

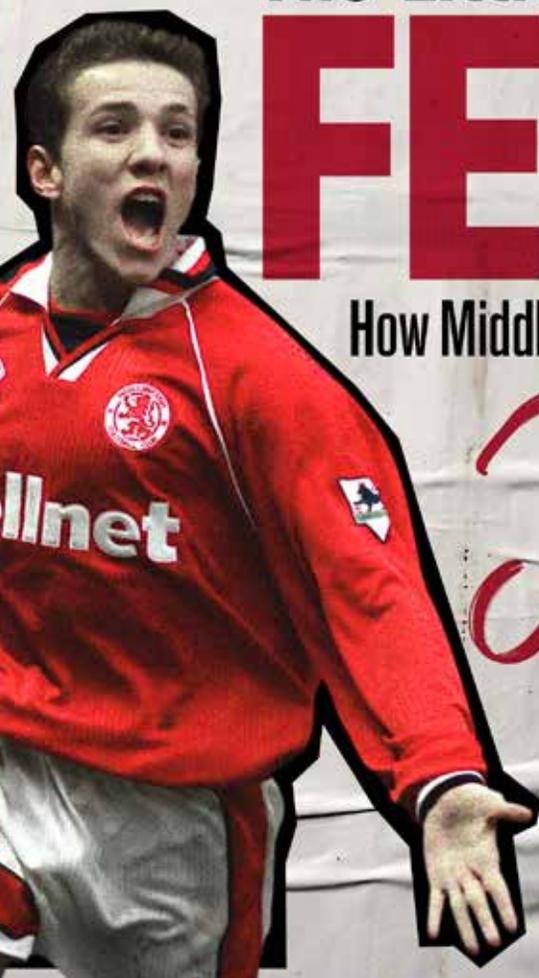
The Little

# FELLA

How Middlesbrough fell in love with

*Juninho*

DAVID BROOME



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# Act I: 1995–1996

‘He got the whole of football talking about Middlesbrough.’

*Bryan Robson, Middlesbrough manager, 1994–2001*

## Chapter One

# Welcome to Teesside (International Airport)

THERE MAY have been no record scratch to delineate the prologue from this opening chapter, but we will still hit the rewind button, from February 2004 to October 1995.

A lot happened in those intervening nine years, a period that ranks if not top, then pretty bloody close, of any in Middlesbrough's history. We reached four cup finals, qualified for Europe for the first time, won our first proper piece of silverware, signed some of the best players in the world, and got relegated with them.

One of those players is about to descend the aeroplane stairs (I just Googled that, sure they must have a better name, but no, aeroplane stairs it is).

As Juninho is greeted by thousands of fans at Teesside Airport, and later at the BT Cellnet Riverside Stadium, he looks overawed, wearing a suit slightly too large for his petite frame. He's like a work experience kid on his first day of placement – if that placement had hired a samba band to welcome him and thousands of employees were holding pictures of his face and asking for his autograph.

He looks a little scared, and Juninho says he was always much braver on the pitch than off it. Towards the start of the 1996/97 season, which – spoiler alert – would not end well for Boro, the Teessiders faced the Tynesiders in the first meeting between the two in seven years. Juninho, who was (and if you learn nothing else from this book, learn this) quite short, squared up to Newcastle’s 8ft 3in (approximate) Belgian centre-half Philippe Albert.

‘I was tough on the pitch because they couldn’t beat me up in front of the referee,’ Juninho told *FourFourTwo* years later. ‘I wasn’t scared of anyone – I thought he had been disrespectful and I came to ask him why he did that, and told him not to do it again.’

‘It happened all the time in matches, but if it had been out on the street I think I’d run like I was running away from death.’

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. Juninho hasn’t even left the aeroplane yet. As he descends the stairs with Boro chief executive Keith Lamb, an official hands him a white baseball cap and a bag filled with other goodies. With sombre gravitas, she intones four historic words to introduce this samba sorcerer to the north-east of England.

‘Welcome to Teesside Airport.’

