

Sell-ons, bench-warmers and fill-ins: the life of Premier League academy graduates

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Zach Fagan spent 12 years with Arsenal but the glitter of the Premier League proved an illusion experienced by many youngsters, some picked up at the age of four, in a flawed system



'Everyone's got to think they're going to be the one,' says the former Arsenal under-21 player Zach Fagan. 'That's the only way it works.' Photograph: Jordan Mansfield/Getty Images

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Many are called but few are chosen. Unless of course we're talking about Premier League football, in which case the equation is even more extreme. Even at a time when the obsession with developing talent remains as urgent as ever, when scarcely a week passes without some prominent voice – this week Jürgen Klopp – flagging up the clogged progression from promise to fully formed first-teamer, the picture remains more or less the same. Many are called, to ever more splendid surroundings, and at ever younger ages. But still the disconnect remains.

It is a story that lends itself to poignant contrasts. This weekend Zach Fagan watched from the bench as Welling United lost 2-1 at Havant and Waterlooville in the FA Trophy. Fagan is one of those names that might just ring a bell. He spent 12 years with Arsenal's junior levels, making the cut from eight-year-old

triallist to full-time youth, to scholar to under-21s. As ever there were excitable whispers along the way. An elegant, ball-playing defender, Fagan played centre-back alongside Héctor Bellerín. He was compared to Rio Ferdinand and Éric Abidal by the club's in-house magazine. He got to the level below the level. In May 2014, having never played for the first team, he was released and signed for Welling.

No disgrace in that. Welling are a National League team, a level below League Two. But in terms of planning and progression, an entire boyhood spent in the gilded shadows of the overclass, it is a career that makes very little sense: all dangled rewards and impossible expectation, another strand in the unplanned social experiment that is the world's richest, most chaotic league.

"Everyone's got to think they're going to be the one - that's the only way it works," says Fagan, a bright, endearingly level-headed 21-year-old, who talks with fondness and some longing of the system through which he was processed. "You might think: 'Oh yeah, I'm going to play under-10s, under-14s, scholar, then Arsène Wenger's going to see me and say, I want you in my team. Then you're going to play 30 Premier League games and play for England.'

"But it doesn't work like that. It can be a harsh environment. There are so many variables. These people who make the decisions on you, they've got someone ahead of them making decisions pressuring them. At the end of the day your wellbeing gets pushed to the back. The coaches will tell you, it's a results business. In the end everyone's out for themselves."

Even as Welling were losing at Havant there was evidence elsewhere of the varied fates of the modern academy graduate. A few miles down the coast Benik Afobe, Fagan's team-mate at Arsenal, was scoring his first Premier League goal for Bournemouth. The following day Jesse Lingard and Cameron Borthwick-Jackson were the only genuine homegrown players on show as Manchester United beat Liverpool 1-0 at Anfield. What links all four - the recovering non-leaguer, the starlet bouncing back, the might-still-bes - is the intensity of the programme through which they have, in various guises, now emerged.

Afobe was spotted by Arsenal at six. Lingard has been at United since he was seven, Borthwick-Jackson a year younger. This is now standard. There are stories of some academies refusing to look at eight year olds because they will have "picked up bad habits". Joe Willock, an Arsenal scholar, joined when he was four after being spotted juggling a ball on the touchline watching his older brother Chris ("I've loved every second of the 11 and a half years I've been at Arsenal," Willock Jr said, which is no bad thing given this has in effect been his whole sentient life to date, an entire childhood parcelled out through the age groups).

What football does with its young players - and what exactly this is doing to them - has been a concern from the early professional days. Before the first world war scouts would hawk job-lots of young Scots around the clubs. Matt Busby's horror at the basic cruelty of youth football in the inter-war years was a driving force in the way he chose to rebuild Manchester United. Players would emerge via school and district football, with trials a constant process, and in more recent times the YTS junior contract the grail. In 1998 the more formalised academy scholarship system appeared, a structure that has been constantly refined and reworked ever since.

The reaching down into ever younger age brackets is something new. The increasingly muscular, interventionist presence of professional academies in junior football will not be news to those who have seen the age groups empty out as the best are lured away. Premier League clubs will now run a variety of training hubs, enough to work around the rules about formal contracts being signed only at nine years old. Not to mention feeding thousands of doomed dreams among easily distracted infants and their extended families of a future among the footballing heavyweights.

