

Those blasted Brazilians!

Barry Leighton geared up for the World Cup by going on a friendly football tour to Brazil. Find out how he and his team got on

SHELL-shocked, weary and dazed, we'd spent 90 minutes chasing shadows, mistiming tackles and hacking gamely at legs which had disappeared several seconds earlier.

They were sleek, fast, outrageously talented, about 25 years younger than us lot and couldn't shake an ounce of flab between them.

More than that though, they were Brazilian and frankly, we didn't have a hope.

So whose fault was this sporting debacle, this hapless mockery of the beautiful game, this ghastly mismatch on the international soccer scene? It was that Scottish chap, Miller

Fresh from a Southampton boarding school, it was Charles Miller who arrived at the port of Santos in 1894 clutching an unusual, spherical, leathery object in each hand.

"What are they?" he was asked, as he bounded gamely down the gangplank. "Footballs," young Miller responded.

This was Year Zero as far as Brazilian football — or "futebol" — was concerned.

Miller is the founding father of football in the land of coffee, nuts and samba. He introduced it there, and has a street named after him in Sao Paulo to prove it.

But for the English, who invented the damned game in the first place, it was the beginning of the end.

They stole our wonderful sport and made it their own. How dare they? Our big chance to recover some self-respect floundered in the steamy heat of the 2002 World Cup when they stuffed us with 10 men.

It was about time we regained some pride, showed them a thing or two about British steel. Reclaimed our game, no less.

Sometimes, a little bravado down the local can turn into a horrible reality.

Cue the return of the Wild Westerners... eight years after our last game and now with an average age of 45 and three months.

The Swindon-based Westerners have been demonstrating their silky skills on far flung corners of the globe since 1988.

We've been murdered in Manila, battered in Bangkok, humiliated in Holland and slaughtered in Saigon.

In Delhi, the Westerners won 10-0. OK, some of our Indian opponents were playing bare foot — but, hey, you can beat only what's in front of you.

Arriving in Rio on a sultry Friday night we were greeted by our director of football Stewart Cruttenden, grinning beerily from Copacabana's Balcony Bar.

He'd already been there three days, allegedly planning our training schedule and recruiting players (notably Billie from Chile, our tour operator.) We were up against ex-pats side the Rio Rebels the very next day. So, early to bed then? Don't be daft.

You never quite get used to heading a football with a ferocious hangover. It gets



worse as you get older. But despite the "chop" (that's Brazilian draught beer), which flowed seamlessly into the early hours we put in a typically stubborn, occasionally sublime performance against a team of 30-somethings who play every week.

Five nil actually flattered them.

Rio is a vast, swarming city dominated by two of South America's greatest icons, Sugar Loaf Mountain and the Corcovado with its 38-metre, 1,145-tonne statue of Christ.

We waved goodbye to both a couple of days later as we departed for Buzios, a stunning peninsula framed by the green ocean and white sands, a two-and-a-half hour drive away.

A rigorous Fergie-like training session was required for our crunch match against the boys from Buzios the next day.

So we hired a boat, found a secluded cove with a bar and stayed there for 12 hours, discussing tactics.

They've got a huge pitch at Buzios and we weren't too bothered when a bunch of lads — average aged around 20 — arrived to watch us play their dads. We'd requested a veterans' side to square up to, after all. We waited in

vain. Eventually it dawned that this bunch of Ronaldinio lookalikes were indeed the opposition. Great!

Over the next 90 minutes, and in between largely unsuccessful attempts to kick them, we watched with a mixture of horror and open-mouthed wonder.

They were volleying 50-yard passes and trapping it on their chests. The sort of thing I often did myself until the milkman, rattling his gold tops at the door, aroused me from my slumbers.

Flicks, back-heels, step-overs, they were doing things the wretched Miller could never have dreamed possible with those spherical objects.

On several occasions all 22 players were parked in our penalty area for what seemed like an endless stream of corners.

Now I know how Custer felt.

Had it not been for a typically stout-hearted and disciplined display by the Westerners we would have been well-beaten. I reckon the Brazilians were quietly thrilled after inching it 8-2. Back in Rio was the unmissable chance of worshipping at the city's third awesome site... the fabulous Maracana. The scene of



Sent off: Barry recovers from a bleeding nose



High emotions: The Fluminense fans celebrate their only goal during the 4-1 defeat by Botafogo at the Maracana Stadium, left. Wild Westerners, middle, play their first match in Brazil against the Rio Rebels, above

Pele's 1,000th goal, the world's largest football stadium, was hosting a Rio derby between Fluminense and Botafogo.

Entering this vast near-legendary arena I found myself in tears for the third time on the tour (after the statue of Christ and that mistimed tackle in Buzios.)

Strangely, I seemed to be the only person in the excitable 40-50,000 crowd proudly sporting a Swindon Town shirt.

Naturally, I'd be supporting Botafoga, once the team of Garrincha — possibly the world's greatest ever player. But we found ourselves slap-bang in the midst of the Fluminense boys and, being fickle football fans, quickly changed allegiance.

The skills were magical, two players were sent off, there were three penalties and Botafoga won 4-1.

Dreamland, but nothing Rooney, Terry, Gerrard, Lampard and of course, the Wild Westerners couldn't match.

Sampling the chop later that night, we all agreed we were definitely up for another crack at the South Americans.

Watch out Buenos Aires. And next time we'd really show 'em...