

Keeping their distance

ON THE SPOT
MICHAEL GRANT



IF Inverness was situated just outside of Glasgow then I would have bitten their hand off because it was a fantastic opportunity. It's only down to geography. That's not Inverness's fault and it is no slight on them because they are a fantastic club. If it was a bit closer to home then I would have jumped at it."

It was Ally McCoist who came out with that comment back in January, 2006, as he explained why he could not be considered as the next manager of Caledonian Thistle. McCoist was as respectful and diplomatic as ever, and he had good reason for withdrawing his candidature given that at the time he had three young children anchoring him to the central belt.

Even so, his quote was telling. It touched on an attitude towards Inverness which is prevalent throughout Scottish football. To many, it isn't so much the Highland capital as a godforsaken place somewhere near Timbuktu. McCoist's words were the sort of thing Caley had heard many times before, and have heard again since, from men they have approached to manage or play for them. There is that moment in negotiations when the club's representatives hear some squirming along the lines of, "Ah, I'd love to come, it's just the travelling wouldn't be so handy. Unless you really made it worth my while..."

The Trans-Siberian Railway covers

5816 miles. Route 66 across the States runs for 2450. Those are journeys. The A9 between Inverness and the central belt covers a piddling 138 miles, taking just two hours and 20 minutes. That is next to nothing, even if it does get wearying for managers to regularly traipse up and down it to watch opponents and potential signings.

Last week, there was a bookmaker's list containing potential successors to Craig Brewster as Caley manager. There were a few odds names – Ossie Ardiles? Chris Sutton? Bobby Williamson? – but most notable about the supposed field was the sheer volume of Highlanders/northerners on it: Barry Wilson, Kevin McDonald, Steven Pressley, Eric Black, Neale Cooper, Charlie Christie, Colin Hendry, Duncan Shearer, Derek Adams and Steve Paterson.

Caley is the only SPL club where a managerial vacancy would be discussed with such an emphasis on geography. The subtext is clear: who would really want to live up there – with its heather, accordions and darkness – unless they had connections with the place?

The bookmakers' favourite to be appointed as Brewster's successor in the next few days is John Robertson, because he is a former manager of the club, he is available and willing and – guess what – he now lives in Inverness.

It is Caley's location which has shaped the club's unusual managerial history. It was reported last week that they had never sacked a manager, which was not true: Sergei Baltacha essentially agreed to be dismissed in 1995. But what is noteworthy is that they have never appointed an old manager or even one with previous experience in charge of another SPL or Scottish League club. They have gone for the young, hungry and unproven: in other words, those whose desire for the job rendered Inverness's location irrelevant. The only exception was the appointment of Brewster second time around in 2007, a strategy which will be repeated if Robertson is confirmed in the coming days.

Caley haven't needed any lessons from central belt clubs when it comes to appointing managers. They



John Robertson is favourite to fill the manager's post at Inverness CT Photograph: Christopher Furlong

have repeatedly gambled and won. Their managers have been Baltacha (dismissed), Steve Paterson (poached by Aberdeen), Robertson (poached by Hearts), Brewster (poached by Dundee United), Charlie Christie (resigned for family reasons) and Brewster again (sacked). Ardiles, bless him, need only have looked at the profile of those previous managers and saved himself the bother of applying.

Those of us who have lived, worked and watched football in Inverness don't need any lectures on its appeal, although its status as Europe's fastest growing city, and its ranking as fifth in Britain for quality of life, are pretty powerful testimonies. It is a football town, too, even if it suffers the national curse of having too many locals more interested in Rangers or Celtic than the team on their doorstep.

Through their 15-year existence Inverness have been an efficient, progressive club who deserve better than to have their recruitment limited



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by geography. That is why Robertson would be an appropriate appointment. In 2004 he took them into the SPL and transformed their appeal at a stroke. They can now attract a higher calibre of player and manager. Robertson's departure in 2004 got messy, but he remained a champion of Caley and soon returned to live there. At least the wee fella doesn't see the A9 as a long haul.