The woman from the welcome party keeps trying to get Juninho to put the cap on, telling him with dubious logic that it will keep him warm. I’m not sure what the writing on the cap says, but Juninho doesn’t seem keen. It’s probably just a Middlesbrough FC cap, although you’d think it would be red then, so perhaps it is part of the ever-popular line of Teesside International Airport merchandise. If so, it’s understandable that Juno doesn’t want to put it on, he’ll need to keep it in mint condition so he can sell it for thousands of pounds on eBay in years to come.

Rewatching news footage from Juninho’s arrival in England, two things strike me. One is that the presenter pronounces his

name variously as Juzinho or Jorginho, but the other is that Middlesbrough were fourth in the Premier League at that point. Granted, it was only October, but we had lost just one of our first ten games, winning six, with Craig Hignett in lethal form, scoring a goal every other game.

So perhaps it wasn't quite so outlandish that we were signing a player dubbed 'the best in the world' or 'the new Pelé' by some fans of hyperbole at the time.

A note on that. As will become clear from these pages, Juninho is my personal favourite player of all time, Middlesbrough or otherwise. And he is, in my opinion, the most gifted, most exciting and most watchable player we have ever had. Even more so than David Wheater, believe it or not.

But best in the world? The highest praise you could perhaps give him at that point was that he was one of the greatest prospects in world football, but his career at that point was restricted to club football in São Paulo and a handful of appearances for Brazil.

I think it would be deemed more of a coup now, because football coverage is ubiquitous, so there are very few unheard-of gems that sneak through to unfancied clubs. It would perhaps be the equivalent of Middlesbrough having signed Neymar – to give another Sao Paulian example – from Santos in 2013. Someone who was exciting, but not yet the world-beater he would become.

And he was not a complete unknown quantity to English football fans. Juninho had already lit up the shores of Albion when playing in the never-to-be-repeated Umbro Cup. He scored against Terry Venables' Three Lions in the decisive final game at Wembley, standing out in a Brazil team that also contained Roberto Carlos, Cafu, Dunga and the original Ronaldo.

It was this tournament that had furthered Boro's interest in the young boy from Brazil, manager Bryan Robson being assistant to England boss Venables at the time.

Sitting in the dugout watching Juninho tear his team a new one, Robson was already making notes that must have read something like 'if you can't beat 'em, get 'em to join you'.

Graeme Le Saux opened the scoring – and his own England account – with a goal that wouldn't have looked out of place had he been wearing the yellow of Brazil, but Juninho matched his audacity with a free kick reminiscent of his compatriot, namesake and future team-mate Juninho Pernambucano. It was another Brazilian maestro, Didi, who invented the *folha seca* (dry leaf) style of free kick, which is hit with plenty of top-spin so it flutters down (like a leaf) from side to side as it drops into the goal.

He then plays in Ronaldo, the original one, *Il Fenomeno*, Brazil's new number nine, to score his first competitive goal for the Seleção. Afterwards, Robson said, 'He could do a bit of everything. He had great pace with the ball, he had skill and vision. He was tiny, but that didn't worry me because you could see he was brave and he was never intimidated.'

When the deal happened, it was no quick swoop, but the culmination of months of work by Lamb and manager Robson.

'Bryan Robson is arguably the single most important signing Middlesbrough have ever made.' That, at least, is the opinion of *Teesside Gazette* writer Philip Tallentire in a long-read piece from May 2019 looking back at the former England captain's seven years at the Teesside tiller. And it is hard to find fault with that assertion.

Hindsight would suggest it was a stroke of genius for Gibson to bring Robbo to the club, but in truth it was also a gamble that paid off handsomely.

Robson had no coaching qualifications when he left Manchester United after 13 trophy-laden years, but as Gibson

probably didn't say, 'Badges? We don't need no stinking badges.' The chairman clearly hoped Robbo's stardust would sprinkle over Middlesbrough as it had over Manchester, and that his contacts and reputation would make up for the lack of framed certificates adorning his Ayresome Park office.

