FOCUS ON WINNERS: LEANDRO DAMIÃO



Internacional striker Leandro Damião has had an exciting 12 months, scoring in the final of the Copa Libertadores and making his national team debut for Brazil. He now has two important international championships in his sights.

Olympic goals, FIFA dreams

The traditional yellow shirt of the Brazilian national football team is one of the most iconic objects in the wide world of sports. Its exact shade and its badge with the initials CBF (Confederaçao Brasileira de Futebol) come immediately to mind for any football fan. Scenes from the team's greatest victories, none more so than the 4-1 victory over Italy in the 1970 FIFA World Cup in Mexico, are part of the collective memory of football, still the world's most popular game, still loved by billions, in spite of the shortcomings of the professional game's high-profile, high-earning administrators.

Everyone loves Brazil, but this love comes at a price in that the expectations of the watching public are high, and every time a new star player emerges from the excellent Brazilian club game to make an impact in the national team, he immediately draws comparisons with the great players of previous teams. Pressure is high and the demand for consistently excellent performances from the youngest age can take its toll.

Goal machine

Leandro Damião da Silva dos Santos, a striker born in 1989 in the small town of Jardim Alegre, in the state of Paraná, knows all of this. He made

Praise and honours have come thick and fast in the last 12 months for Leandro Damião, but he remains committed to working hard every day to turn Olympic and World Cup dreams into reality.

Alexandre Lops

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Leandro Damião believes boots must fit well and offer footballers high levels of comfort. He loves the F50 adizero boots he receives from adidas.

adidas

his professional debut four years ago at the age of 17 at Atlético Ibirama, a team from Santa Catarina. Impressive displays caught the eye of the southern region's big teams and he moved to Internacional (Inter) in Porto Alegre in 2009. A year later he helped Inter secure the premier club title in the Americas, the Copa Libertadores, scoring a goal in the final against Chivas Guadalajara of Mexico. To date, in only 57 matches for Inter, he has scored an impressive total of 33 goals. In 2011, he played his first match for the Brazilian national team, a tour match in London, for which Scotland provided the opposition. Leandro Damião failed to score in Brazil's 2-0 win, but he made a strong impression locally. Three months later, reports in the London-based media suggested three of the city's biggest clubs, Tottenham Hotspur, Chelsea and Arsenal, were vying to bring the striker to Europe in a multi-million pound transfer deal, with Inter rejecting all the initial offers. European Champions' League 2011 winners, the all-conquering Barcelona, are also reported to be monitoring his progress.

Proud moments

It's a lot for a young man to take in, especially as the games for Inter and the national team are coming thick and fast in the southern Brazilian winter. And Leandro Damião has other things on his mind. Next year, he hopes to represent his country at the football competition at the London Olympics. Leandro Damião says he is ready for all the challenges ahead. "It's such an honour to wear the Brazil shirt in a game," he says. "It's what I've always wanted, and I think playing for Brazil is something every footballer wishes he could do. To play for Brazil just fills me up with pride; it's tremendously exciting, for me and for my family."

Feel the difference

These days, of course, wearing such an iconic shirt also has commercial considerations. Nike, Brazil's sponsors and official kit suppliers at least until 2018, has a deal worth around $30 million a year. Football shirts at this level are big news and major sports brands incorporate as much new technology into them as they can, partly to satisfy the marketing need for newness, partly to justify the high price in the shops of the replica shirts that fans buy in the millions, and also to help elite athletes perform at their best. For example, Nike used the build-up to the last FIFA World Cup, in South Africa in 2010, to launch new versions of a number of international teams' shirts, including Brazil's, incorporating post-consumer recycled polyester into the mix for the first time. The players wear elite versions of the shirts, with carefully engineered moisture-wicking technology, special compression zones



The famous yellow shirt worn by Brazil is one of the hottest properties in the sports apparel business.

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and other functions built into the fabric. Leandro Damião believes players can feel the difference. "Sometimes the difference between one shirt and another is really clear," he says. "This is a high-performance sport, one that demands a high level of fitness, and what players want are shirts that are lighter and lighter in weight, but which can help you stay fresh in summer and keep warm in winter."

Internacional's current kit supplier is Reebok, a subsidiary of adidas. The player also works with adidas as his boot supplier; he uses the F50 adizero boot, again launched last year in time for the World Cup. "The boots I receive from adidas are excellent," he continues. "Quality is very important as far as boots are concerned. I think that footwear has to fit correctly on a player's foot. An athlete has to feel good; you need to feel comfortable."