Sasa Papac is a popular figure among his Rangers team-mates, not that that stops them noting that he glides through life so slowly they wonder if he has a pulse. He was an unlikely figure to make a room dissolve into laughter at Murray Park on Friday, but he pulled it off with this quote on being wrongly sent off against Falkirk by referee Willie Collum. "Everyone can have a bad day. A player can have a bad day and play shite." He didn't learn that word growing up on the streets of Mostar. Who says foreign players don't take in our Scottish culture?

Blatter's strange game of Russian roulette

THE INSIDER
ANDREW JENNINGS



WHEN you're a top Russian mobster on the run from the FBI for fixing an Olympic gold medal, it's comforting that a member of the IOC is happy to drink a toast and chat with you in a Moscow nightclub.

And even more welcome, if you are president of the Russian Football Federation and wish some day to bid to stage the World Cup, that the tubby little IOC member clinking glasses and smiling at you also happens to be the president of Fifa, Sepp Blatter.

That was the scene when notorious mobster Alimzhan "Alik" Tokhtakhounov met with Blatter one night at Moscow's exclusive China Club, only three years after the medal-fixing. Making the introductions was Viacheslav Koloskov, longtime boss of Russian football and a member of Fifa and Uefa's executive committees.

Alik aren't stray outside Russia's borders – the Feds would have an Interpol warrant executed wherever he was spotted. But why should Alik care when the top guys in world sport drop by his favourite bar.

So this is the company Blatter keeps in private. No-one with power is cold-shouldered. To maintain his electoral support across Eastern Europe, the Fifa president needs the goodwill of Russians with clout in sport.

Like Alik Tokhtakhounov. When arrested in Italy in 2002, on a US warrant for fixing the Salt Lake Olympic ice dancing contest, Alik was reported to be driving a Merc registered in the name of Ukrainian tennis star Andrei Medvedev. Pictures on Medvedev's website of Alik posing with him, Marat Safin and Yevgeny Kafelnikov at the French Open in 1999 were wiped the next day.

Tokhtakhounov's other friends include Russian ice hockey star Pavel

Bure, a leading Russian Olympic official and sports officials everywhere.

The friends Alik doesn't talk about are listed in police crime files world-wide. He got to know some smart boys in school in Tashkent in the 1950s that are now variously billionaires, football club owners, emperors of industry, heroin traffickers and an IOC member who has problems with visas for the USA.

The FBI link Alik to Moscow's godfather of crime, Simeon Mogilevich. No longer with us are Alik's former mentor Otari Kvantrishvili – a sniper got him – and Sergei Timofeev who ordered that hit, himself blown up nine months later. One of their rackets was recruiting Russian Olympic wrestlers and weightlifters to run Moscow's most successful debt recovery agency. Hell, they'd collect even if you didn't owe.

So when some crooks at the International Skating Union wanted a few ice dance judges greased at the 2002 Salt Lake Games, they worked with Alik and his pal, Chevalier Nusuyev, the president of the Russian Youth Sports Federation – who left us in a rattle of gunfire in August 2005.

Alik set up the scam from his villa in Tuscany but his conversations with Nusuyev, officials and skaters in Utah during the Games were taped by Italian



The Fifa president needs the goodwill of Russians with clout in sport

police investigating money laundering.

The deal was that the Russians got their gold and Alik's French chums got theirs. But the Canadian duo of Jamie Sale and David Pelletier were so blatantly robbed that the confused IOC – including Sepp Blatter – gave them a gratuitous gold alongside the French pair, the only time an Olympic event has yielded two gold medals when there should only be one.

The Italian cops tipped off the FBI and Alik was arrested on a fraud warrant five months later. After a year's vigorous legal activity, Alik beat extradition to America and has been swanning around Russia, untouchable ever since.

So what were Sepp's parting words to Alik as he left the China Club? "See you at the ice dancing in Sochi in 2014?" Or did he say "I'm sure you know what to do to bring the World Cup tournament to Russia in 2018"?

Perhaps Seb Coe, who has pledged his Fifa Ethics Committee to monitoring the 2018 campaigns, might have a quiet word with Blatter and Koloskov... and maybe tell Alik: "Stay out, pretty please, this Fifa process is dodgy enough already."

Find out more about the day Sepp met Alik at <http://www.transparencyinsport.org>