

Islanders cross the Pond... into the world of US soccer

by | Katie Macleod

More and more British footballers are moving 'across the pond' to play in the USA – and among them are two island players making a name for themselves in the American soccer world.

31-year-old Ally Mackay, from Lewis, and 25-year-old Robert MacGillivray, from Benbecula, both took the scholarship route to US football careers, one that saw them attend university in the States, play for their university teams, and move into the professional football industry after graduation.

Both Ally and Robert now live in Florida, working 'behind the scenes' in the ever-growing industry that is soccer in America. Ally works in Orlando as an agent for Global Premier Management, a role he took on when he returned to the US after getting his MSC in Sports Management from the University of Stirling.

"The basics of the job are pretty simple – to sign players to the agency," he explains. "It's not usually as cut and dried as that, as we look to sign good people as well as good players. A lot of time can go into signing even one player, and it is very competitive as there can be a number of agencies in for the same player."

Robert, who also lives in Orlando, is currently Head of Youth Development at XL Soccer World, which runs a successful youth programme teaching children the fundamentals of the game, developing their technical ability through weekly practices. "Parents are really behind it and show that by coming to games, coming to practices, and really getting behind their children."

"It's much more of a business here," says Robert, of the nature of the sport in the US. "I think in Scotland it's taken for granted. It's just football, it's the norm and we essentially get it for free. Here in the US it's booming. It's on the rise and with that there's a lot of excitement surrounding it."

Ally agrees. "Football is definitely growing in the US. I think it is certainly becoming comparable to the other big sports." He references the fact that Atlanta United, a new team in the Major League Soccer (the American equivalent of the Premier League), saw 30,000 season ticket sales a month before their first season. It is, he suggests, "a sign of the times."

A life in America was something neither of them had really anticipated. Ally was playing football in Glasgow, contemplating studying to become a PE teacher in Edinburgh, when a friend recommended he look into playing in the US. "It seemed a bit far-fetched as I didn't know of anyone who had done it prior, but for some unknown reason my mind was made up after I had met the representatives in Glasgow," remembers Ally. "Maybe I watched too many movies!"

It didn't end up being far-fetched at all, of course: by the autumn of 2007, Ally was studying at the University of Evansville in Indiana on a football scholarship. "It is a smaller university but it was great for me, and I made some very good

friends who I am still close with today," he says, adding that while some people have had trouble with the scholarship process, he "can't say a bad word about it."

Football scholarships in America are a big deal; the largest university games are shown on national television, and some players go straight into the MLS on leaving university. "It is certainly not for everyone, as there are times when you miss out on some pretty big occasions, but I was able to play at a pretty good level at some of the top places in the country, while getting a degree from a private school," says Ally.

"The university is historically known for its football team, so it was pretty cool during the season, when there was a bit of hype around the place and we were playing in front of some decent sized crowds."

A few years later, Ally was advising Robert, then studying Sports Coaching at North Glasgow College, on how to pursue football in the US, too. For Robert, arriving in the US to play football at Mount Mercy University in Iowa was almost like a dream come true. "My first impressions were simply excitement. I felt as though I really had found the next best thing to professional football. I was training three, sometimes four times a day during pre-season, which was gruelling but brilliant at the same time."

But as he points out, "it wasn't all play. I was there to obtain my university degree too. A typical day involved 6am team workouts, classes from 8.30am-4pm, football training from 4pm-6pm, a quick bite to eat, and off to the library until midnight to catch up on homework."

The intensity of the schedules didn't put either of them off, but then both had been playing football in the Western Isles for years. Ally got his first taste of serious football with friends at The Nicolson Institute, and eventually Ross County, although it was at home in Point his interest in the sport began to grow. "I first got into football at home because of my brothers. They were a little bit older than me and were always doing quite well for Point, so I guess I was pushed from an early age."

"The people that know me best will say I'm quite competitive, so I guess I wanted to do as good as they did – the arguments still go in in the house to this day! I was very grateful to them and my parents though – there was never a time I had to miss any football. Looking back now, how my mother kept her sanity is still beyond me."

Robert had a similar experience, playing football with his older brother every day after school. "I was always the one who took football a little too seriously. It was my passion from a really young age," he remembers. By 13, he was travelling with the Benbecula Under-15 team to games around the country, and even training with the senior players of Benbecula FC. "There was never really a time where I decided I wanted to pursue football



| Ally Mackay, right

professionally, I had just never really accepted doing anything else for a living."

Football aside, life in the USA has been good to them both – but it did take some getting used to. "Driving on the other side of the road was... eventful, at least in the beginning!" says Ally, while Robert admits certain political attitudes took a while to adjust to.

"I love it here, I really do," says Robert, who is now five years into his American experience. "I've had many opportunities to move home but I've always decided to stay here in the US. One day I still hope to move back to Benbecula, but for now the network of friends and opportunities I've created for myself here in the US is too good to chuck. Being away from my family certainly took getting used to... but it's all worth it when I get to go home on holiday and see friends and family and really savour my time in the islands."

Ten years since his first move to Evansville, Ally is now "pretty comfortable on both sides of the pond." In the last year he's got married and had a son, so Florida will likely be home for them for the foreseeable future. "I love living in Florida, but I also love getting home when I can. Coming away from Lewis has made me appreciate it more, and I want my son to appreciate where that side of the family is from. I had a great upbringing and was really lucky with the path I took, and that cornerstone started with my family, friends, and football back home."



| Robert MacGillivray playing football in Iowa