



Professional & Elite Sport Management

Assignment 2 – Case Study



Prifysgol Cymru

Y Drindod Dewi Sant

University of Wales

Trinity Saint David

*Professional & Elite Sport
Management Assignment 2 – Case
Study*

Exclusive: Fears raised for football's young rejects



Many young players find it hard to cope if they do not make it in professional football Oli Scarff/Getty Images

James Ducker Northern Football Correspondent
Last updated at 12:01AM, January 15 2015

More than half of young British footballers whose dreams of a professional career are shattered prematurely suffer clinical levels of psychological distress, a new study has found.

Research has established that almost 55 per cent of players aged between 15 and 18 who were rejected by clubs suffered problems such as depression, anxiety and loss of confidence or turned to alcohol and substance use within a month of being released.

The findings come as *The Times* begins a two-part investigation today examining the emotional damage that can be caused among teenagers who fail to earn a scholarship or professional contract and the efforts being made by the game to ensure that a generation of rejected players does not become lost causes or troubled cases.

Discussion of issues such as depression and suicide in professional football has been brought into sharper focus in recent years in the wake of high-profile cases, such as the deaths of Gary Speed and Robert Enke, the former Wales midfielder and Germany goalkeeper respectively.

Former players such as Tony Adams, who battled alcoholism, and Paul Merson, who had drink, drug and gambling problems, have also been open about their troubles.

A study by FifPro, the world players' union, reported last year that one in four present and

former professionals suffer symptoms of anxiety and depression, but the problems facing youngsters whose hopes of a football career are cut short are less well documented.

According to XPRO, a charity established to offer help, support and advice to former players of all ages, 96 per cent of scholars signed by clubs in England and Wales at 16 will not play again from the age of 18 and of those who do earn professional contracts, only 2 per cent will still be professionals past 21.

The latest study, carried out Dr David Blakelock, a clinical psychologist, for Teesside University, questioned almost 100 youth players aged between 15 and 18 at clubs across England and Scotland at three different points — before selection procedures, seven days after and 21 days after.

Of those players who were released, 54.5 per cent were experiencing levels of psychological distress at 21 days compared with 35.7 per cent at seven days.

“The results suggest that in the first month, a sizeable proportion can experience a range of psychological problems — depression, anxiety, a loss of confidence and impairment in everyday functioning,” Blakelock said.

Comments are subject to our community guidelines, which can be viewed [here](#).

18 comments

 **James Prosser**

5 people listening 

+ Follow

Post comment

Newest | Oldest | Most Recommended

Sebastian Cargutt

January 16, 2015 16:57

As the team I support are playing Chelsea next week there's an outside chance we might get a mention in the national media. No doubt the focus will be purely on the gulf in finances, but we'll take whatever we can get.

Which reminded me of an article about a young chelsea starlet in the TImes a few weeks ago. He's an 18 year old, presumably apprentice or possibly first year professional and he was reported to earn £10k per week. That will be quite a come down from £500k pa to stacking shelves in the Co-Op if he doesn't make it.

Even on the paltry £10k per week he's having to get by on, if he were to join any of the 24 teams in the bottom two professional divisions he would be their highest earner (regardless of who was actually paying him, as I suspect Chelsea would have to meet most if not all his wages). It somehow doesn't seem right that a trainee should rock up looking for experience, yet earns more than the rest of the squad.

I think that is why premier league clubs are finding it harder and harder to get

From superstars to scrapheap: meet the game's lost generation



A worryingly high percentage of young footballers never fully come to terms with being released by clubs as teenagers, a trend that has led to XPRO, the charity, offering support, help and advice to those whose world has fallen in

Marc Aspland/The Times

James Ducker Northern Football Correspondent

Last updated at 12:01AM, January 15 2015

Exclusive: In the first of a two-part series on the fate of footballers who fail to make the grade, James Ducker reports on the alarming impact of early rejection

Geoff Scott has seen up close and personal the damage that rejection can cause aspiring young footballers. The chief executive of XPRO, a charity set up to offer support, help and advice to former professionals and those who never got that far, he is well versed in the game's bottomless pit of hard luck stories.

Yet one tale seems, momentarily, to stop even him in his tracks. Visiting a former Liverpool academy player who had ended up in prison after his dream of winning a professional contract with the club was shattered, Scott's offer of assistance was met with a chilling

response.

“Geoff, thanks very much for your help but let me tell you I’m just going to become a bigger and better drug dealer than the guy that got sentenced,” the prisoner said.

