

Well-Traveled

An Interview with Marquette University men's coach Louis Bennett, as told to Julia Ann Charpentier

Louis Bennett may be known as a legend in international soccer, but this 48-year-old charismatic native of Bristol, England, flaunts more than his own skills on the field. An award-winning player and founder of the touring British-American Soccer Program, Bennett is entering his fourth season as the men's soccer coach for the Marquette University Golden Eagles. He replaced Steve Adland in 2006.

Some believe his decision to leave the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Panthers after 10 seasons was a mistake. He was the most successful men's soccer coach in the school's history, leading the team to five consecutive NCAA Tournament berths and garnering numerous coaching awards. He thrives on challenge, and his career change will test his skills.

Bennett has an extensive background in collegiate and professional soccer. After a brief stint with the New York Arrows, he played for Crewe Alexander and Port Vale in England and went on to play for seven years in the United States for Kansas City, Milwaukee, Dayton and Memphis. Three of those seasons (1985-87) were with the Milwaukee Wave as a midfielder and forward.



Louis Bennett has lived in several different cities, but his biggest move may have been across town from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee-based school to Marquette University.

JC: You grew up in Bristol, England. What were your greatest motivators?

LB: The society has a focus on sporting activity – especially in soccer. My grandfather was involved in soccer. My father loved it.

JC: Your grandfather played professionally?

LB: He played with professional clubs. In World War II, he was part of the Home Guard. By the time he came out, my grandmother didn't want to move anymore, so he played locally. A couple of local pro teams had always wanted him to play. He was a big inspiration, even with his dress shoes on. With shirt and tie, he could show a few moves.

JC: You began playing at eight years old and turned pro at 19.

LB: I played for my first pro team and got paid when I was 19 or 20. I went to a teacher training college in the Midlands called Alsager that became Crewe and Alsager. Port Vale also wanted me, so I would play on their reserves. At the time I was in college I was also playing for a pro team

because there's no eligibility or ineligibility. There wasn't a lot of money. They had three teams: an 18-year-old team, a reserve team and a first team. Two or three of the college guys would bounce around helping the A teams and the reserves, so that was my first experience with a men's pro club.

JC: You played pro for the New York Arrows. Was that your first contract in the United States?

LB: I was 21. I'd graduated from college and I'd played with an organization: England Colleges, and then Great Britain Colleges. I played in an intercollegiate scrimmage, and I could never do that because I was still playing with a pro team. I ended up going to Camp Half Moon in Massachusetts, and while I was there someone from the New York Arrows came up.

JC: How long did you play for them?

LB: I was there four months, then I went to Kansas City. I went back and forth with the New York Arrows before the season started about how many foreign players they had, so I left before the season was due to start to play for Kansas City. I played four

or five games for the New York Arrows. I went to Kansas City because they guaranteed me I wouldn't have to live in a hotel. When I was in Kansas City the move might not have been the best I did, but I moved and didn't play that well. I was homesick, and they released me from my contract. From the time you get released you get put on waivers, and that means you've got a 48-hour period to get picked up. If you don't get picked up, you don't have a work permit. I went back to England.

JC: 1985?

LB: About 85-86. I went to another pro team next to my college called Crewe Alexandra. I was there for about two months and then got seriously hurt. An ankle injury kept me out for four months. I consistently was getting phone calls – inquiries from the United States to come back. Over here, I saw a big opportunity for coaching and working with kids – also to play. It was indoor soccer because there was no outdoor soccer. None of my family wanted me to leave. They wanted me to stay in England. They thought I was in a good situation because I was with a pro club. All right, I wasn't in the first team, but I had a degree, which a lot of people don't have in England. I only wanted to play or coach. I decided to come back to the United States for good. I went to Kansas City, but the league fell apart. Out of the ashes came the AISA, a league for American players or green card holders. I landed up signing for Milwaukee.

JC: While still in England you were named the Great Britain Colleges International Player for three years.

LB: It didn't help me in England. Being a collegiate player didn't really matter. It was whether you're a pro player or whether you've been on a foreign team. It was what got me noticed in America because they scanned all the international players in the college scene in England.

JC: Tell me about your three seasons with the Milwaukee Wave.

LB: When I came to Milwaukee I was hungry to make a difference. I made sure that mentally, socially and emotionally I would

fit. So my time in Milwaukee was where I got my feet on the ground. It was a time where I grew up and became a proper professional soccer player. Instead of wanting everything to be perfect, I made everything acceptable for myself. Some people look back and say they were hard times. They were actually good times. We weren't earning a lot of money, but everyone really wanted to be in the league for the reason that they love soccer. Having some contractual difficulties after three years with Milwaukee and then having to go and play elsewhere, you could look at that as a downside. Players get traded – not pushed around, but moved around. That's all part of the business. You're basically a commodity. Even what could be seen as a negative experience in Milwaukee was a positive experience.