In Robbo's autobiography, cleverly titled *Robbo: My Autobiography*, he admits he tried to smuggle Andrei Kanchelskis out of the back door of Old Trafford with him in 1994, but the Russian rocket opted to flit west down the M62 to Everton instead. Had Kanchelskis come, perhaps Robson and Lamb would not have cast their eyes to South America in search of talent to light up our midfield.

Before that though, there was a season in the Championship (née First Division) to navigate, though we were lucky that Robson didn't just turn tail the moment he clapped eyes on his new club's facilities.

These days, Middlesbrough's training ground and youth academy are the envy of many similarly-reputed clubs, and although their stadium is one of those identikit arenas built in the late 1990s (see also Pride Park, the Stadium of Light and the Britannia Stadium), it is a palace of modernity compared to Ayresome Park.

'It was a bit of a culture shock when I arrived,' admitted Robson. 'We had no training ground so we had to change at Ayresome and drive to the local prison, where we were allowed to use the pitches.'

Robbie Mustoe is someone who has certainly been there and seen that when it comes to Robson-era Boro, having been there to see him arrive and still being with the club after he left.

Though born and raised in Oxfordshire, and beginning his career with the U's, Mustoe was shaped by his incredible 12 years on Teesside into, as Juninho himself called him, 'the most underrated player' he ever played with. A central midfielder with

a strong work ethic, he had idolised Robson as a youngster, and after playing under Colin Todd and Lennie Lawrence, Mustoe couldn't believe that his childhood hero was going to be his new manager.

'We never really believed it until he walked through the door in a meeting room at Ayresome Park,' Mustoe said, the wonder still evident all the way down the video call from his new home in America, where he has been a pundit for ESPN and now NBC since his playing career ended.

'I grew up idolising Robson, so it was amazing. I loved to study central midfielders, so to have him as manager was amazing.

'I didn't think Lennie Lawrence was a big fan of me, but when Robson came in, he brought me into his office and told me I was going to be a big part of the team. From then he's got me, and I would run through a brick wall for him.

'It coincided with Steve Gibson taking more control of the club. We weren't aware, as players, of all of the plans, but then it starts to come through with the new stadium and it was all very exciting.'

Craig Hignett was another player who had been at the club for a few years when Robson arrived and was excited with the former England and Manchester United captain's arrival.

He said, 'Announcing Bryan as manager was a real coup for the club and showed the ambition of the chairman, Steve Gibson.

'It was definitely a turning point for the club because up until that point we were playing in front of 6,000 fans and struggling in the Championship.

'Bryan had such a reputation in world football that his name alone was able to attract some world-class players.'

In his first season at the Boro helm, Robson was player-manager, and not just one of those who threw on a pair of shorts to play 20 minutes of a cup game to make up the numbers. In

the season we got promoted, Robson played 25 times, often keeping a young Mustoe out of the team.

‘I didn’t mind, because I knew I was part of his plans for the future,’ said Mustoe. ‘The way he trained, you had a classy player with the heart of a lion.’

‘He was the ultimate professional and I learned so much from watching him and playing with him. When you played with him, he was a different animal.’

After being asked to stick two quid in for the tea and biscuits by John Hendrie on his first day (true story), Robson had a word with Lamb. ‘The club should provide them,’ he beseeched. ‘I also told him we needed a water dispenser and I wanted the dressing room painted white.’

Thank God for that. Because if there’s one thing we all know about Juninho, it’s that he’s a diva when it comes to dressing room decor. Mariah won’t sing without 20 kittens; Ozzy won’t play without 1,000 brown M&Ms; and Juninho won’t kick a ball unless the changing room walls are daubed with an emulsion so white it hurts your eyes.

That water dispenser though, did perhaps not turn out to be the technological revolution that Robson had hoped it would be. Mainly because skipper Nigel Pearson started keeping a pet fish in it.

As defender Neil Cox reminisced, ‘Nigel had put a goldfish in the water filter in our dressing room at Ayresome Park. He fed it, but every time you pressed to get water out, the goldfish swam up.’

