Clive Charles (1951-2003)

Clive Charles was a soccer player and coach who left an indelible mark on Oregon soccer culture. He joined the Portland Timbers in 1978 and went on to coach the University of Portland men's and women's soccer teams and the U.S. men's Under-23 National Team.

Born on October 3, 1951, in a working-class neighborhood in London, Charles came up in the West Ham United youth system, a club based in East London, signing as an apprentice when he turned fifteen. In 1970, he joined West Ham's first team as a defender. Charles was one of the early black players in England's First Division (now the Premier League), along with another future Portland Timber, Clyde Best. Nonwhite players were rare in England, even in the 1970s, and were often subject to racist taunts and chants from fans.

Charles played on loan for two seasons, 1971 and 1972, with the Montreal Olympique of the North American Soccer League and was a second-team All-Star both summers. He moved to Cardiff City, a Welsh club competing in the English Second and Third Divisions, where he played from 1974 to 1977. He was team captain and played with future Portland Timbers Willie Anderson and Bill Irwin. In 1978, the Portland Timbers purchased Charles from Cardiff City.

The introduction of players such as Charles and John Bain kick-started the Timbers into the playoffs and all the way to the semi-finals. Though Portland lost to the New York Cosmos, the impact of the twenty-seven-year-old Charles was undeniable. He played for the Timbers until 1981, in both the outdoor and indoor leagues, and entered into the game seventy-six times and scored seven goals in the 1980-1981 indoor season.

Following his departure from the Timbers, Charles continued to play soccer in the Major Indoor Soccer League, first for the Pittsburgh Spirit and then for the Los Angeles Lazers. He retired as a player in 1983 and returned to Portland. At the suggestion of Los Angeles teammate Jimmy Conway, a former Timbers player, he became the coach of the boys' soccer team at Reynolds High School in Troutdale.

In 1986, the University of Portland (UP) named him coach of the men's soccer team, and in 1989 his coaching responsibilities expanded to include the women's team. Under his leadership, many national team players came of age, including Kasey Keller, Shannon MacMillan, Tiffeny Milbrett, and Steve Cherundolo. Charles led UP teams to 13 conference titles, 20 NCAA tournament berths, and 7 NCAA Final Four appearances, with a combined 439-144-44 record. In 2002, his last season with UP, the women's team won the NCAA championship.

Charles and his friend Art Dixon founded the FC Portland Academy, a youth soccer club, in 1987. Dixon later owned a different incarnation of the Timbers, while FC Portland became an important fixture in the Oregon youth soccer scene. Although Charles was forced to withdraw from leadership in FC Portland when the team became the Timbers and went professional in 1989, his impact on the formation and success of the club was evident in the short-lived American Professional Soccer League era.

In addition to his work in Oregon, Charles was assistant coach to the U.S. Men's National Team in the 1998 World Cup; head coach of the U.S. Women's Under-20 National Team in 1993-1996; and coach of the U.S. Men's Under-23 National Team from 1996 to 2000, a team that took the bronze medal at the 1999 Pan American Games and finished fourth in the 2000 Olympics.

Charles received the Women's United Soccer Association lifetime achievement award in 2002. The next year, the Portland Timbers retired Charles's number, 3, the only number the team has ever retired.

Clive Charles lost a long battle with prostate cancer on August 26, 2003. He was posthumously inducted into the Oregon Sports Hall of Fame. To recognize Charles's contributions to the women's soccer team, the University of Portland named its soccer complex in his honor in 2004.

Written by Morgen Alix Young

Further Reading:

"Clive Charles." Oregon Sports Hall of Fame. http://www.oregonsportshall.org/clive_charles.html.

Haight, Abby. "Clive Charles, 1951-2003: Charles' Legacy More Than Soccer." *Oregonian*, Sep. 9, 2003, p. D1.

Muldoon, Katy. "Clive Charles Career Highlights the Player." *Oregonian*, Sep. 9, 2003, p. D7.

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