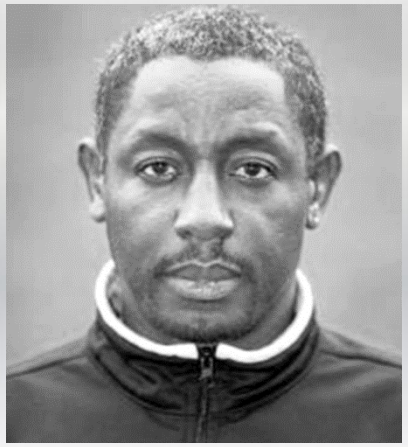
First Citizens Sports Foundation

HALL OF FAME



Russell Latapy

Football

Inducted in 2011

'The Little Magician' – the moniker that perfectly sums up a player that is easily considered for any Trinidad and Tobago All-Time XI, Russell Nigel Latapy. Whether dribbling past defenders – his speciality – or creating feints with the ball seemingly stuck to his feet, Latapy was a delight to watch on any pitch, and his stages would vary from Laventille to the Champions League. Naturally, crowds loved his dynamic play.

'Latas' was a natural sportsman, taking part in cricket as well as football as a youth in his native Laventille, with his skill so evident in the latter that soon he was playing organized football at the Under-10 level before being scouted by the national Under-16 team. By 1983, Latapy had his first taste of an international tournament when Trinidad and Tobago played in the CONCACAF Youth championships, hosted in Trinidad.

Attending Tranquility Secondary School, then San Fernando Technical Institute, gave Latapy the chance to enthral crowds in the Secondary Schools League, especially when his skills helped 'Sando Tech' take the double in 1985: the South Zone title followed by the national InterCol title.

The midfielder joined the ranks of Trintoc FC in 1987, the same year that Latapy made his senior Trinidad and Tobago debut. Against Barbados in a Caribbean Football Union match, he was given the freedom to be a playmaker and ran amok, as Trinidad and Tobago won 4-0. With the 1990 World Cup qualifiers on the horizon, the diminutive Latapy was a welcome addition to a squad that was preparing to make history.

Throughout the CONCACF qualifying campaign, Latapy's dribbling and passing made him the crucial link player to help set up goals for the likes of Hutson Charles, Philbert Jones and Leonson Lewis. With Trinidad and Tobago on the cusp of World Cup qualification, needing a point against the USA in Port of Spain, the Americans knew that keeping Latapy marked tightly was key to their success. Despite the best efforts of Trinidad and Tobago's 'Strike Squad', the USA won 1-0 and an expectant nation and its players were heartbroken.

Latapy dusted off the disappointment and signed for Académica de Coimbra in Portugal in 1990. During his four-year spell there, he played 150 games and scored 18 in his last two seasons, which gained the attention of the top Division 1 team Porto, coached by Bobby Robson. Signing for the team in 1994, Latapy was now in the big time, helping the team to back-to-back Primeria Liga championships in 1994 and 1995, scoring five goals in that second season. Also, on 13th September 1995,

he created history when he became the first Trinbagonian to play in the UEFA Champions League. His debut was against FC Nantes.

In 1996 he signed for Porto's rivals, Boavista FC, winning the knockout Portuguese Cup competition in his first season and achieving another first when he debuted in the UEFA Europa League against FC Dinamo Tbilisi. Two seasons later Scottish First Division team, Hibernian, signed Latapy, where he became a legend for the club. A dynamo in their midfield, he helped the club to promotion to the Scottish Premier League in 1999, while earning himself the Scottish Division 1 Player of the Year award, with six goals in 23 matches and numerous assists.

When Latapy returned to national team service for the 2000 CONCACAF Gold Cup, both he and Trinidad and Tobago were on fire. He opened Trinidad and Tobago's scoring in a 4-2 win over Guatemala, then terrorized defences and set up goals for his teammates in one of his best displays at international level. Trinidad and Tobago progressed to the semi-final (the best performance in the Gold Cup) where they were beaten by Canada. To the surprise of no one, Latapy was included in the tournament's Best XI, together with teammates Dwight Yorke and Arnold Dwarika.

Latapy joined Scottish giants Glasgow Rangers in 2001, but failed to reproduce his Hibernian and Gold Cup form. Trinidad and Tobago were also hopeful of qualifying for the 2002 World Cup, with Latapy now 33 years old and the chances of playing on the greatest stage of them all diminishing. The team made it to the final round of six CONACAF teams but failed to advance.

Age was also cited as a factor when he left Glasgow and completed the 2002-03 season at Dundee United. Falkirk FC did not have any age-related apprehensions and actively sought Latapy, having seen his play at Hibernian. With 14 goals in two seasons, he found his groove and helped Falkirk to promotion to the Premier League in 2005, again becoming a well-loved legend of the club. Along the way he earned the accolades Player of the Month for April 2005, capped by another First Division Player of the Year award, for 2005.

His return to form was perfect timing, as Trinidad and Tobago was again chasing World Cup qualification but was struggling. Latapy had not played for the national team for over three years, but Yorke encouraged him to return to the fold, knowing that Latapy was the boon that was needed. Latas heeded the call, and Trinidad and Tobago's fortunes immediately improved, with the Little Magician pulling the midfield strings (including scoring in a 3-2 win over Guatemala) and the Soca Warriors finally earning that coveted place at the World Cup after defeating Bahrain in a play-off. Sixteen years after the heartbreak against USA, Latapy was going to the World Cup.

At 37 years old, he did not start any World Cup matches in Germany, but came on to a rousing welcome in Trinidad and Tobago's final match against Paraguay. His touches were magical, a fitting epitaph for one of Trinidad and Tobago's greatest players to show his skill.

Remaining at Falkirk for another two seasons, Latapy began his forays into coaching, diving into the deep end when his Assistant Coach role for Trinidad and Tobago morphed into the manager's role in April 2009. He

remained at the helm until 2011 before coaching stints at Boavista, Inverness, Barbados and Macarthur FC (Australia).

Russell Latapy, the Little Magician, is heralded as one of the most skilful players to have ever emanated from Trinidad and Tobago and, in 1996, added the Hummingbird Medal Gold to his list of accolades. The Russell Latapy Secondary School in his native Morvant was named after him, and in 2011 he was inducted into the Trinidad and Tobago Sports Hall of Fame.

Primeria Liga:	**1994, 1995**
Portuguese Cup:	**1996**
Scottish Division 1 Player of the Year:	**1999, 2005**