Sócrates

An orthopaedic surgeon who became one of football’s greatest midfielders

Sócrates Brasileiro Sampaio de Souza Vieira de Oliveira, footballer (b 1954; q 1977, University of São Paulo), died on 4 December 2011 from intestinal septic shock.

The Brazilian footballer nicknamed Dr Sócrates was one of the finest talents of his generation. Not only did he hold a medical degree but also for years he felt divided between his life as a professional athlete and thoughts of following a career as an orthopaedic surgeon. In fact, even when he made a choice of the green of the pitch over the green of the scrubs, it was far from clear which aspect of his life the tall midfielder loved most.

“I have always had three loves: football, medicine, and beer,” Sócrates used to joke. “When I started playing I had this deal with my dad that I would not forfeit my education for the game and would get a degree I could use if things didn’t work in football. Even when I got my diploma I still didn’t know what to do.”

Sit-ups on his own

Sócrates had already passed his residency exams when he finally made the decision, in early 1978. By then he had lost count of how many times he had had to run around the pitch and do sit-ups on his own at Botafogo de Ribeirão Preto’s training ground because he’d missed training while working as a doctor, or how many times he had arrived at stadiums just in time for matches, still wearing his scrubs. “It reached a point where I simply had to choose: it would not be possible to carry on doing both things,” Sócrates explained in many interviews.

Another factor influenced his decision: although Botafogo was only a small club in the interior of the Sao Paulo state, Sócrates’s wages were more than 10 times those of the average junior doctor. But a couple of months later, when Sócrates was sold to the Brazilian football powerhouse Corinthians, his unusual background caught the attention of the media and the public. Soon the whole country would be calling him The Doctor.

Sócrates quickly rose through the ranks in Corinthians. Even though the then Brazilian national team manager, Claudio Coutinho, overlooked his talents for the 1978 World Cup, the player’s inclusion in the seleção, the “selection” for the Brazilian national team, was just a matter of time. Sócrates cemented his place in the midfield and became the captain of one of the most brilliant sides in Brazilian football, still revered after the 1982 World Cup in Spain despite being knocked out by Italy in the quarterfinals.

That tournament also saw a transformation of Sócrates’s behaviour. His skills and reading of the game were never disputed, but he had attracted criticism because he was unfit, only worsened thanks to his appetite for smoking and drinking. “However, Sócrates underwent a spartan programme for the 1982 World Cup and was in the best form of his life for that competition,” remembers Renato Prado, a Brazilian commentator. “The day after the defeat to Italy, however, I bumped into him in Barcelona, and he had a cigarette in one hand and a beer in the other.”

Sócrates Brasileiro Sampaio de Souza Vieira de Oliveira was born on 19 February 1954 in Belém do Pará, Brazil. Although football made his name famous worldwide, his militancy also contributed to the legendary status he achieved in Brazil. In Corinthians, he devised a revolutionary democratic system through which players and staff could vote in club decisions, from team hotels to player signings. Sócrates also openly campaigned for free presidential elections in Brazil and criticised the military government for its resistance in allowing the vote. It was his disappointment at the defeat of a parliamentary proposal on this theme that led to his accepting a move to the Italian club Fiorentina in 1984.

“I walked through a sea of people in the streets during the rallies, and that mobilisation represented one of the proudest moments of my life. It was to pay tribute to the common folk that I conditioned my permanence in Brazilian football to the approval of free elections,” said Sócrates at the time.

While in Italy he had problems with his back, and in 1986 Sócrates returned to Brazil. Three years later The Doctor retired from football. He split his time between sporadic work as an orthopaedic surgeon and work as a columnist for several Brazilian newspapers and magazines on topics involving politics and economics, in which Sócrates maintained his critical verve. Managers and authorities in Brazilian football were frequent targets, and the former captain never shied from expressing controversial thoughts, such as his support for Spain in the 2010 World Cup.

Heavy drinking

Unfortunately, Sócrates did not stop his heavy drinking either. At every public appearance, such as his surreal cameo for the lower league Yorkshire side Garforth Town in 2004, he showed signs of overindulgence—not that he tried to hide it. Such a lifestyle took its toll, and in August and September 2011 The Doctor was in hospital with a severe case of digestive haemorrhage. Debilitated, he returned to the intensive care unit with intestinal septic shock. Sócrates died on 4 December 2011 at the age of 57 leaving six children. On the same day Corinthians, the club Sócrates loved to the point that it disavowed him, the Brazilian national team manager, Claudio Coutinho, looked to the point that it disqualified him from working as a television pundit, won the Brazilian Championship. Before the match, the players paid tribute by raising their right arms and putting their left behind their backs—the way The Doctor used to celebrate his goals.

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Cite this as: BMJ 2011;343:d8343