



by Gordon Craigie

The Auld Alliance is alive and well...

The trouble with the French is they don't have a word for entrepreneur! Who knows if George W. Bush, the 43rd President of the USA, ever *actually* said that... but it's a good line anyway! Maybe what he thought France needed was a Scot to lead the way, since he had publicly endorsed and promoted the role of Scots in shaping and strengthening his own country, from the Declaration of Independence right through to the present time. If so, he would surely appreciate the efforts of the Scotsman who came up with the idea of recruiting young French footballers to a football academy in Scotland. Yes, you read that correctly – for the last 8 years, young footballers from the home of the current and two-time World Champions, France, have been pursuing their dreams in Glasgow thanks to the entrepreneurial spirit and ambition of the Pollok born Parisian resident, Chris Ewing.

Chris appeared to be living the dream when he was signed as an apprentice football player by Motherwell. The current Scotland manager Alex McLeish was in charge at the time and Chris was 'learning his trade' alongside other young hopefuls like Lee McCulloch and Stephen Craigan, both of whom enjoyed long and successful professional careers. But Chris's dreams were

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shattered in familiar fashion when he was released at the end of his contract, despite assurances to the contrary. At just 19 he found himself kicking around the lower and junior leagues while wondering what he could do next, and that was where his life really began to change, as Chris recalls...

"When I was 15 my Dad took me to America to watch Ireland in the 1994 World Cup. My cousin, Tommy Coyne, was in the team and we saw Ireland beat Italy at the Giants Stadium in New York and lose to Mexico in Orlando. When I first discovered New York City it literally changed my life. That experience opened my eyes to something beyond Glasgow for the first time and I thought, 'wow there's something else out there'. A wee bit later on that would give me the courage and desire to travel and try things. After I'd left Motherwell, I had the opportunity to go to America on a scholarship. I was fortunate enough to study at Adelphi University in Long Island and the University of Tampa in Florida, and I understood for the first time the power of any project that links the passion of sport with education and the experience of living abroad. On the back of that came the original idea of setting up my own football Academy."

It wasn't all plain sailing though and, despite benefiting hugely from the experience, Chris lost his way a little when his Dad sadly passed away. He dropped out, returned to Glasgow with no qualifications, or money, and ended up working in a pub for minimum wage. In 2004, Chris became friendly with a French girl who was studying at Strathclyde on an Erasmus programme and, when she returned home, she invited him to follow her to Paris. Chris thought he had nothing to lose and duly headed off, with just £40 in his pocket! "I remember it well, two £20 notes! I thought I'd give myself 10 days to see if I could get a job and if I didn't then I'd try and make the money last – I didn't know how expensive

Paris was and, with hindsight, £40 for 10 days was a wee bit ambitious! Anyway, when I arrived Euro 2004 was on and I just asked for a job in an Irish bar and got taken on that first night. The 10 days passed and I ended up staying. It was difficult in the beginning, I was sleeping on sofas, drinking quite a lot – I was young and didn't really know what I was doing to be honest! Then I met my wife in that wee pub and that set me on the right road..."

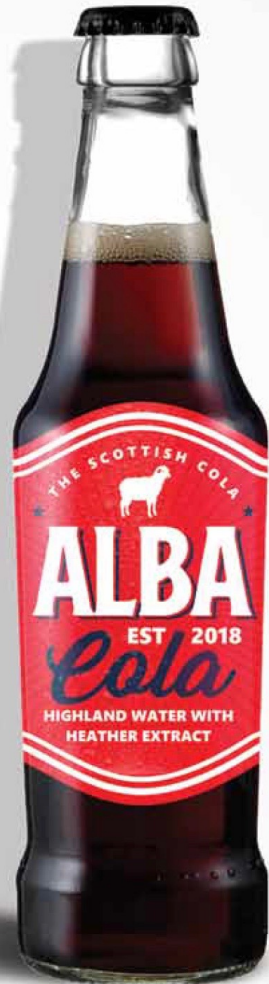
Realising that he didn't want to work in a bar forever, Chris started to think seriously about what he wanted to do and how he could capitalise on his football background. "I cheekily phoned Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) and asked if they were looking for any English-speaking coaches and they gave me a job on their summer programme. Apart from anything else, that meant I then had PSG on my CV! Then I got a coaching post with the American school in Paris and also started a company placing young student athletes in North America. I placed over 100 young French footballers in the USA and Canada but realised there was a lack of real potential to develop that business. My main ambition had always been to work with young footballers day in day out, and I eventually realised that what I really wanted to do was to run my own Academy. After my experience in America I knew anything that combined football with education and the experience of living abroad is worthwhile. I live in Paris but I'm a very proud Scotsman and I'm proud to come from Glasgow. The opportunity to bring young French footballers into Scotland, share Scotland with them, show what Glasgow's all about, show them how to coach and all that, that was something that really motivated me. So, I dreamt up the Edusport Academy – I researched potential partners, colleges, accommodation, training facilities and so on, then took the leap of faith! I opened the Academy, did some recruitment in Paris and in 2011 we got our first group of 18 young footballers in to Glasgow."

