

THE LIVER



Crispin Andrews looks at how the Premier League runners-up are leading the way off the pitch by teaching important life skills to youngsters around the world

Watch, read about or discuss any part of Liverpool Football Club's attempt to win the Premier League title this season and you'll soon realise that there's much more to football than kicking a few balls.

One look at the club's first sustained title challenge since 2009, in the 25th anniversary year of the Hillsborough disaster, shows that football is and can be just as much about life skills.

WORLD CLASS

On March 16, 30 minutes into Liverpool's game against Manchester United at Old Trafford, United full back Rafael handled in the penalty area. Up stepped Steven Gerrard, Liverpool's captain, the man who has for many years stood out as a world class player during some of the club's leanest times. A footballer who has come out second best against Manchester United so often. A man whose cousin died, aged 10, at Hillsborough when Gerrard was eight.

Before the game Liverpool were second in the league, four points behind Chelsea. They'd been on a good run, but there had been other good runs in previous seasons that had come to nothing. If Gerrard scored and Liverpool went on to win, it would show the doubters that this year the team were genuine title contenders.

Gerrard scored the penalty. He added

another from the spot just after half time, but missed a third. Liverpool won 3-0. The title race was on, but manager Brendan Rodgers remained calm, cool, confident, but most of all focused in his assessment of his team's chances.

He didn't get drawn into speculating about whether Liverpool would win the league for the first time in 24 years. Instead he praised the qualities he believed would take his team either to victory or, if not, very close - hard work, aggression, intent to attack, spirit to defend, movement, resilience, confidence, belief and respecting your opponent. This was Manchester United, after all.

Dealing with pressure and managing expectations, both your own and other people's, are fundamental life skills. So too is making plans, following preconceived strategies, responding to the unexpected, connecting with people and dealing with difficult situations.

There's a human element to any sporting struggle and this year's Premier League title race illustrated it perfectly. But football can teach life skills from a very early age.

On the Liverpool soccer schools' website, Brendan Rodgers explains that the club, through its various youth development activities around the world, aim to develop youngsters' abilities off

the pitch as well as on it: "Introducing them to experiences that will shape their development into young adults and give them the life skills they will use for the rest of their lives."

Mark Haig from the Liverpool FC Foundation talks about raising young people's aspirations and helping them develop confidence. Paul Barrett, head coach at Liverpool's Academy in Indonesia, teaches youngsters how to play the Liverpool way - get organised, follow a structure and behave in a way that enables you to

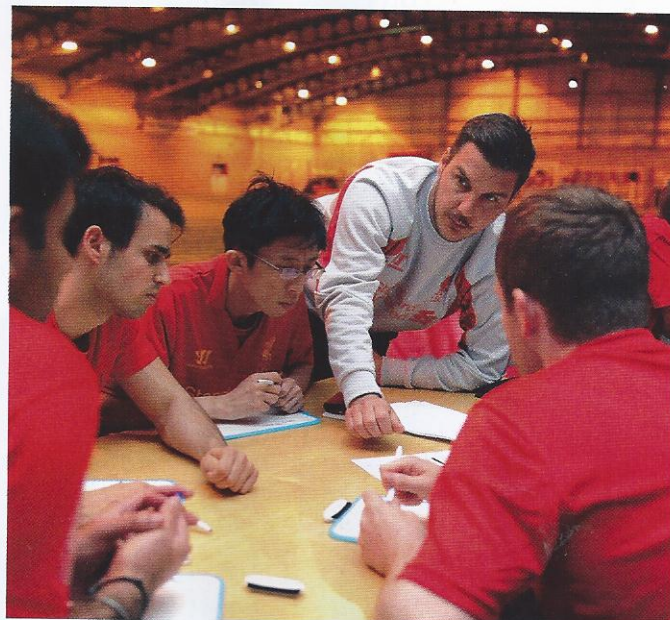
achieve what you want. Invest in skills that will help you achieve both now and in later life. Control the ball before you can do anything with it. Set good foundations for your life.

LIFE AND DEATH

Liverpool are working with a charity that operates in an area where learning these skills is a matter of life and death. Marcus

"Football shows young people that if you run headlong into the tackle and just see how it goes, you will most likely lose the ball"

POOL WAY



McGilvray, a Welsh HIV nurse, runs football life skills courses in Edendale just outside Pietermaritzburg in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, one of the continent's worst HIV affected areas. 45 per cent of adults and 16 per cent of adolescents in the region are HIV positive. McGilvray operates under the banner of WhizzKids United. Liverpool FC is one of his sponsors.

In their first life skills sessions, the children play a football match with no goals. After a while they complain that they're not enjoying the game because they're running around in circles with nothing to aim for. "What is better? A life with or without goals?" McGilvray asks them. He adds: "We use the game of football as an analogy for life."

In subsequent games there are goals. To score, individuals work together to overcome challenges, as must these young people in their lives. A goalkeeper protects the goal, so the team can achieve what it wants; in a relationship, contraception protects people from HIV. A player with the ball turns away from an opponent or passes to a teammate. In life, a young person can turn away from trouble or ask for help.

"Football shows young people that if you run headlong into the tackle and just see how it goes, you will most likely lose the ball," McGilvray says. "In life, too, the trick is to see the trouble coming and act before it arrives."

He says he's not looking to develop the next Pele, but to use football to engage with young people who would otherwise not turn up for the health services many of them desperately need. His coaches run life skills courses in schools, children's homes and community groups.

McGilvray opened a health academy in the grounds of Edendale Hospital in June 2010. Now the young people have somewhere they can come for HIV treatment, counselling and help with any other problems they might have. There's a football pitch next door.

Staff at the academy wear their Liverpool shirts proudly. There's a signed, framed Liverpool football shirt on the foyer wall next to one from Kaiser Chiefs, one of South Africa's most famous football clubs. Not everyone there is a Liverpool fan, but wearing their sponsor's famous kit gives the place an informal feel.

"It removes the stigma of coming to a HIV clinic," McGilvray says. Continuing with the football metaphor, he adds: "Football clubs have academies where young people come to develop as footballers. Young people come to the Edendale Academy to develop themselves as people."

WE GO AGAIN

After Liverpool had beaten Manchester City 3-2 to go two points clear at the top of the Premier League, Steven Gerrard gathered his team together. The crowd was ecstatic, but the team could only hear Gerrard's words. "This does not slip now. This is gone. We go to Norwich. Exactly the same. We go again," he told them, tears in his eyes.

15 minutes earlier, Philippe Coutinho had driven home the winner, latching on to a scuffed clearance by Vincent Kompany. Taking advantage of opportunities when they arise, expected or not, is a fundamental life skill.

CHALLENGING ENVIRONMENT

For many adults, a happy life depends on success in business. Liverpool FC and the London School of Business & Finance offer a five-day management and leadership programme.

Nicola Schaefer, managing director of E.L.I.T.E.S, believes the course will give people involved in or wanting to get involved in business leadership and management a chance to learn from experts who work in a particularly challenging business environment - football.

"In football the environment constantly changes and managers have to know how to bring the best out of individuals and the team," she says. "They have to be able to rise above adversity, meet challenges and adapt to changes. A football team changes more often than most teams. It might contain people from all over the world with different values, personalities, strengths and weaknesses."

This can create instability and if not managed well could lead to confusion, conflict, dysfunction and chaos. A good football manager or leader on the pitch or in the boardroom can unite contrasting and often difficult characters behind a common purpose.