Up until Juninho’s arrival though, Robbo’s improvements were generally small but important ones. The £1.3m acquisition of Jan Åge Fjørtoft from Swindon was the biggest outlay, but Gibson had spent bigger in a much more important area – the £16m building of the Riverside Stadium.

Without this venue to play in, without a two-time Premier League winner to manage him, and without the top-flight football

that Robson brought, it is unlikely Juninho would ever have had his head turned to face the chilly north-east winds of Middlesbrough.

‘He got the whole of football talking about Middlesbrough,’ said Robson, who was told during that game between Brazil and England at Wembley that Juninho could be available.

Lamb quaintly faxed São Paulo to see if they were interested, but received a ‘stroppy’ reply (at least as stroppy as a fax machine can be) – ‘nunca’.

But Boro persisted, enlisting ‘the agent, an Italian guy’ to help and, after many more faxes winged their way back and forth across the Atlantic Ocean, São Paulo said they might be interested. Quick as a flash, Robson and Lamb grabbed their passports from their sock drawers and jetted to Brazil.

Five days of laborious negotiations were surely made easier by numerous caipirinhas and the joy of not having to spend their whole summer in Middlesbrough, and finally a deal was done for \$7m (£4.75m in those heady days when the pound had some strength left in it).

Years later, Gibson revealed how the whole deal for Juninho had almost collapsed in the most bizarre circumstances.

A local businessman issued a winding-up petition against Middlesbrough FC in a dispute over sponsorship rights, which led to a court date and the club’s bank accounts being frozen, just as negotiations with Juninho hit a critical point.

Speaking in an interview for *England, Their England*, a book chronicling the history of every overseas-born footballer to have blessed the English game, Gibson said, ‘Immediately that happens you have to appear in court.

‘But that court thing can take 14 days and in that 14 days the banks have no option other than to freeze your accounts. It nearly stopped us signing Juninho.’

Luckily, a blowtorch was taken to the frozen assets just in time to complete the deal. And the Brazil trip could have been

even more productive for Boro, as Robbo also made enquiries about a left-back playing for São Paulo's city rivals Palmeiras – one Roberto Carlos. Alas, the dithering about with faxes meant that sneaky Italian giants Internazionale de Milano had swiped him away just days before.

Now, I'm not saying that Roberto Carlos would have been a better option at left-back than Curtis Fleming, but – oh no, wait a minute, I am saying that.

Back to Teesside. After the excitement of the airport, Juninho is whisked to the Riverside, where he is greeted by the aforementioned samba band, banging what look like wheelie bins and blowing whistles; several youngsters with bleached-blond hair (this was the 1990s); and – most thrillingly of all – Roary the Lion.

'Let's say it was an unusual way of welcoming a new player,' Juninho said. 'We're used now to seeing fans gathering for a player's unveiling, but it wasn't so common back in the 90s.'

'I certainly didn't expect such a warm welcome. In fact, I remember there was a Brazilian family waiting at the airport. We became friends and we're still in touch 20 years later.'

That Brazilian family would go on to play a bigger part in Juninho's acclimatisation to Teesside. Sitting next to Juno at the press conference is Gianni Paladini, who acted as an interpreter for many of Middlesbrough's foreign stars, including Fabrizio Ravanelli, Benito Carbone and Juninho's compatriot, Emerson.

Already a successful property owner and nightclub-monger, he would later inveigle himself further into the football world, first in a failed attempt to take over Port Vale, and then in a more successful acquisition at Queens Park Rangers, where he was chairman for seven years.

However, while Paladini, a former Napoli youth player who had been living in England for nearly 30 years at this point, was probably perfectly qualified to translate for his Italian

‘amici’, his Portuguese was not quite as fluent, at least according to Juninho.

‘That Brazilian family I met at the airport really had to help me out on this, because I quickly realised that the interpreter the club had employed didn’t understand a word I was saying and he was translating everything from his own mind,’ he said.

