

Wasted youth: Independent, FA and Premier League viewpoints



Roddy says the focus on education is not just about producing professional players Alan Walter/ The Times

Published at 12:01AM, January 16 2015

Independent view

Richard Caborn, Sports Minister (2001-2007)

Football family has failed to nurture climate of support

Football has reached something of a crossroads in England, with the quality of the young talent coming out of our academies under greater scrutiny than ever, both in terms of their value as players but also as human beings.

While our coaches are under huge pressure to discover the next great hope to lift our country's fortunes in international tournaments, less focus is put on the personal development of either players or their parents. Some clubs do more than most, but what's being offered at present is at best inconsistent and at worst non-existent.

Since my time as Sports Minister, this is a situation that has sadly deteriorated, partly owing to the self-interest of clubs, but also because of an unwillingness by football's major stakeholders to come together and find some sort of solution.

I believe what's needed is a re-examination of what players and their parents require in a world of huge dreams, pressures and promises, where only the lucky few make the

progression from Premier League academies to Premier League first teams. The focus is always going to be on the stars of the next generation, but what about the majority of youngsters whose dreams are dashed at the end of every season? How do we help players and parents to come to terms with failure if it happens?

More than two years ago, I chaired a meeting at Wembley to consider proposals on education information and advice for young people thinking of a career in professional football.

The FA, along with the Premier League, Football League, Professional Footballers' Association and League Managers Association all agreed that there was a lack of action in this area, but none of the questions raised at that meeting are being adequately addressed by the so-called football family.

I have worked with specialists and experts who have built programmes to help players at all levels, from the first steps at academy level to retirement, and while they have managed to make small inroads at individual clubs, their efforts and skills are often viewed with suspicion by those who have vested interests.

Surely football has to realise its limitations and give its young players and their parents the guidance, care and advice they deserve from people who are both independent and professional in this area.

FA view

Mike Rigg, Head of talent identification

Governing body making great strides

A colleague of mine recently embarked on a study trip to China. Of the numerous people with whom he met and talked was a swimming coach.

One of the tests to which budding eight-year-old swimmers were subjected at this coach's club involved the children standing on one leg with the other placed directly in the air above their heads. They had to maintain that pose for 20 minutes. If they managed it, they were through to the next assessment stage. If they didn't, they were out. Gone.

It sounds harsh, but the coach argued that it was reflective of a very different culture from the one we have here. "The problem in England is you worry too much about the 99 that fail and not the one who succeeds," he said.

The "no pain, no gain" argument will always be deployed, but while a career in football can be a truly wonderful experience, there is always more needed from those responsible for the development of young players to ensure that we truly understand the consequences of enveloping children in a system that can distance them from a normal life growing up.

The Elite Player Performance Plan has made significant strides towards improving and regulating standards expected of clubs, and we are on the right track to helping to support those suffering the disappointment of having to leave the elite sports system.

We had a good example in our under-17s. We put in place a tutor and support network to ensure one of our young England players was able successfully to complete his GCSEs the morning after winning the 2014 European Championship in Malta. This aspect is an

important part of our emerging England DNA.

Players are recruited at a young age and the question of “too much too soon” will remain, especially where difficult decisions have to be made by families who want to ensure that their children continue to develop a love and passion for the game.

We will continue to wrestle with the debate of ensuring those who experience rejection are readied to face the world suitably prepared.

Premier League view

Ged Roddy, director of youth

Clubs going extra mile to help all stand in good stead

The number one aim of the academy system is to produce more and better players — the emphasis being on better, not just more. A fundamental part of this is the player’s education, and by that I don’t just mean the youngster’s technical ability, important as that is. The modern player needs more than that.

The tactical demands of the game, combined with the psychological pressures of performing in an elite environment, mean that the pastoral and academic elements of a player’s development are increasingly important.

When the Elite Player Performance Plan was implemented in 2012, much of the focus was on improving coaching and facilities; clubs were eager to give the future Steven Gerrards and Theo Walcotts more time on the training pitch with more efficient training methods.

Less well observed is the huge investment made in education and welfare provisions for clubs’ young players. We are not just talking about a few tweaks, but about a sea change in terms of provision, delivery and outcomes.

Premier League club academies have formal links with local schools, they have their own classrooms and employ their own tutors. All academies enrol their scholars on BTECs in advanced apprenticeships in sporting excellence and they all study for coaching qualifications. If players want to, they can take their A levels and continue to higher education.

There will always be disappointment for those who do not have a future as professional players, but Premier League academies are elite learning environments and, just like elite-level swimming, ballet, acting and other disciplines, it is extremely challenging to make it to the very top.

Our focus on education is not just about producing rounded players who end up playing professional football, but also qualifications and options for those who don’t. The majority of players coming through the academy system will not make it to a Premier League first team, but every single boy who comes through the system should have their lives and opportunities enhanced by the experience.

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