Beyond that it is hard to avoid the feeling the breeding and bleeding of talent is an issue, on many fronts, in an absorbing but alarmingly profligate top tier. Last October three local derbies were played on a single Premier League matchday. Only four homegrown players - John Terry, James Tomkins, Mark Noble and Paul Dummett - were among the 66 that started the games.

In the simplest playing terms this is clearly a handicap. Managers are asked continually to pull a whole team out of the air, to bolt the pieces together on the move. Resources are funnelled into constant revolving recruitment. Buying players, not improving or educating them, becomes the chief skill.

Above all a sense of alienation can set in between fans, players and club, a drift that really becomes apparent only when the opposite happens, when teams are built and players produced. It is hard to overstate the simple cheering effect of, say, Jordan Pickford's promise at Sunderland. Or Harry Kane's wider importance to the Tottenham team, not just in terms of goals but wellbeing and morale.

Plus there is the question of what exactly all this is doing to the players themselves. A huge amount of human wastage takes place. "Give 100% to everything you do and you will get there in the end," reads a line from the introduction to the Arsenal academy brochure. But this can't be true. Only Jack Wilshere has made it at Arsenal as a genuine academy product since Ashley Cole, whose own break owed a lot to good fortune as Silvinho, the regular left-back, got into passport problems. Spurs have had some real successes recently. Louis van Gaal looks like he'll continue hurling United's youngsters at the wall until one of them sticks. Southampton stand out above the rest.

Really though the temptation is to wonder exactly why these ruthless, cash-driven institutions are bothering. In May last year Arsenal signed Charlie Patino, aged 11, from Luton Town. He cost £10,000 and was pictured in the newspaper with his dog Truffles. Why do this at all? Why open an academy in Athens or in 30 other locations around the world as Arsenal have? A few years back Chelsea were popping champagne corks and taking a Uefa transfer ban on the chin having signed Europe's one Sure Thing, a player known as The Black Zidane. Gaël Kakuta ended up playing six games and leaving quietly last summer.



Chelsea's Gaël Kakuta played just six games for Chelsea before leaving the club. Photograph: Darren Walsh/Chelsea FC via Getty Images

There are some obvious reasons why this is happening with renewed energy now. Clubs aren't really expecting to build a team out of these players. In part the academy is a kind of due diligence exercise, a necessary sweep just in case that one-in-a-million player turns up. A single genius redeems the whole process, never mind these precious stones seem to turn up only as part of a more thorough process.

Second the academy can pay for itself by selling players, or via deals such as the one that took Afobe from Wolves to Bournemouth, from which Arsenal made £1.5m.

More to the point under the homegrown players rule eight of your 25-man squad must be homegrown (that is, grown somewhere in England). Hence the pressure to keep those age group teams churning on with their collection of possible sell-ons and helpful bench-warmers. Meanwhile the rest, the fill-ins who were always likely to be released anyway, become the football equivalent of net-bowlers, there to make up

a practice team.

“It’s a lot for a kid to take,” Fagan admits, only after some prodding. “They’re setting you up for this whole life of football and dreams and then to get cut or something, then your whole life before that has basically got to change. But it’s impossible to refuse too. You have to accept their offer. At the end of the day the club are doing something massive for them, giving them a first opportunity.”

And yet so much of what emerges at the other end looks like luck rather than judgment. The only world star to emerge recently from an English academy, Paul Pogba, walked out of Manchester United for next to nothing. Bellerín stood out, but not so much that his injury-led elevation to the first team can be called a genuine masterstroke. “Héctor’s always been a really good player,” Fagan says. “But at the same time so are a lot of people. Everyone’s good if you get to that age. If they had 40 games in the Premier League you might see that as well. He got an opportunity and he took it.”

The whole process is not without harmful effects either. Arguably the most significant development from the Elite Player Performance Programme, introduced in 2011, was the new rule that clubs could sign players from anywhere without geographical limits. As a result some Football League clubs have closed their academies. Others say there is little point in running them when scouts from richer clubs can drop by at any time and cream off the best. Just as the academies will later take the best out of school and club football with no real promise – beyond the usual impossible promise – of any fruit at the end.

And yet in sport there is always hope. Fagan may have given away most of his Arsenal training gear by now (“I guess my mum wanted to keep it”) but he takes heart from the upward progress of players such as Jamie Vardy, Troy Deeney and Matt Grimes. “You’ve just got to be confident in your abilities. If you’re upset after leaving a big club it shows you don’t believe in yourself enough. You’ve just got to keep working. It’s not about what happens now. It’s about the end story.”

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