‘The family asked me who he was and told me that he was not translating anything the right way. He did things like ask for “faisao” [pheasant] instead of “feijão” [beans].’

Poor Juninho, the number of times he must have sat in the canteen at Rockcliffe Park forlornly eating baked pheasant on toast, too polite to correct the mistranslation.

There is an example of this lost-in-translation effect at the press conference. One of the assembled press corps asks with unparalleled wit and insight, if Juninho is surprised at how cold it is in Middlesbrough. A simple – indeed, very simple – question, but Paladini makes such a hash of the translation that Juninho looks at first confused, and then slightly offended, so it is left to one of the Brazilian journalists in the audience to untangle the question.

Juninho and Robson laugh off the question, the latter pointing out that ‘it’s Middlesbrough, not the North Pole’, although remembering his arrival two decades later, Juno told a different story.

‘I arrived in October and it was so freezing cold that I couldn’t feel my feet,’ he said. ‘I had to put pieces of newspaper inside my boots to help warm them up. I also had to wear one of those ninja caps that leave just the eyes showing.’

I don’t know exactly what a ninja cap is, but I want one.

Andy Campbell, then a doe-eyed 16-year-old making his first steps at his hometown club, remembers that even with a ninja cap, newspaper in his boots, cold-weather gear, a woolly blanket, thermal underwear and a hot cup of steaming cocoa,

Juninho was electric to watch in training. Campbell said, 'The first time the little magician trained in snow was amazing to see. He wore all his training kit, plus bottoms, a coat and a balaclava to keep the cold away. Funny thing was, he was still the best player on the pitch with all the extra clothing.'

'This just showed me how good and dedicated he was to the cause of playing for the club and that was proven over the years.'

But why Middlesbrough? Remember, this was a Boro team who weren't even in the Premier League the previous season. We had a manager with a name and were moving into a new stadium, but had little else to offer compared to some of the bigger clubs who would surely have been aware of Juninho's talent.

The answer is perhaps less romantic than fans might hope. 'I heard that there had been talks with Arsenal, but I didn't ever get an offer from them,' says Juno. 'I was still under contract at São Paulo, but it was running out and there was a big difference between what I wanted and what they were willing to offer me. That's when Middlesbrough got in contact and Bryan Robson and Keith Lamb came to São Paulo.'

'The Premier League wasn't broadcast in Brazil back then and we had very little knowledge of it. Of course, I was aware how big the name Bryan Robson was in England, and I'd heard about Middlesbrough, but that was all. Before the deal was sealed, I started to watch matches and I remember being a bit frightened by all the long passes and the physical game! But I had never run away from anything before, and I certainly wasn't going to run from this.'

In training over the next few weeks, before he was able to make his Boro debut, he instantly impressed his new teammates, dispelling their concerns about his size.

Craig Liddle, now Boro's academy manager, said, 'I can remember us being linked with him but if I'm honest I didn't know a great deal about him.'

‘The first thing that struck me was how small he was, but once he started training you could see he was going to be something special.

‘His ability to run with the ball and change direction was something else, and his ability to play passes between the lines with disguise was fantastic.

‘Another thing I noticed, he didn’t have great power when shooting but incredible accuracy.’

Liddle wasn’t the only one to be star-struck.

Rob Nichols, editor of the much-lauded, old-school Boro fanzine *Fly Me To The Moon*, still going strong after more than 30 years, remembers going to Ayresome Park to watch Juninho train.

‘I think there is a YouTube clip somewhere of old pro Chris Morris [Boro defender and Ireland international] and he is open-mouthed about the little man’s skills,’ Nichols said.

‘He couldn’t quite believe what Juninho could do with the ball.

‘I remember magazines like *Total Football* coming to Middlesbrough and interviewing me and they were seeing Middlesbrough as a new buzz town. It was all a bit unreal.

‘I do remember feeling almost overwhelmed when Juninho made his debut – everything seemed off the scale. It was nothing like any of us had ever experienced.’