Chris Ewing. Image courtesy of Edusport Academy



THE SCOTTISH COLA

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Image courtesy of Alba Cola



It's not all football!
Image courtesy of Edusport Academy

Since then the numbers recruited have increased year-on-year before stabilising at around 60 for the last few years. "One of the big misconceptions about the Edusport Academy is that it's about getting the players signed to professional clubs and us acting as agents, but that couldn't be further from the truth. It's all about acting as a catalyst for a sustainable change in their lives, saying to a young French guy, 18-20, come to Scotland and have this experience abroad. For me this is the key – your life will never be the same because whatever happens after that year abroad no one can take that experience away from you. You will learn so much, grow up, learn about responsibility and how to overcome difficulties, ups and downs and how you react to those, and football is the catalyst because it's their passion. Learning English is worthwhile for them because if they go back to France with a good level of English then there's more opportunities open to them. But the main point is to change a young guy's life.

"There's so many people within football that will sell dreams and take advantage of people. One thing that scares me is somebody coming to my Academy and leaving disappointed, because that's not why I set it up. I set it up for positive outcomes, for people to fall in love with Glasgow and with Scotland, to meet new people and make new friends, to get better as a footballer and as a young man, and to learn English. If they come with the right attitude, and we're honest with them from the start, then we can avoid that disappointment."

As the Academy developed it became clear to Chris and his support team that their players needed the opportunity to play together as well as train together, so they applied for membership of the South of Scotland league. That worked well for a few years, winning the League Cup twice and earning a place in the Scottish Football Museum at Hampden as, essentially, a French team being successful in the Scottish football pyramid – Vive la Vieille Alliance! But success can

bring unexpected problems. When the team won promotion to the Lowland League it was clear to the Edusport staff that they had a classic case of 'men against boys' and that the students simply weren't ready to play at that level. Recruiting some experienced Scottish players to strengthen the team caused friction as some of the French guys felt disrespected by not getting a game in favour of local players. The solution decided upon was to separate the first team from the Academy completely, and that was when Chris had his next brainwave – how hard can it be to lead a new club through the lower echelons of the Scottish football pyramid system towards the Premiership, by 2025?

"We needed money to attract and pay players so we came up with the idea of a funding platform called *Our Football Club* (www.ourfootballclub.com). Membership costs £25 and buys the right to take an active influence in all decisions pertaining to the club. To date we have over 800 members signed up from 30 different countries and our vision is to create the first football club that's managed by an online global football community. Yes, it's a very ambitious, innovative project and people have said 'you're crazy, you say you want to be in the Premiership by 2025' – OK, that's probably overly ambitious and has generated a bit of negative feedback, but you've got to

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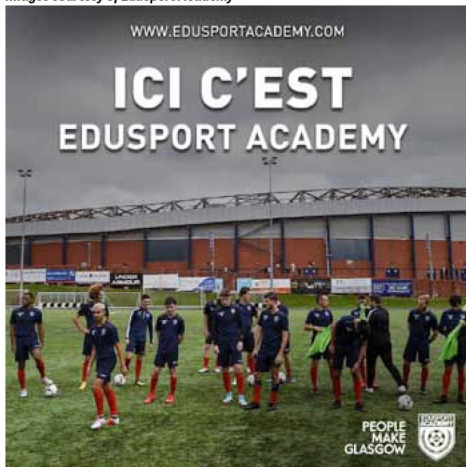