JC: How did your experience in Milwaukee compare to Memphis and Dayton?

LB: The Dayton crowd took a shine to me, and that was flattering. I came back after the season to be in Milwaukee. Dayton was a huge boost for my career. It was a brand new franchise, and they needed people to follow. I was just one that they decided they would adopt. [I was] traded on the dispersal draft. I met some good people in Memphis, and then I got hurt, so I officially retired. Coaching's not playing, but it's the next best thing. I'm probably a better teacher than I was a player, even though I don't want to admit that. I was a solid professional that earned his money.

JC: You were a very popular player.

LB: I had a blue-collar streak of my play right down the middle of my back, and after every game I left everything I had. It took me about a day and a half to recover playing indoors, battering around those boards.

JC: You were at UWM for 10 seasons. What inspired you there?

LB: When you're a professional soccer player there's a must-win, almost an acidic feel about winning. I went from professional soccer to college soccer. You're helping sculpt and mold and providing opportunities for young men to become the people they want to become. No single year will be the same. So you have to put a different slant, a different spice into your team, without moving away from what you believe. There are 199 teams and only 48 go to the NCAA Tournament, so if you're one of those 48 every year for five years, that's an unbelievable ride that you probably take for granted. Do I have any regrets? I would have liked to have gone to a final eight, final four, final 16 with UWM. I

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would have liked to have been a coach that played under lights at UWM. Ironically, the year I left was the year that they got the lights.

JC: You were the most successful men's soccer coach in the history of UWM. Why did you leave for Marquette at the end of 2005?

I loved the place. It was my only American college, and I loved what we'd created. I never saw it as a stepping-stone. After going out of the tournament two consecutive years, I would start looking for excuses about why we couldn't go beyond the round of 32. If I started making excuses to myself, I couldn't provide an honest, up-front approach to the players. I'm not saying that UWM can't ever win a national championship.

JC: How are loyal fans reacting?

LB: It's the most passionate team sport throughout the world. It was the biggest collegiate game crowd ever when I went back the first time. There was such a passionate, hostile crowd that it was what I was used to when I was in England. I'm happy I can be part of a rivalry that will bring 3,400 people out to watch a college soccer game.

JC: Some soccer enthusiasts say that the Golden Eagles have not reached a level of skill that the UWM Panthers have.

LB: I think they've not reached a level of performance and a level of competency. I was afforded 10 years (at UWM) to put a program together, a culture together, a system together. You cannot go in and microwave a sports program. You may go in and change it and have one year of success, but continuing excellence comes from the process of doing the right things at the right time all the time. My goal at Marquette is to create one of the best soccer opportunities for people from 18 to 21, so that when they look at Marquette, they can see we have good results, good facilities, good structure. It's something of value. The players make friends, they learn a little about themselves, they learn a little about their fellow man. We're in competitive athletics, but it has to be more than that.

JC: Is there anything at UWM that

you miss or regret?

LB: I don't regret leaving at all. I miss the people. This is such a huge opportunity, such a huge challenge. That's what I thrive on, the challenge, the test, the competition. When people say you can't do something, I dig my heels and say, "I think we can, if I believe we can." Marquette is providing that for me. They know what it takes in the Big East. It takes great facilities. It takes the opportunity to travel to play out of the region. I'm in a league now that is the closest to finding NCAA tournament games during regular season. That's what we wanted.

JC: Your coaching techniques are unlike the average American. What are the differences between British and American soccer?

LB: I've met so many people from different parts of the world. I think it's more of an international style. I've tried to build a coaching style and a coaching knowledge from everyone that I meet, so I'm by no



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means a finished article. My style may change slightly I wouldn't call it just British, and I wouldn't say it's not American either. I try to bridge the gap between the technical and the technician, and the emotion and the emotional kind of coach. There's a technical and tactical feel and recognition of players.

JC: Is the British way of playing superior to the American way?

LB: No. Not now. The game as we know it is called association football. That form of the game was created in Britain. They're the founders of the game, like the Scots were the founders of golf. Just because you invented something doesn't mean now, in modern society, you play it so much better. The English Premier League is the best league in the world in my opinion. It has players from all over the world. The British league is the best in the world, but they're playing in the international style. The way that I coach, and the way that our teams are designed to play, is truly American – it's a hybrid. If you watch Dutch possession, if you watch Dutch attacking possession, if you watch German defensive possession and then you watch English wing-play, you mold them together and add some American athleticism spice, and now you've got four different elements that make up how I choose to coach.

