

How to Play Striker

Two of the best ever talk to *Champions Magazine's* Mark Sylvester and Stephanie Jones about the craft of scoring goals.

HENRIK LARSSON

What do you need to reach the top? "No fear" is top of the list, says the Golden Boot winner.

When did you realize you had a talent for scoring goals?

It happened as soon as I started playing for a club side as a kid. I'd drift into positions where I could get a shot at goal, and a lot of them went in. Once that happens you don't think about playing in any other position, and goal scoring becomes a bit of an addiction.

How did you develop your technique? Did you model yourself on anyone?

My idol was Pelé, and I watched loads of video of him, but you can never be another Pelé. Having said that, you always can pick up something from watching great players in action. I'd watch how sharp Pelé was, how he never seemed to switch off. I've tried to be like that. I was lucky enough to have good coaches at places like Hogaborg, my first team, and they helped me work on those skills.

Do you go into a game expecting to score?

You never can do that, but it's always in the back of your mind because as a striker, it's in your blood, and you want to score. Depending on the team, you might have an idea of the sort of chances you'll get. But I always put winning as a priority over my scoring.

How do you feel when you don't get a goal?

That depends on whether the team (has) won, but it does feel like there is something missing that you can't quite put your finger on. It is a hollow feeling.

You once said that before a game you tell yourself, "It'll hurt and it should hurt."

What did you mean?

You have to put your body on the line. If you don't, you're not going to score. A striker has to get to the ball first, be better than his marker. There is no

way you can do that without getting hurt, so it shouldn't be a surprise. Accept it.

You are not the biggest, so how do you cope with a towering center half?

The key is not to play their game in their back yard. Don't play to their strengths. Try to force them to play to yours – if you can't out-muscle them, the only thing left is to outsmart them. It's tempting to get involved, but, like a good boxer, don't get drawn into a scrap.

You have the ability to sit on the last defender's shoulder and time your run to perfection. Is that something you can learn?

Of course. You can learn most things. You have to be on your toes and prepared to move either way, and you always keep the last defender in the corner of your eye. If you know your teammates well, you'll often have a split-second advantage in knowing the moment he'll release the ball. If you can anticipate where the ball's going, you don't need to watch it.

There seem to be times when everything you touch goes in – as in 2001, when you won the Golden Boot. Why is that?

If I knew that, I'd never miss. I'm sure there are loads of factors like confidence, teammates getting the ball to you more... I think it just happens – don't question it or it'll go away.

When you hit a dry run, is there anything you can do to get out of it?

You don't suddenly become a bad player, so there's no need for massive changes. Stick to what you know works. Sometimes it's about going back to basics. When you're not scoring it's easy to over-think. You should think less and let your instincts take over.

You can also turn provider. Doesn't that go against your instincts as a striker?

There isn't one way to be a striker, and I don't think dropping deeper, going looking

for the ball, affects your instincts. I don't like just being up front waiting for the ball.

There isn't really a Larsson way of scoring, but is there a type of goal that gives you most pleasure?

Definitely. I love headers because there are so many factors involved. You're trying to get across or in front of a defender, make a good run, judge the flight of the ball, be aware of the keeper. Often you make the jump and seem to be hanging for a long time before making contact with the ball, and that feels fantastic.

You've always been able to jump.

Luckily, I've always had a bit of a leap. The more you do it the more you develop those muscles, but it's also about not having any fear. Don't worry about the defender. Worry only about the landing after you've headed the ball.

What goes through your mind when you step up to take a penalty?

As little as possible. I've made up my mind where I'm putting the ball before it's on the spot. Nothing the keeper does will change that.

What's the secret of scoring a one-on-one with the keeper?

When you're a striker, the most important thing is to make your mind up as soon as you can. If you've run half the length of the pitch, you have to keep an eye on a defender closing you down. As soon as you can, check where the keeper and goal are, and decide what you are going to do. Sometimes it's better to go around him; other times, hit the ball early or chip him. You don't want to let the keeper dictate it, though, so as soon as you get in shooting range make the decision. If it goes wrong, don't beat yourself up about it.

How do you cope with the attention you get from defenders?

If you have a varied game, it makes