It is an extreme example of the life that can lie in store for many who are washed up, in a football sense, at 15, 16, 17 or 18, the ages when players discover if they have won a scholarship or professional contract. Yet ensuring that those who fail to make the grade do not become a generation of lost causes, isolated, depressed, consumed by a sense of failure and in some cases driven to self-destruction, is a pressing issue with which the game is wrestling as it attempts to produce more English talent.

A new study by Teesside University has established that young footballers whose careers are cut short go on to suffer clinical levels of psychological distress. The research, by Dr David Blakelock, a clinical psychologist who was on the books of Newcastle United and Nottingham Forest as a youngster, involved questioning almost 100 youth players aged between 15 and 18 at clubs across England and Scotland at three different points: before selection procedures, seven days after and 21 days after.

Of those who were released, 54.5 per cent were experiencing levels of psychological distress at 21 days compared with 35.7 per cent at seven days, which suggests that young players may find it increasingly difficult to cope when they are suddenly cut adrift from a world in which they had been immersed.

“The results suggest that, in the first month after release, a sizeable proportion of players can experience a range of psychological problems, namely depression, anxiety, a loss of confidence and impairment in everyday functioning,” Blakelock said.

For those in and around the game, this should not come as a surprise. The prospects of success are slim, rejection is rife, the pressure immense, both on players and the parents who experience their own rollercoaster ride of emotions. The fallout rates are frightening. XPRO says that, of those signed by English clubs at 16, 96 per cent will not play again from the age of 18. Of those who do earn contracts, only 2 per cent will still be playing professionally past 21. At present, XPRO is trying to help about 60 footballers under 20 suffering from depression and in the process of visiting about 250 released players who are in young offenders’ institutions.

James Scowcroft, who made almost 600 career appearances as a striker for a host of clubs, including Ipswich Town, Leicester City and Crystal Palace, still recalls vividly the crestfallen look on the faces of peers who were rejected. His best friend, Carl Kessler, was not awarded Youth Training Scheme terms at 16, when Scowcroft was. A few years later Kessler was dead, the coroner returning an open verdict. “I lost touch with Carl and the next thing I knew I was at his funeral,” Scowcroft said.

Now an under-15 coach at Ipswich, Scowcroft has strong opinions on a subject that has become a huge talking point inside the game but requires a much wider public debate.

“We’ve got to look at the 98 per cent who don’t make it and ask, ‘Are we doing enough for them?’ ” Scowcroft said. “I don’t think we are. At a time when they’re going through so much in their lives — physical and emotional change and entering GCSE years — the demands are huge.

“You’ll see kids who up to 13 were superstars. Then they’ll suddenly stop growing and the

psychological impact of that is frightening. They can become bitter, resentful. The danger if you get released is you see yourself as a failure when you're not. You've achieved a lot more than you have failed."

The Times will explore in depth tomorrow the wider issues at play and the efforts to which the authorities, from the Premier League, Football League, FA and PFA, plus clubs and independent bodies, are going to ensure that young players have the life skills, qualifications, advice and support network to fall back on if rejected.

At present, players can sign for a club in their under-nine year. Scowcroft, like many, believes this is too young. "Most think of life after football at 35 or so but for some it can be 11," he said. "In my view, children should not be experiencing that sort of rejection at that age."

Danny Higginbotham, the former Derby County, Southampton and Stoke City defender who started his career at Manchester United, agrees. He was vehemently opposed to his son, Jak, joining Crewe Alexandra's academy at such a young age in the belief that it was too much, too soon. A late developer, Higginbotham, under the old rules, had not been allowed to join United until he was 14. Under the present system, would he already have been written off?

"If you're telling a kid at 11 or 12 he's not good enough for you there's a grave risk of killing players' love of the game," Higginbotham said. "An affiliation with a club at eight or nine is fine but let them go play with their mates, have as normal a childhood as possible."

Peter Morrison played professionally for Bolton Wanderers and Scunthorpe United but his career was cut short by injury at 20. Now a successful football agent, he believes he is well placed to help counsel developing players on the game's pitfalls. Just over three years ago, Morrison learnt that one of his contemporaries at Bolton, Lee Pryers, had committed suicide aged 31. The last time Morrison had seen Pryers he was working as a window cleaner. "I don't think we'll ever know the reasons behind it but I've wondered if in different circumstances Lee's life would not have ended so tragically," Morrison said.

"From a young age players can be in a very small bubble now and that's all they see. Is it any surprise then when they are rejected that they don't know which way to turn?"

