

Goal.com Profile: Micah Richards

by Graham Lister - Goal.com

Having been England's man-of-the-match in their defeat by Germany in August's friendly international, Manchester City defender Micah Richards excelled again against Israel on Saturday and scored his first goal for his country in that crucial Euro 2008 qualifier. The teenager has also been in outstanding form for City this season, and seems equally at home as a right-back for England or a central defender for the Citizens. Goal.com looks at his career to date...

Early Years

Micah Lincoln Richards was born on 24th June 1988 in Birmingham, the son of parents from the Caribbean island of St Kitts. He grew up in the Chapeltown district of Leeds, attending Archbishop Cranmer C of E Primary School and then Wetherby High School. He represented Leeds City Boys and was signed on schoolboy terms by Oldham Athletic at the age of 12, moving to Manchester City in 2001. He also attended the highly successful Brazilian Soccer Schools scheme established in England by Simon Clifford in Leeds, and still has strong links with this programme as his father, Lincoln, actually runs a Brazilian Soccer School in Chapeltown.

The central aim of Brazilian Soccer Schools is to encourage children to spend longer working with the ball practicing and developing their skills.

Richards has become its most celebrated graduate. He was a member of the International Confederation of Futebol de Salão (ICFDS) National Squads, an elite programme open to the best young players in the under-15 and 16 age categories in the regional Brazilian Soccer Schools and Brazilian Football Academies.

Micah played for the squads when available, at both Oldham and Manchester City. His success to date has been attributed in part to his involvement in BSS and the ICFDS National Squad programme. On their website www.icfds.com, BSS themselves say they believe Micah's rapid progress through the ranks at Manchester City "has been because the club have allowed him to continue his training with BSS and the National Squads alongside City's academy."

He was one of a group of talented youngsters progressing through the academy, including Nedum Onuoha, Stephen Ireland, Ishmael Miller and Michael Johnson.

After joining Manchester City as a youth trainee and captaining the youth side, Richards broke into the reserve team, and in May 2005 won the club's 'Most Promising Player of the Year Award'. In July of that year, playing as a striker, he scored a hat-trick for the first team in a pre-season friendly and was rewarded a few weeks later by being assigned a squad number (45) for the 2005-06 Premiership season.

Rise To Fame

On 22nd October Richards made his competitive first team debut for Manchester City, coming on as a substitute against Arsenal. Although City lost that game 1-0, Richards was thrilled to play - even if only for a few minutes, as a forward - against the team he had grown up supporting, and to appear at Highbury before it closed. His involvement made him the first BSS player to play in the Premiership.

At the end of October he was named Reserve Player of the Month, and in January 2006 captained the reserves and the FA Youth Cup side at the age of 17. On 12th February 2006 he was given his first Premier League start, playing at right-back against Charlton Athletic.

A week later Richards shot to national prominence when he scored a dramatic last-minute equaliser with a header that forced a replay against Aston Villa in the Fifth Round of the FA Cup. In an immediate post-match interview live on BBC One with Garth Crooks, excitement got the better of him and in his, youthful exuberance when asked about the goal used he phrase, "f***ing hell." At the end of the interview, anchorman Gary Lineker apologised to viewers and put it down to "the inexperience of the young lad."

During that 2005-06 season Richards captained the Manchester City youth team that reached the FA Youth Cup final. He had to miss the first leg against Liverpool because he was on first team duty, but played in the second, helping City win 2-0. It was not enough though as they lost to The Reds 2-3 on aggregate.

In July 2006 City rejected a bid of £5 million for Richards from Tottenham Hotspur, and later that month he signed a new four-year contract at Eastlands, though interest from other clubs didn't go away, prompting then manager Stuart Pearce to say:

"I am not actively looking to sell Micah because he has a great future here. Whatever offers come in for him, it is going to take a ridiculously big offer to get him out of this football club. I would love to see Micah stay here, captain the club, and maybe be here for 10 years and carry the club on his back if he can. He is good enough to do it. I have not worked with anyone so good and so young."

An indication of his growing status was the fact that, for the 2006-07 season, Richards was handed the number 2 shirt as opposed to the number 45. He went on to play 28 Premiership games for City last season, having made 13 appearances in the previous campaign. Rumours that he might be bought by another club nevertheless persisted until the Thaksin Shinawatra/Sven-Goran Eriksson team took over and dramatically improved the club's prospects. Richards started the current season playing at centre-back, and produced a man-of-the-match performance against champions Manchester United at Eastlands on 19th August 2007, prompting admiration from the English media and, importantly, from his boss, former England manager Sven-Göran Eriksson.

Eriksson said: "I've never worked with a defender that strong and that quick. He wins everything. He can fight. If he makes a mistake he can recover because his pace is unbelievable."

Technical Skills

Richards can play at right-back, in central defence, in central midfield or even as an extra striker, but it is as a defender that he has made his name - at right-back for England and centre-back for City. He has said that playing at centre-back it all about taking up the right positions and passing the ball accurately, while at right-back it is also about going forward down the wing to support the attack.

Observers have commended his excellent ball control, which is a product of his Brazilian Soccer Skills involvement, and the training he put under that programme has helped develop a formidable balance of skill on the ball and great pace and power.

Richards once told FourFourTwo magazine that he rates his strengths as tackling, heading and goalscoring. Weaknesses? He told the magazine: "I need to bring the ball out of defence a bit more, like Rio Ferdinand does. I tend to look for the wide pass from the back, but I'm working on that side of my game."

He has tried to model his game on those of Sol Campbell, Ledley King and Patrick Vieira, and ranks Inter's ex-Arsenal midfielder Vieira along with Ian Wright, Thierry Henry and Paul Ince (in his Manchester United pomp) as his heroes.

National Team

Having represented England at Under-16, Under-17, Under-19 and Under-21 levels, Richards was called up for the senior England squad in November 2006, for a friendly against the Netherlands. He had only played in 28 professional club matches at the time. He took the place of England right-back Gary Neville and became England's youngest-ever defender, breaking the record previously held by Rio Ferdinand.

On Saturday he scored his first international goal in the Euro 2008 qualifier against Israel, producing a spring-heeled jump to head home Gareth Barry's corner.

Richards looks destined to be an England regular for a long time to come.

Did You Know?

- Richards and Middlesbrough's Seb Hines were at Wetherby High School together.
- Richards has played football since he was very young but also did well on the wing at both rugby union and rugby league at school because of his pace. That pace made him a good schoolboy sprinter (100m and 200m), but football was the sport he really loved.
- Oldham Athletic are believed to be in line for 20 per cent of any transfer received by Manchester City for Richards thanks to a sell-on clause when they allowed him to leave Oldham's academy for City's. In July 2006 City reportedly tried to buy out the clause, but Oldham refused.
- Richards liked local team Leeds United as a boy, but the team he supported was Arsenal because of Ian Wright.
- Lincoln Richards, Micah's Dad, has only ever missed one of his son's games - his first-team debut for City against Arsenal at Highbury in 2005. The reason was that Lincoln was in Ethiopia setting up one of the Brazilian Soccer Schools for homeless kids - something Micah would like to help him do in the future.

Particulars

Name: Micah Richards

Date/Place of Birth: 24th June 1988 / Birmingham

Nationality: English
Height: 1.77m
Weight: 80 kg
Position: Right-back / Centre-back