Edusport Academy coaching team. Image courtesy of Edusport Academy



It was an Auvergnat Cola, a regional drink developed in 2009 as part of a growing trend in France for local products

Not a bad training ground – Lesser Hampden! Images courtesy of Edusport Academy



be ambitious. There's no point in saying that in three years we might get out of the Lowland League or we might be in League 2 in ten years, that doesn't excite anyone. For any club, if you do the same thing year in, year out then you're going to get the same results. People say we're mad, but madness is a club that keeps doing the same thing and expects a different outcome! For me, if you're ambitious to go up the leagues that's why the pyramid was set up. Owners who have good business acumen, with good coaches in place who work hard to get a good footballing team on the park, should be rewarded for that. That's what we're trying to do and the only way we can do that is by thinking outside the box, and I genuinely believe in *Our Football Club*. Initially it's to raise money and resources for the football club, but it goes beyond that for me. It's a real people project. It's about people loving football wherever you're from, no matter what colour you are or which team you support, you can be seduced by this project to take a small football club in Scotland up the divisions as a group of people who love the game. To have over 800 people involved, particularly from 30 countries, just boggles my mind!

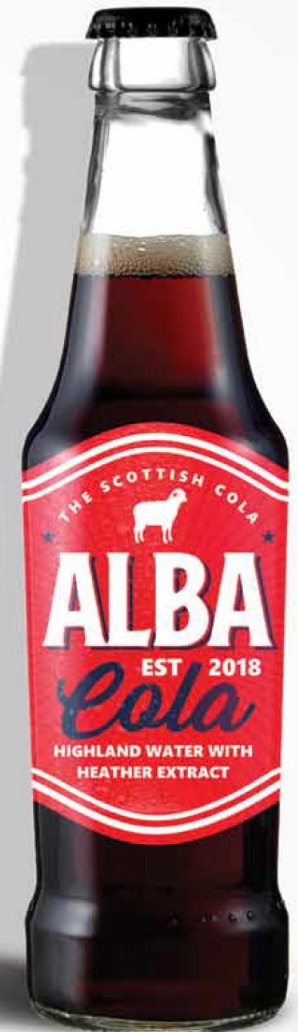
"I live in Paris and I've been on the streets when France won the World Cup, seeing people who wouldn't look twice at each other during a normal day giving each other cuddles! That is what football is about and if we can harness any of that passion to this project then that has to be championed. If you can give anybody any kind of hope through football then that's what football is – it's a game, it's a sport, it's about passion, it's about uniting people, it's about giving people hope. That's what it should always be about and that's what we're trying to harness in this project."

So, with the football academy established, expanding into basketball and rugby this year too, and with an innovative and ambitious football club developing rapidly, last summer Chris and his family left Paris and Glasgow behind to seek some tranquillity in the Auvergne region of central France. Having lunch on a beautiful summer's day on a terrace in an idyllic setting, Chris ordered a cola. Expecting one of the usual suspects, *Coca-Cola* or *Pepsi*, he was intrigued by what he received, instantly identifying the flavour as 'different'. It was an *Auvergnat Cola*, a regional drink developed in 2009 as part of a growing trend in France for local products. "Quite unique, novel, tasted OK, and I thought this is maybe something that could work in Scotland, a Scottish cola. That got me thinking – I love my Academy, that's my bread and butter, but I was coming up for 40 and I like to challenge

THE SCOTTISH COLA

SAME. BUT DIFFERENT.

Gallus



www.albocola.com



Image courtesy of Alba Cola





Football class of 2018-19. Image courtesy of Edusport Academy

myself a bit. I just fancied trying something creative where I'm designing it myself and creating a product that I've made. So, I trademarked the name *Alba Cola* then thought, OK, you've got this idea but you're a guy who has no experience whatsoever in the food and drink industry – how do you actually produce a cola anyway? How do you get it up and running, an actual liquid in a bottle? I did my research, followed through and... we have what we have!"