96 Percentage of scholars signed at 16 will not play again from the age of 18

98 Percentage of players signed as professionals who will not play again from the age of 21

56 Percentage of apprentices at Football League clubs between 2012 and 2014 who failed to win a professional contract

76 Percentage of scholars leaving Premier League academies in 2013-14 awarded professional contracts at theirs or another English club

60 Footballers under 20 and suffering from depression whom XPRO is at present trying to help

Comments are subject to our community guidelines, which can be viewed [here](#).

49 comments

‘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

Last updated at 12:01AM, January 15 2015

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.”

Comments are subject to our community guidelines, which can be viewed [here](#).

4 comments

 **James Prosser**

2 people listening 

+ Follow

Post comment

Newest | Oldest | Most Recommended

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.

Richie Sadlier: Rejected teenagers must get professional help

Crushing distress requires counselling, not a pep talk



[Richard Sadlier Twitter](#)

[Email](#)

Published 18/01/2015 | 16:55



1

Richard Sadlier, Millwall F.C.

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.

rsadlier@independent.ie

Sunday Indo Sport

Follow @IndoSport

Sponsored Content

Recommended by



People Don't Know This Brilliant Way to Check if You Had PPI

The Claims Guys



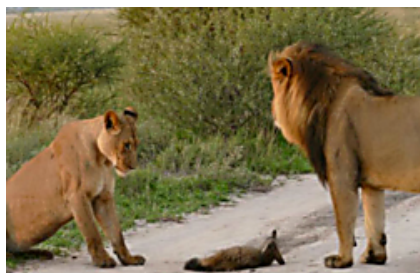
Malia Obama's Net Worth Has Left Americans Speechless

TomorroWoman



Are you the best Poker player? Take a quick quiz

888poker



These Lions Found An Injured Fox, You Won't Believe What Happened Next

TickleFeeds



Could you spot the signs?

Norton



The secret of the unheralded rugby star who kept Sonny Bill Williams...

Home - Scrum Together

[News](#)[Sport](#)[Weather](#)[iPlayer](#)[TV](#)[Radio](#)

SPORT FOOTBALL

[Home](#) [Football](#) [Formula 1](#) [Cricket](#) [Rugby U](#) [Rugby L](#) [My Sport](#) [All Sport](#)[Live Scores](#) [Results](#) [Fixtures](#) [Tables](#) [Gossip](#) [All Teams](#) [Leagues & Cups](#)

Premier League: What happens to footballers after being rejected?

By James Gheerbrant
BBC Sport

🕒 28 August 2014 | Football

🔗 Share



Players have taken very different routes after being released by top clubs

For footballers at the top of the professional game, the early weeks of a new season are a time of giddy excitement.

For some, the summer may have brought a dream move to a big club, or the expectation of one imminently as the final days of the transfer window loom. For others, promotion might have brought greater financial rewards and the chance to challenge for some of the game's biggest prizes.

These are the dreams young footballers nurture, but the reality - for the majority of professional footballers - is very different.

The Professional Footballers' Association (PFA) estimates that each summer, about 700 players are released by their clubs, causing upset and uncertainty.

"The biggest attrition rate is undoubtedly among young players," says Oshor Williams of the PFA's education department, which offers support and training to prepare them for a life outside professional football.

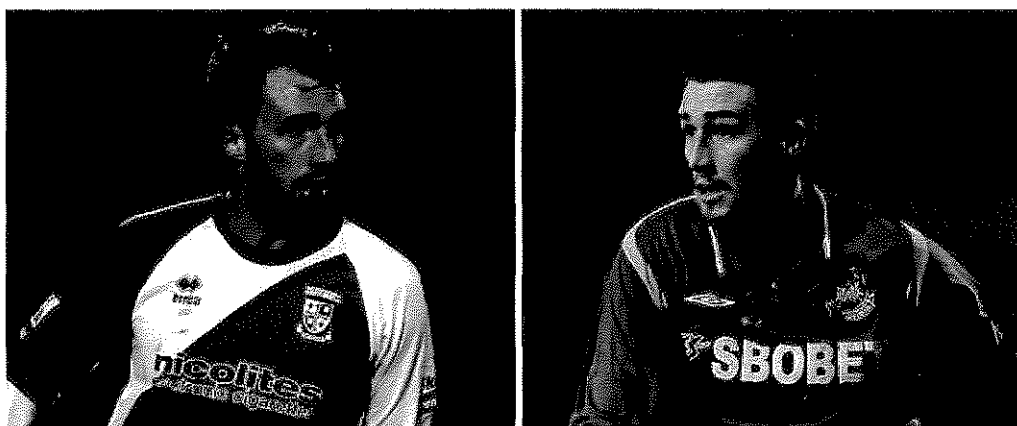
"Of those entering the game aged 16, two years down the line, 50% will be outside professional football. If we look at the same cohort at 21, the attrition rate is 75% or above.

