game."



Young manager, young squad.



Lusaka Dynamos have had a long lineage of developing young players in Zambian football with a few managing to move abroad. Most of the squad that Loftman worked with were between their teens and early twenties as that was one of the aspects of the club that piqued Loftman's interest.

"I think half of our squad was 18 to 21 when I first came. We brought in some experienced players since, but the majority of them have been young which has meant they have been able to start working on improving and learning. The experienced players have been very helpful and very supportive which has been good."

"I think the key thing in Zambia is just to educate the players early, it's all about education. Some of the players might not have had that educational process in the academy where they've been taught how to act as a professional. The first thing I did with some of the younger players was told them my expectations and I never experienced any problems."

Loftman also speaks candidly about how his team struggled with set pieces, as even in their win against Buffaloes, they conceded two goals from free-kicks and the process him and his team went through to try and remedy this.

"When I first went, we only conceded from set-pieces and our objective was to not concede these goals - something we did well to start with. It was difficult for teams to break us down and then the Zanaco game came and when they went down to 10 men, that really threw us as we didn't realize how strong they would be with only 10 men on the pitch! But that taught us a lesson for the Buffaloes game where they also had a man sent off."

There was no language barrier between Loftman and his young squad, maybe only a barrier caused by accent and pronunciation at most. However, the Londoner told me about his players being confused with some of his training methods, as he tried and tested his way into finding the best tactics and exercises to drill his teams for games.

"I tried things on the training pitch where the players looked at me thinking 'What is this?' But after a while they adapt, especially things that they enjoyed. There are some fun games we did, I don't think they were used to doing fun games, as their training is meant to be very serious. But I always try to keep them entertained and focused on a Monday or Tuesday."

"We didn't do rondos as they were a bit too serious for them that early on in the week. For example, we would come in and play football tennis on a Monday as well as doing recovery work. We did a team keepy-up game where everybody is involved and we have to keep 10 balls in the air at the same time - it took them a long time to get to 10 but we did finally get there."

"They didn't do much running, especially compared to how much they were used to when I first arrived [as Technical director]. They do less running now, purely because we found out that when it got to game day, they were tired before the game even started so it was really important to manage their workload. Under me, if they had a game they would try to minimize the running that they did and focus on the tactical side. If we had a week where there were no games, we would make sure that is the time to increase their workload."

His education in football coaching is evident in every word that Loftman utters, not only telling me what he did in training with his new side but also why they did it. His thoughts on the simple aspect of running, itself, were those of a deep thinker about the game and how it coached.

"If you think about running, you don't always have to run in a straight line - so we will play 7v7 on a full size pitch meaning that the distances they have to cover are similar to the distances they would if they were running on a track. But, crucially they've got the ball moving, they're still playing games, they're still learning and they're focused. A lot of the times when you just run, your body doesn't deplete itself of energy that much because you're not actually concentrating and focusing. Actually, the brain depletes a fair amount of energy in games because you're focusing so much on making decisions."

"We worked a lot on strategy so we put together a strategy at the beginning of the week so everything we do during it is related to that theme. If that strategy is to press high up the pitch for example, we would work on pressing throughout the week - it would be the focus. If we looked at defending in our own half, we would work on that during the week and everything we do would be moulded around that. If the strategy works then great, if it doesn't, we have to have a look."



Football is universal, as are its problems

"The hardest thing I have found to teach, not just in Zambia but in football in general, is when to press high and when to sit back. For players to understand and observe a trigger is difficult to teach and I have found that everywhere I have been."

Like the professional clubs back home, Loftman implemented video analysis into his team at Dynamos - seeking to teach yet not overload his players. To do so, he looked to find a unique understanding with his playing staff.

"I used videos but I did not seek to overuse them. I have shown them videos of the stuff I have done before and teams I have worked with in England and Europe. We looked at counter-attacking so I brought them a counter-attacking video which showed Real Madrid and Liverpool as well as a few others.

"They had a look at Leicester last season after they won the league, so that was a big thing here obviously, as well. We looked at why they won the league and why teams around them didn't manage to. I sometimes record some of my own training sessions but only if we were working on a difficult topic to master."

Alongside the video technology that is budgeted for by all the Football League clubs in England, Loftman also uses statistics to critique and analyse his player's performances, a method he describes as 'very important.'

“Everybody can identify the problems. It is finding solutions to the problems with the squad you have and the players you have available, that's the key part.”



"When you watch a match, it depends on what kind of mood you're in and what happened in the game. There have been games where I thought we were awful and I watched the game back only to realise that we weren't too bad... and there were games where I thought we were perfect and we were nowhere near it! I always use stats to get a fair understanding of how the game's been."

Loftman also took into account the opposition's strength and weaknesses when picking his team for the weekend.

"Against Buffaloes, we wanted to isolate Christopher Katongo as we knew his threat was crossing coming into the box for headers. (Note: Katongo was the captain of Zambia's heroic 2012 African Cup of Nations winners.) Luckily for us he managed to get onto a few but they tended to be outside the width of the goal, something we spoke about prior. That is. defending the width of the goal so that if they head from outside, they have less chances to score and it is easier for the keeper to deal with."

