

‘All I had worked and lived for, taken away in a single conversation’



Hazelidine is training to become a GP having not got the professional football contract he craved Salford Royal NHS Foundation Trust

James Ducker

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PETER HOUSE

Peter House will never forget the day he was told he would not be offered a professional contract. Rejection, an alien word for a player who had sailed through the age groups, captaining all of his academy teams and representing England at youth level before winning a scholarship, triggered an acute sense of failure that ultimately led to his life unravelling.

After two suicide attempts, he drifted into a life of crime, dealing drugs until he hit rock bottom when he was given an eight-year prison sentence. “I couldn’t cope with being rejected,” he said. “Everything I’d worked and lived for, taken away during the course of a conversation. Eight or nine years, for what?”

A talented defender, House had joined one of the northeast’s biggest clubs shortly before his ninth birthday. Training three nights a week and playing matches at the weekend, he went on to represent England at under-14 and under-15 level and by 16 was offered a scholarship. Within 12 months, he had captained the club’s reserve team. A career in football beckoned.

Born into a working-class Catholic family in the Low Fell area of Gateshead, money had

always been scarce. House's father, a former coal worker, was long-term unemployed, his mother a nursing assistant at the local hospital. They had four children to support. Yet now, with House's prospects of becoming a professional within touching distance, the club were bending over to offer the family financial assistance.

"I'd been courted with football boots and stuff like that when I was eight by different clubs looking to sign me but now, at 16, 17, my father was being made a scout and put on the club's payroll," House said.

A turning point came when the club signed another defender from Africa. Accommodation and employment were quickly found for the new arrival's family and he became a direct rival for House's position in the team. Then, at the end of the season, came the news every aspiring footballer dreads.

"I was told I wouldn't be getting a contract because they'd reached the full allocation of players in my position," he said. "I was devastated. I felt like a complete failure. Within a month my dad's role as a scout also ended. The club paid me the equivalent of the first year of the professional contract and I tried to find a job but I couldn't even contemplate playing non-League.

"I'd been around the first team. I'd witnessed first-hand those trappings of wealth and success and had craved the chance of achieving the same. I felt tremendous guilt, like I'd let all of my family down."

House had excelled at school but his studies had gradually been neglected as he strove to become a footballer and by his late teenage years his qualifications were worse than even the poorest of the former classmates he had once outshone.

"I'd known nothing else but football and before long I was very depressed," he said. He twice tried to take his own life before resorting to pushing drugs. Each week he would drive from Newcastle to Lincoln to deliver cocaine. Every delivery earned him £1,500. "Some weeks I'd earn £3,000," he said.

The life of a drug dealer caught up with him and House was eventually caught and jailed. Prison would prove a sobering experience but his depression was so severe, his sense of guilt so pronounced, that the recovery process was slow and painful. When XPRO, a charity set up to offer help and advice to former players of all ages, learnt of House's plight, it was quick to offer its support. House was encouraged to take advantage of one of the prison's education programmes as he tried to rebuild his shattered confidence. By the time he was released from prison in July last year, he had received his Level 4 accountancy qualifications and is training towards becoming a chartered accountant. Now 22, he wants to specialise in the sports and entertainment industry. "It's been a long road to get here," he said. "There was a time when I doubted I ever would."

As for football? "I haven't kicked a ball since being released," he said.

•Peter's identity has been changed and the name of the club he played for withheld at his own request

Forward plan an exception to rule for youngsters

MICHAEL HAZELDINE

For Michael Hazeldine, there was never any intention of putting all his eggs in one basket. A centre forward who signed for Wigan Athletic at 13, he was one of four boys from a group of about 60 who joined the club’s Youth Training Scheme (YTS) three years later and came close to realising his dream of becoming a footballer.

Yet when told that he would not be getting the professional contract he craved, an initial, profound sense of disappointment soon gave way to satisfaction that he had made alternative plans in the event that he experienced rejection. Bright and driven, Hazeldine had performed impressively at school, maintained his studies and earned a place at Edinburgh University to study medicine. At present, midway through a three-year GP training scheme at Salford Royal Hospital, the 28-year-old hopes to specialise in sports and exercise medicine.

“Obviously, I was gutted initially to hear the news but I’d already arranged a back-up plan so it almost felt for me like the start of another chapter of my life,” Hazeldine said.

He had the benefit of parents who, while supportive of his footballing aspirations, insisted he did not disregard his education. He also received advice and financial assistance from the PFA, which helped to fund his university studies. For a myriad of reasons, though, Hazeldine believes that he is firmly in the minority. Most team-mates he encountered gave little or no thought to a life beyond football.

“There were one or two others who were quite academic but I was perceived as a bit of an oddity from that point of view,” he said. “I don’t think education or a back-up plan was at the forefront of many of their minds and I don’t think what I was doing rubbed off on others.

“It is quite scary when you look at it retrospectively but when you get to YTS level can see how people at that stage become a bit blinkered and think they have got further than they actually have. It’s the last step but it’s also the hardest step.

“Some players may have felt that pursuing other avenues could have a negative effect on how other players and coaches perceived them.”

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 **James Prosser**

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Mr Stuart McKittrick

January 16, 2015 13:51

The PFA should insist that clubs ensure their apprentices complete academic and/or artisan qualifications in parallel with football training. Students on U.S.

sports scholarships can only play for college teams - from which they are picked for professional contracts - if they have maintained a minimum academic standard. This ensures that the majority who fail to make it as a career have something to fall back on.

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Professor Sir Tom D Harry

January 15, 2015 14:28

I reckon that last sentence is probably the most important bit, as well as the hardest to change

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Malcolm Slade

January 15, 2015 12:27

Good luck to both, although I think Peter ought to have gone into non-league where he might still have proved himself.

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stephen berry

January 15, 2015 12:24

The lesson being don't get carried away if you make it to boot camp you haven't won the x factor. Beware all you pushy parents.

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