"Most of these kids don't have a Plan B. It can be very unnerving to find yourself having to move into a completely different world."

So what happens to those who slip through the net? BBC Sport spoke to four men released by some of the country's leading clubs and whose lives took very different paths - into prison, gambling, medicine and the lower leagues.

'I've made every mistake in the book'

Midfielder Josh Payne broke into the West Ham first-team squad in 2009 aged 18, making two appearances in the Premier League. He was released a year later and went on to serve a six-month prison sentence for actual bodily harm and assault. He now plays part-time for Woking FC.



Payne now plays part-time for Woking after failing to make the grade at West Ham

Payne was one of those young players for whom everything seemed to be going right. A star of the West Ham academy, he captained the club's vaunted under-18 side and earned his professional contract a year early. He broke into Gianfranco Zola's first-team squad, making his Premier League debut in March 2009 against Blackburn Rovers.

A newspaper report at the time described Payne as "a young man in a hurry... destined for big things".

"It was very exciting," Payne remembers. "I was training with the likes of Scott Parker, Alessandro Diamanti, Diego Tristan. It was brilliant to be involved."

And then, suddenly, everything started to go wrong. "I took my foot off the pedal," Payne says. "That was my biggest downfall - I had a bit of success and I thought 'I've arrived here'. It comes all at once and you don't know what to do. I thought I could relax."

Payne was called into the manager's office and told he would not be offered a new contract. "It was only when somebody sat me down and those words came out of their mouth that I realised I hadn't kicked on," he says. "It hit me - I didn't want it enough. I didn't realise how good I had it."

The cultured midfielder signed a six-month deal at Doncaster Rovers, but struggled to establish himself. Spells followed at Oxford United, then Aldershot Town. That was where his troubles deepened.

"People make mistakes every single minute of every day," Payne says reflectively. "I just made one a bit bigger than everyone else."

From the pitch to prison

There are about 130 former professional footballers currently in prison.

Most are under 25 and sentenced for drugs offences.

Notable footballers who have been jailed include former Everton striker Michael Branch (drugs offences), former Watford and Birmingham striker Marlon King (dangerous driving) and former West Brom defender Ronnie Wallwork (receiving stolen goods).

Payne got into a fight outside a Guildford nightclub. In an act of drunken stupidity, he punched a man and hit him with his belt.

"I knew I'd done wrong," says Payne. "I wasn't a man when I committed the crime - I thought I was, but I wasn't."

Payne received a 12-month prison sentence for ABH and assault. "I remember being led away," he says. "I'd packed a bag but I hadn't even got the right clothes. I was stripped of everything. I'll never forget the first night."

He spent six months at HM Prison High Down in Surrey. During that time, he missed his daughter's first birthday and Christmas. "It was a nightmare," he says.

Phil Brown looks at what can be done to prevent young footballers getting into trouble when they are released by clubs.

Payne emerged from jail determined to get his life back on track. He signed part-time at Conference club Woking. Last season, he won the club's Player of the Season award and earned a call-up for England C, representing his country at non-league level.

"I'm a lot stronger and wiser now," he says. "I appreciate football a million times more - being free to express myself on the pitch, free to work hard and enjoy working hard."

Payne believes young footballers should be offered greater emotional support by their clubs.

"I'd love so much for clubs to have people to talk to the young players," he says. "I wish I'd had somebody. I've made every mistake in the book. Of course I have regrets - I let a massive opportunity slip away."

'I was gambling £20,000 in a single bet'

Midfielder Gavin Heeroo was a trainee on the books of Crystal Palace. After being released in 2004, he developed a gambling addiction. He conquered his betting habit with the help of the Sporting Chance clinic and now runs his own business.

Heeroo dreamed of making it at Crystal Palace but ended up launching his own fitness business

Heeroo left school at 16 and signed for Crystal Palace as a trainee. Among his team-mates in the Eagles youth team were Wayne Routledge, now at Swansea, and Ben Watson, who scored the winner in the 2013 FA Cup final for Wigan against Manchester City. Heeroo's career was not destined to have such a fairytale ending.