Gold medal ambitions

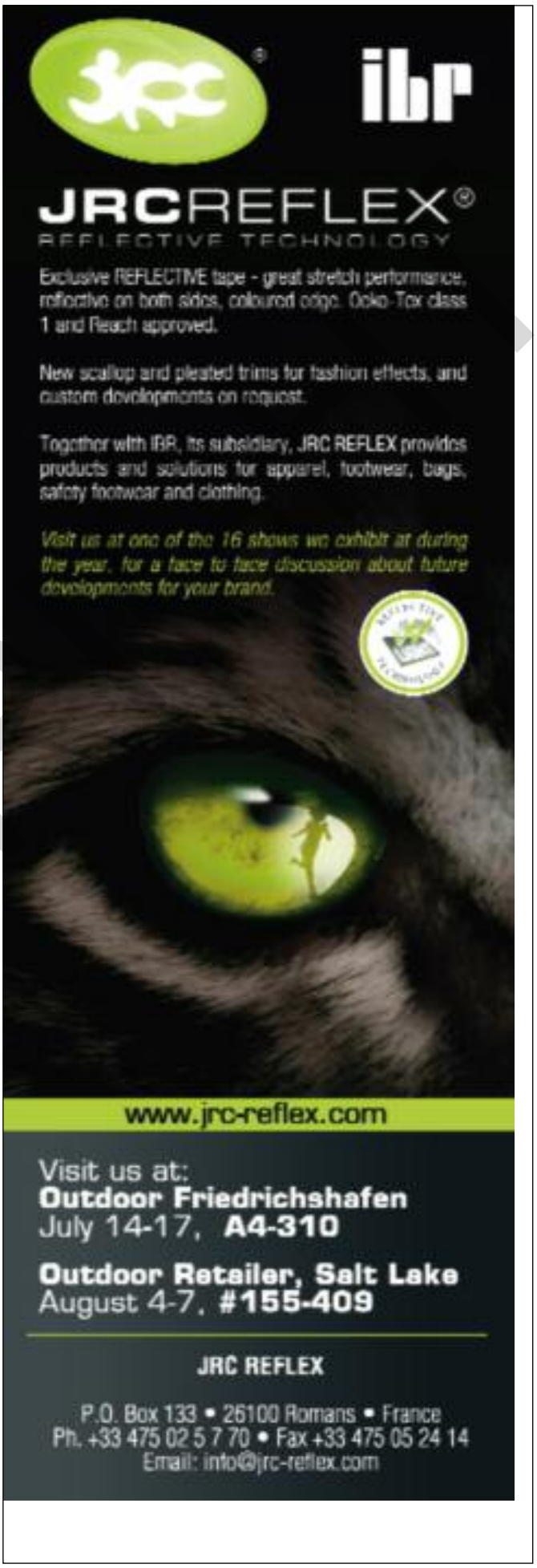
If his Olympic dream comes true next year, it won't just be a question of wearing the national team's shirt again. More is at stake, and even thought there is more than a year to go and still no guarantee of making the squad for London 2012, the Inter striker already has his main objective clear. It consists of winning Olympic gold, a prize that, so far, has eluded Brazil. The Summer Olympics always coincide with the European national football championships, which has traditionally made the Olympic tournament something of a lesser prize in the view of many European football fans. Players who take part must, for the most part, be under 23 years of age (three over-age players are allowed in each squad), whereas all the stars of the big European nations are on show in their continental competition. No European team has won Olympic gold in the men's football competition since host-nation Spain won in 1992. The last two competitions have been won by Argentina, and the two before that by African nations, Cameroon, preceded by Nigeria.

In recent times, clever countries have used the Olympic football competition as a basis for forming the heart of a squad for the FIFA World Cup, qualifying for which often begins immediately after the Olympic competition ends. This is certainly part of Brazil's thinking, but the importance of the Olympics themselves is not lost on Leandro Damião. "We've won the FIFA World Cup five times and the Copa América lots of times, but we've never been able to win a gold medal at the Olympics in football," the player says. "That's why the Olympic competition means a lot in Brazil and it's why we are pursuing that goal in 2012 with a passion."

Extra pressure

Nevertheless, it remains true that two years later, the Olympic squad is likely to be the mainstay of Brazil's next World Cup squad. And Brazil will be the host nation in 2014, putting the group of players selected for that tournament under even more pressure than usual.

"The 2014 World Cup already has everybody going in Brazil," the striker says. "Maybe it's because of the new stadiums being built, or just because people are excited about hosting one of the main sporting competitions on the planet. To be able to represent our country and to play in the World Cup in front of our own fans would be tremendously exciting, but I know that, to achieve that dream, I have to keep working hard every day."



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