

Richie Sadlier: Rejected teenagers must get professional help

Crushing distress requires counselling, not a pep talk



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I remember the following scene as if it was yesterday. I was sitting with the rest of the Millwall youth squad being congratulated by the staff at the club for getting as far as we had.

We had successfully cleared the many hurdles of youth recruitment and were on the books of a professional club at the age of 17. We were told to feel proud of what we had achieved, but to brace ourselves for the challenge that faced us now.

Based on all their experience and on previous year's figures, we were told that maybe four of the group would be offered a deal at the end of their scholarship. Possibly two of that four would do enough to get a second contract, but only one of us would be likely to have a career in the professional game.

I don't know how those figures impacted anyone else in the room, but I left determined I was going to be that

one.

Measuring the fall-out rate in youth football is near impossible. How, for example, could you know how many 10-year-olds want to be professional footballers? Or eight-year-olds for that matter. Who do you dismiss as deluded and who has a realistic chance? Whatever the criteria to be classed an aspiring footballer, the percentage that make it into professionalism is not much above zero.

Obviously, the older you get with the dream still alive, the better the odds become. Even then, though, the figures are pretty soul-destroying.

According to XPRO, a charity established to support former players of all ages, only four per cent of 16-year-olds will still be in the game after turning 18 and only two per cent of those will last beyond their 21st birthday. The accuracy of these findings has been questioned, but the harsh reality is that nearly everyone will fail in their attempt to become a professional footballer.

Each player's experience is obviously unique, but a recent study carried out by the University of Teesside claims that more than half of all British boys between 15 and 18 suffer clinical levels of psychological distress within a month of being released by a professional club. The question now is whether enough is being done to support them.

I spent a season as head of youth recruitment at Millwall's academy after I retired from playing. Part of the job involved telling young boys they had no future at the club. To soften the blow, we would always mention the many examples of players finding success at one club after being released by another.

We would offer assistance in getting them another club if they wished, but in most cases it fell on deaf ears. They were devastated by the news, and often, so were their parents.

The reality is that most boys who set out to be professionals won't make it. For a variety of reasons, nearly all will experience this crushing rejection at some point. It's a given. Is enough being done? There's no way to avoid the disappointment among players who don't make it make it, but there's a lot more that can be done to emotionally support them.

If football is serious about assisting teenagers who experience the difficulties identified in the research, then it should be ready to embrace expertise from other fields. A pep talk from a well-meaning member of staff is not enough. Nor is the offer to help find another club. Sufferers of clinical levels of psychological distress, however that manifests itself, require help.

More often than not it will be the kind of help that coaches, managers, parents, team-mates, agents and scouts are ill-equipped to provide.

They need counselling from qualified professionals. They need to process what they are going through with someone who is trained to help. A rejection of this kind is a significant life event for an aspiring footballer. It's about more than talking through their options for getting a job.

You could, of course, make the argument that it's not football's job to look after the people who aren't good enough to be selected. Everyone knows the risks involved and nobody is forced to take part. After all, how many industries take full responsibility for the emotions of the people they choose not to hire?

But these are young teenagers. Forget the blame game and focus on solutions. These are young people who don't make life choices based on rational assessment of industry statistics. The fall-out rate is high, you say? So

what, I'll be the one who makes it.

I have a framed photo of that youth squad from the summer of 1996. When I retired in 2003, I was indeed the last man standing from that group. Some were still playing in non-league, but I was the only one left in the professional game. I may have been 24, but I certainly fell into the category of people who experienced clinical levels of psychological distress. And even though I got calls from a huge amount of people offering encouragement, the greatest support came from weekly sessions over a prolonged period with a qualified therapist. Well-wishers and pep talks are woefully inadequate in situations like this and it's far more complex than simply finding another job.

It's a highly competitive profession and one that most people will never be involved in, but those that try shouldn't be defined as failures from the moment they leave. They should be offered the help of people fully trained to provide it.

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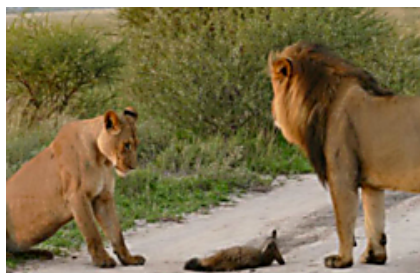
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