"I loved every minute of it," says Heeroo, who grew up on the notoriously tough Broadwater Farm estate in Tottenham, north London. "I did train hard, but I wasn't as focused as I could have been. Being a London boy didn't help - you have all the temptations on your doorstep. I got caught up in the lifestyle."

Heeroo says he was relieved when he was let go by the club after two years.

"Iain Dowie called me into his office and told me I needed to go and play football," Heeroo remembers. "I wasn't devastated at all - I felt like a

weight had been lifted. Iain was great but the club didn't give me any support."

Heeroo had offers from League clubs, but joined then-Conference National side Grays Athletic in an effort to hang on to his flashy lifestyle.

"I always saw professional football as a job, like any other industry," he explains. "Sometimes you can get paid more at a lower level than you can in the higher divisions. It might not be a great move for your career, but you need the income. I had a flat and a car. I was still hooked on the lifestyle."

In hindsight, Heeroo admits, dropping out of the Football League was a mistake.

"I dropped too low," he says. "When you're in the lower leagues it's hard to get noticed; it's hard to get out. It's very difficult. You have been so pampered and then suddenly you have to clean your own kit."

Football's gambling problem

40% of pro footballers go bankrupt within five years of leaving the game.

The vast majority of footballers who gamble do it online; many take out pay-day loans to fund their habit.

Notable footballers who have suffered from gambling addiction include Stoke winger Matthew Etherington, ex-Man Utd winger Keith Gillespie and former Sunderland striker Michael Chopra. Chopra estimates he lost a total of £2m gambling; Gillespie claims to have blown £47,000 in a single afternoon.

Missing the excitement and glamour of top-level football, Heeroo turned to gambling.

"It's not so much the money that you're hooked on as the buzz," he explains. "I was trying to replicate the adrenalin rush. At one stage I was gambling £10,000 or £20,000 in a single bet. I was betting more than I could afford to lose. It's a scary place to be."

Heeroo conquered his addiction with the help of **Sporting Chance**, [↗](#) the clinic founded by former Arsenal captain - and one-time alcoholic - Tony Adams.

With his football career waning, Heeroo decided to start his own fitness business with friend and former Palace team-mate Dougie Freedman, the current Bolton boss who also managed the Eagles.

"I did a fitness course," he says. "I'd always enjoyed keeping myself fit and I found that I really loved helping other people to achieve their goals."

Now Heeroo is using his company, **Focus Fitness**,  to rescue other young footballers, by hiring ex-players to run personal-training sessions.

"I think there's a lack of support [for young players]," he says.

"Organisations need to be more accountable. I always strongly believed that if football didn't work out, I could do anything I put my mind to. Other kids might not be so lucky."

'Realising I could be a doctor was inspirational'

Striker Michael Hazeldine joined Wigan Athletic aged 13. He became a reserve-team regular for the Latics and played one first-team game before being released in 2006 aged 19. He went on to study medicine at Edinburgh University and is now training to be a GP.

"I think I always dreamed of being a professional footballer," he says. "I felt I was good enough and I had the opportunity, so I thought that was the way I was going to go."

Hazeldine was a promising junior footballer at Wigan Athletic between the ages of 13 and 19

Snapped up by Wigan as a precociously talented 13-year-old, Hazeldine went on to earn a three-year trainee scholarship at the age of 16. By 18, he was playing regularly for the reserves and training with the first team.

"It was a big step," Hazeldine remembers. "Just mixing with the players, around the training ground or in the canteen, seeing these big names - Jimmy Bullard, Jason Roberts - they were very exciting times for a young player. It felt like we'd got to the last step and things were within touching distance."

But like many young players, Hazeldine found the last step the most difficult. When his youth contract ended, he and his fellow scholars were summoned to the manager's office to receive the dreaded news - none of them would be offered a professional deal.

"Paul Jewell called me in and said: 'Your dedication is second to none, but you're not ready to go into our first team,'" Hazeldine remembers. "The other lads were devastated because all their eggs were in that basket."

But unlike most of his peers, Hazeldine had prepared for the possibility that he might not be kept on. Wigan had offered him the opportunity to attend college once a week to pursue A-levels - a chance he grabbed with both hands.

