

VISION BY NICHOLAS FENOUGHTY

The author played for twenty years as a semi-professional footballer, mainly for Matlock Town, and played for them in their FA Trophy victory at Wembley. He admits to being a passionate believer that vision is the main way for a player to develop as, “he only improves because he knows more because he sees more – and seeing more is the only way to know.”

Augustine of Hippo lived in 4th Century North Africa. He was always out with his friends, had women all over the place and was a modern day ‘party animal.’ However, even as a young man, he was admired for his intelligence, wit and great powers of oratory. At a surprisingly young age, Augustine became disillusioned with his life so at the age of nineteen he started a search for God. After ten years he was no nearer his objective and was beginning to despair. In this despair he was becoming ill and full of anxiety. He’d had enough, he was at the end of his tether. But then, while in this state, he heard a voice. It said, “Take and read.” He picked up the bible at his side and, at no particular place, started to read. He said that, after he had read a few lines, “a pure light of confidence shone in my heart.”

This story of Augustine is the nearest analogy I could find to my football career, but without the women everywhere, being a party animal, and having wit, intelligence and great powers of oratory. I was not really in despair either, and I was not searching for an objective, but I was in the dark, so to speak, and eventually, like Augustine, a pure light of confidence did shine in my heart and still does, regarding a certain aspect of the game of football - and that is vision.

When I was a young boy I simply loved playing football. At the age of seventeen, I signed as a full-time professional footballer and my expectations were high. After a short while, however, I felt as though I had run into a brick wall. I knew there was something wrong, but at the time I did not understand what the problem was. After two years, I went into non-league as a semi-professional and felt happier. The opposition weren’t as fit, fast or strong and I could function much better at this level and found expression once again. I stayed in non-league for the next seventeen years and played in some very good sides. There were some exciting FA cup runs, and I was lucky enough to play on the winning side at Wembley in the 1975 FA Trophy Final.

Aristotle said:

‘I hear and I forget.’

‘I see and I believe.’

‘I do and I understand.’

At about the age of thirty two, I saw another way of playing. By the time I was thirty six, I understood, and my potential had turned to actual; I knew where to be, and a

light of pure confidence shone in my heart. The secret of success! For me, the journey that led to knowing where to be started with vision.

Puskas was asked in an interview, “What is the difference between a good and a great player?” Puskas took a couple of steps back, saying nothing. The reporter said to the interpreter, “What did you ask him?” The interpreter replied, “I asked him what the difference is between a good and a great player.” “Ask him again,” said the reporter. Puskas was listening intently, said nothing, took two steps to the side, stayed there a minute then walked off whilst laughing. Puskas was obviously implying the position that a player took up made him good or great.

Ron Greenwood, who once managed England, passed away recently. He was widely regarded as one of the best coaches England has ever produced. In a recent Chelsea v Colchester programme, some of his ex-colleagues spoke in memory of Mr. Greenwood. One player, Derek Saunders, who played in the Chelsea 1956 Championship winning side, said of him, “I played in the middle of defence alongside Ron. He was a good talker, he was forever telling me where to be.” Mick McGiven said, “When I was transferred to West Ham, Mr Greenwood was the coach there. He drew the curtains away from the windows of my eyes.”

This highlights three important aspects. Firstly, Ron Greenwood had vision; secondly, he was able to teach vision; and thirdly, vision develops positioning. The secret of success is being in the right place at the right time.

I remember a coach saying to me whilst I was a full time pro, “Nick do you know the difference between you and players at Liverpool?” I replied, “No.” He said, “They think quicker than you.”

I remember driving home that day, thinking to myself, “Kevin Keagan can say two plus two equals four quicker than me?” I didn’t understand then, but by the time I was thirty six I did. Kevin Keagan did not think quicker than me, but he thought it before me; he had vision.

Why is this thinking called vision? If we are to have vision, we must learn to participate in the object of the vision. The apprenticeship is hard. (Antoine De Saint-Exupery)

When applying the above quote to football in the first phase of vision, our objective is to know where our support is. Our support is our players. So to participate in the objective is not to know only where our players are, but why we need to know where they are as well. We now have a principle. Now our eyes are looking for and at something, instead of waiting for something to happen. We are not subjects any more, we are kings because we can judge.

As a result of developing vision I could now let the ball do the work. I was able to create time. My work rate was far better, yet I was doing less running. My creative ability was more effective and more consistent. I was fitter, yet doing less training. My passing was much better because I wasn’t rushing. I had more time and was,

therefore, more accurate. I was playing a different game and the difference was this: action without vision is just passing time; action with vision is making a positive difference. As my vision developed, my positioning did too. For example, now when the ball breaks to the opposition. I do not think, “Who shall I pick up and chase after?” I think “Where do I go?” That place that I go to does not run all over the field as before, it stays still. I can walk to it because I know where it is and from that position, I can multi-task; I can defend, attack and also cover. I am free of everything that is not objective.

I have realised that, without vision and, therefore, positioning, a player will not develop, regardless of his other abilities. Therefore, it is not our abilities that hold us back, but rather a lack of vision.

Plato has a few words to say on the subject:

“Education then, will be an art of doing this, an art of conversion, and will consider in what manner the person will be turned round most easily and effectively. Its aim will not be to implant vision in the instrument of sight. It will regard it as already possessing that, but as being turned in a wrong direction, and not looking where it ought, and it will try to set this right.”

Once the eyes have turned in the right direction, then it's time for the optometrist to make sure that the eye is in the best condition possible to deal with the extra work-load of the new time zone it has entered.