"In regards to possession, it is easier to keep the ball if you have four defenders and one striker than when you have three strikers and a midfielder against four defenders. It's not easy to keep the ball in a 4v4 situation - you will have that until you perfect your strategy and philosophy."

"Against Power, you could tell that we were not going for the numerical advantage in their half because we knew that they would be very dangerous if they caught us on the break. And they were dangerous in the second half - very dangerous, as were Zanaco - but when you find yourself losing you try and do that."

Loftman's strategy in preparation to face other teams was not geared to individuals specifically but more to the team strategy, something he prides himself on as a coach and a manager.

"We don't prepare for individuals, we prepare for teams. If you can stop their team strategy then their individuals should not be a problem. The main focus is on the team strategy rather than the individuals because most of the teams there don't have just one key individual, they have several."

Loftman has had his experience in watching the development of youth players at the highest level for Tottenham and Watford as well as coaching at a lower level with

Dagenham and Redbridge. Therefore despite being so young, he has already seen a lot - something only made stronger during his African venture.

The experiences he already has means he can draw upon his past and craft his own theories. One of which was concerned with when to implement 11-a-side as format of the game and how players could be 'over coached.'

"I think there are lots of people that say players should be playing 11v11 their whole life, and plenty of people that say 11v11 should start from the age of 14. I would have them doing 11v11 from the age of under 8 and under 9, but at the same time doing 3v3s, 5v5 and 7v7s. There's positive outcomes from playing all different sizes of games; the most important thing is you just play football and you prepare yourself for the next stage coming up."

"For other players it could be the higher the pressure on them, the more creative they're going to be. At the higher end there is big pressure from big clubs to produce players, meaning there is pressure on the club and the coaches that eventually falls onto the players. I think at the lower reaches of the game there is less pressure and an individual can try and experiment and make mistakes without fear."

“If you don't reflect, you'll never learn.”



"There are many ways to 'over coach.' The first thing is coaching from the side of the pitch, I find that in order for players to learn you have to reflect and that for me is the biggest process in learning. If you don't reflect, you'll never learn. So, when you have coaches telling players what their mistakes were before they have the chance to learn, they're never going to actually be able to learn and store memories."

"This is what I said at the start; coaching to develop. For instance, if one of my defenders is in the wrong position on the Friday before the game on a Saturday, he needs to know that he is in the wrong position. If he is 8 years-old and he has 15 years or 10 years before he makes it as a professional, he's got 10 years to learn from that mistake himself - so why do I need to step in and tell him? The idea is teaching him to learn and reflect, this is more important than teaching him to correct his mistakes."

Loftman experienced the deflating pain of loss approximately 12 times while in charge of Lusaka Dynamos and emphasizes the importance of showing up to the Monday training sessions with answers. An element of football management which is surely more important to be able to acknowledge to the players than the story-hungry press.

"One of the most important jobs in management is being able to have the answers to the problems. Everyone can see problems: the fans, the coaches, the media, the staff - everybody can identify the problems. It is finding solutions to the problems with the squad you have and the players you have available, that's the key part."



The future of Loftman and the future of black coaches

The Sports People's Think Tank reported in 2014 that 25 per cent of professional footballers in the UK came from black or ethnicity groups other than white. Yet, just four managers at the 92 league clubs were from BME backgrounds - totalling just 4.3 per cent.

Loftman, as a mixed race coach whose career within British football has been nurtured by two black coaches in Chris Ramsey and Dagenham and Redbridge's Micah Hyde, feels that the situation with what the FA call 'BME coaches' will improve in the UK.

"I think the main thing is coaches having the education that they need to get. I think in England at the moment, a lot of coaches are coming from ex-professionals and going into management which is great for some but it does not work out for others."

"The main thing is that everybody has the education that they need to get and once you get that, you have to go and prove yourself - whether that means going to another country to prove yourself or a really lower league."

Hyde, who is Academy Manager at Dagenham and Redbridge, holds Loftman in quite a high regard.

"Michael was one of many coaches that we looked to develop and he showed good signs. He left to take a job abroad. With more experience, understanding and knowledge I don't see why not," he said exclusively to LBF when asked if Loftman could be a top coach in England or anywhere else in the world.

"Michael is very enthusiastic, and coaching anywhere in the world would only be a beneficial experience, so his work in Zambia is of course, a good thing."

Loftman's record at Dynamos stands at approximately 6 wins, 8 draws and 12 losses which certainly isn't as successful as he hoped he would be. But, his hunger for knowledge and thirst for the game led to a mutual agreement to depart from the club with him immediately moving to a new job in South Africa.

At 26, he is working to one day build a career that will earn him a job back home and, with his staunch ideals and beliefs that will develop over time, one cannot see why his dream won't happen.



Thank you

Thank you to Michael for having Chaka poolside in his Zambian home for an interview.

Thank you to you, the reader.

Thank you to anyone who follows Left Back Football on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook.