Image courtesy of Our Football Club



If you're going to launch a new football club, do it at the National Stadium! Image courtesy of Our Football Club

And what we have is indeed *Alba Cola*, a distinctly Scottish alternative to *Coca-Cola* and *Pepsi*, and the first official cola of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in its 71-year history! Apparently, the Fringe organisers were approached last year by *Pepsi* to set up their 'taste test' on The Mound, only to be rebuffed as they already had an official cola partner! *Alba Cola 1, Pepsi 0!* Chris laughs as he tells this story, adding "I'm sure in terms of sales it's *Alba Cola 0, Pepsi 1 billion!* We've still got some way to go, but it's a nice wee anecdote.

"Developing this has been a personal journey, and I was clear about what I wanted it to be. First it had to be uniquely Scottish, hence the name *Alba Cola*. Also, we had to use Scottish water – not just council water, but good quality Scottish water! Our water comes from the Cairngorms and it's literally one of the finest quality waters in the world. We're very proud to use it and it does add a cost but that's a business choice because I wanted a quality product. A heather extract gives it that unique Scottish identity – it's not overpowering, but you can taste it. There has been a boom in terms of craft drinks, beers and gins and so on, and also a greater demand for craft sodas. I've tried many of our competitors but, for me, they're too overpowering, maybe trying too hard to be artisanal, really strong flavours. I wanted our cola to be something where you can actually taste the water. 90% of any soft drink is water so for me it was a no-brainer to get the best water we can. The result is a really clean, refreshing taste – it's not a cola that leaves you with

an aftertaste and your teeth sticking together! We also think *Alba Cola* is a good mixer with whisky...

"I'm happy with what we've created and the feedback has been good. We've tried it round the bars, friends and family, and people genuinely seem to like it. We're in the final stages of trialling now and aim to be selling in shops and bars by April. The recipe is intellectual property, so only a few people know about it. We would like to create a wee bit of an enigmatic story so why don't we just say the recipe for *Alba Cola* is locked under the Eiffel Tower! At the end of the day we're selling a cola, it's not life or death, it should be fun. That's what we're trying to encapsulate in our brand so sponsoring the Edinburgh Festival Fringe made complete sense because it represents all the good things about Scotland – it's about welcoming the world to this country, putting on shows in the streets which are free for anybody, having a laugh and taking the proverbial out of ourselves. It's about being gallus and testing boundaries but doing it in a friendly, fun and professional manner."

From Pollok to Paris via Motherwell, New York and Florida, Chris Ewing has come a long way without ever forgetting his roots. He may have dropped out of four universities without getting a qualification, but he now holds a Masters degree from one of the world's leading sport management organisations, the Johan Cruyff Institute. Since arriving in Paris with £40 in his pocket and camping on sofas, he now lives in a beautiful suburb, owns three businesses and speaks fluent French. From knowing absolutely hee-haw about the drinks industry, he's now taking on *Coca-Cola* and *Pepsi*. And, he has a globally managed football team aiming for the top Scottish league by 2025... So, what's next for this Franco-Scottish entrepreneur?

"I'm in the process of taking out French citizenship – as much as I love Scotland I also feel a loyalty to France because it's given me an opportunity. I've worked hard to get where I am, but France did give me the opportunity to better myself. My wife and children are French, and I'm conscious of that so I think French citizenship is a way to recognise that. There's also a good bit of history between Scotland and France. First and foremost I'm Scottish but if I'm privileged enough to



Image courtesy of Edusport Academy



Image courtesy of Alba Cola

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acquire dual nationality then that will be great. The threat of Brexit means we have to look at alternative solutions for the Academy, maybe setting up elsewhere, but it's business as usual at the moment. I'm always trying to think how I can better myself and, for all my staff too, it's about being ambitious and driving things forward in a nice, human way. Good guys working together trying to do better – that's the mantra we have and if we can stick to that we'll not be far away."

Former French President Charles de Gaulle once famously championed the Auld Alliance as the oldest in the world, and Scotland's 'European-ness' has never been more topical than it is today. With the successes of the Edusport Academy, and all the rest, Chris Ewing is continuing to fly our Saltire proudly alongside the Tricolore, and we can all raise an *Alba Cola* to that – Slàinte Mhath et Santé!



Inaugural rugby class of 2018-19. Image courtesy of Edusport Academy



Bienvenue à Glasgow! Image courtesy of Our Football Club