JC: You've completed your third season with Marquette. What are the most significant changes you'll make in the fourth?

LB: There aren't any major, drastic changes. We're going to hang our coats on the personnel, the beliefs and the culture that we've established.

JC: How do you define success?

LB: Success in college sports from an outsider looking in ultimately will be defined on wins and losses. From the people within, it'll be their experience and their knowledge and their enjoyment as well as the things that they've achieved in terms of wins and losses. How I define it is a combination of both.

JC: How do you determine a player's value to a team?

LB: His influence. His personality, his ambition, his talent. His dedication and determination. Then you roll all that up, and you put in loyalty.

JC: As you enter the recruiting period, do you base your decisions on specific qualifications such as statistics?

LB: Statistics count a lot more for goalkeepers and forwards. I like talent. I

respect work ethic, but I love character. So you have to get to know these guys. The bottom line is it'll be their character that'll pull everything else through.

JC: Does your gut feeling ever override a player's stats?

LB: All the time. Very often, if there are two players and one has better stats but the other one has a much better feel, we'll go with that.

JC: In the middle of training, say a recruit doesn't come close to your expectations.

LB: Recruits we can't see until they're actually part of our program. If a freshman isn't playing, it might not be appropriate to address it for eight to 10 days. It may be 12, 18 months before we see his full potential. If a guy's not trying hard, or if a guy's giving up, there's no time. In top athletics, and especially in college athletics, you always can do your best and you can work hard. Your emotional frailties might reduce that work ethic on any certain day, but we have to address that. I like the one, two, three and out. Club experience and high school experience doesn't prepare them for college soccer. Especially in club soccer – you pay and you play. When you come to college no one's doing that. Everyone's on the same plane. There's just you, the coach and the team. Sometimes the best stars – the guys that you think are going to be great stars – they'll end up taking 12 months to find themselves. Sometimes the guy that's always had to work for a place adjusts a lot quicker. I don't tolerate lack of effort. If you've not got the opportunity, take what opportunity you have, and work your hardest. I don't think there'll be a player that'll ever play for me that doesn't work hard. We've all got to work on our emotional stability. Those two things are nonnegotiable.

JC: To what extent do you believe that a coach is responsible for a team's performance?

LB: It's our fault when we lose, and it's the player's fault when we win. We've got to take that responsibility because we're the first line from the outside. I don't really care what is said about our program. What I have to care about is what goes on inside the program, as ultimately I'm the one making the decisions on how we train, when we train.

JC: Not all coaches have a background in professional soccer.

LB: My experience playing the pros enhances my approach to the game, and my approach to the game probably helps my relationship with the players. I don't think you

have to be a pro player to be a good coach. My experiences have enhanced who I am to this point, and every day I try to get something new so I can give it back to the players. My interaction with the players is current. We can harp on the history, and my history, and what I've done in the past. That's all well and good, but a player wants to feel current. Players, fortunately, have short memories. They've got to forget the loss and go on to the next day, so we have to make them feel they're in the now. Having been a pro player and recognizing that, we can't get too up when we win or too down when we lose.

JC: Do you have more clout than a coach with an academic background?

LB: Don't know. It would be egotistical for me to say so. That's why I've tried to balance. Despite having a pro background, I'm trained as a teacher. I also have coaching licenses. As a coach I've got to look at it from all different points. And if I was just looking at it from the point – well, I've been a pro, this is how we do it – I would be incorrect. I've got to look at it from a teaching angle, from a coaching-school angle. Your style has to be a combination of everything. If you close out other things, I think you become too single-minded and you become frail.

JC: Do you encourage your winning players to pursue a professional career?

LB: It's such a precarious thing trying to become a professional soccer player, and even if you become a soccer player, a one- or two- or three-year stint in MLS is not going to make you independently wealthy. When you finish your career you're going to have to work, so absolutely yes, once they've got a degree.

JC: What do you value the most in your coaching career?

LB: The relationships I've had with the players and friendships. That's the benefit and the agony of being a college coach. You lose your most experienced players every year, but the fact is when those people leave, sometimes they like what you've done. I've made friendships that I'll have for the rest of my life. And from a professional level, the most rewarding thing is to be wanted. Even though college is not professional, it's professional for me because this is my job. The greatest honor I had was Marquette asking me to build their program and giving me the time to do it.

JC: If you could leave one impression on an aspiring player, what would it be?

LB: Love of the game. ☺