From chalkboards to mortarboards: footballers with degrees

David Artell (Chester, Morecambe and Crewe) - forensic biology

Gudni Bergsson (Tottenham, Bolton and Iceland) - law

Iain Dowie (Southampton and West Ham) - aeronautical engineering

Richard Hinds (Scunthorpe and Sheffield Wednesday) - law

Shaka Hislop (West Ham and Trinidad & Tobago) - mechanical engineering

Seyi Olofinjana (Wolves and Stoke) - chemical engineering

David Syers (Scunthorpe) - classical civilisation

David Wetherall (Leeds and Bradford) - chemistry

"I was always aware of the need to have a back-up plan," he says. "You see the number of players who are released, so you know the chances. I spent most of my free time studying from the age of 15 to 19. That's what you need to do - although football's a fantastic way to go, a lot of players don't make it."

Hazeldine's hard work paid off when he achieved three As at A-level. He decided to apply to university to study medicine and won a place at Edinburgh.

"I'd always viewed being a doctor as one of the most rewarding careers, and realising that I had the ability to do that was an inspiration," he says.

Hazeldine, who credits the PFA for its guidance as he negotiated the transition from football to university, is currently working in a paediatric accident and emergency ward as part of his training towards becoming a GP.

"Doing the job I'm doing now, I'm able to make children better when they come in sick," he says. "I'm finding it hugely rewarding."

But Hazeldine is aware that his happy ending is an unusual outcome for a released footballer.

Hazeldine is working on an A&E ward as he trains to become a GP

"I don't think there's a fallback for a lot of players," he says. "Suddenly your contract ends and you're in the wilderness."

"You're aware that you might not make it, but you think you will. Then that reality comes home and you realise: 'That road's closed, got to look elsewhere.'"

'I had to face the fact I wasn't good enough'

Midfielder Tom Taiwo was rated one of the most exciting prospects in the English game when he signed for Chelsea in 2006 aged 16, but he suffered a serious injury and never played a first-team game. He stayed in professional football and is currently at Falkirk.

Taiwo is now at Falkirk (left) following previous stints with Hibs and Carlisle after leaving Chelsea

Taiwo was still in school, aged 16, when he was spotted by Chelsea while playing for England Under-16s and subsequently poached from Leeds United's academy for a seven-figure fee in a transfer saga that made national headlines.

He was living every schoolboy's dream. "When a club like Chelsea wants you, you have the dream of playing in front of 45,000 people each week and competing for trophies," he explains. "You have that real excitement. You feel you can tackle anything."

But that adolescent aura of invincibility soon faded. A stellar cast of midfielders kept him languishing on the sidelines and then, two days before he was due to make his debut for the youth team, he suffered a broken leg.

"I always felt like I was playing catch-up," Taiwo says. "The club had a glut of players in my position and I was unlucky enough to suffer a serious injury. There's always somebody younger than you coming through."

With his first-team prospects receding, Taiwo went out on loan to Carlisle United. After six months, he was told that he was not wanted at Chelsea and that his move to Brunton Park would be permanent.

"I was disappointed," he remembers. "But I also have to look back and say I wasn't good enough. That can be quite a painful thing to say. As a young footballer, you can be quite blinded at times. It was the first time in my life I'd ever suffered a real setback. I had to face the fact that I wasn't as good as I hoped I'd be."

Bouncing back from rejection

Joey Barton (current QPR midfielder)	Released by Everton at 14; has since played more than 300 games for Man City, Newcastle, QPR and Marseille, and been capped by England.
Demba Ba (ex-Newcastle & Chelsea striker; now at Besiktas)	Released by Watford without playing a game; rejected by Swansea and Gillingham. Scored more than 100 goals in the Bundesliga & Premier League.
Robbie Savage (ex-Blackburn & Birmingham midfielder and now a BBC pundit)	Striker for Man Utd's youth team but released in 1994. Reinvented himself as a midfielder, played 600 games for six clubs, and won 39 caps for Wales.
Kevin Phillips (former Sunderland striker; retired last season and now a first-team coach with Leicester)	Released by Southampton, who considered him too small to be a striker. Scored 287 goals for nine league clubs and played for England.

At that crossroads, many players would have considered giving up. But Taiwo credits the advice of Chelsea youth-team coach Neil Bath for persuading him to continue his football career.

"It was a very difficult situation," Taiwo says. "But football was my passion, and still is. It's a sport that grips you and offers you an amazing lifestyle. It's a great feeling to wake up every morning and know you're going to do a job that you really love."

Taiwo became a regular at Carlisle, winning the **Johnstone's Paint Trophy at Wembley in 2011**. He then spent two successful seasons north of the border at Hibernian and now plays for Scottish Championship club Falkirk.

He has not fulfilled all his dreams but Taiwo, now 24, says: "Looking back on my career now, it's not turned out the way I hoped when I was 16.

"I wanted to be an England international and a regular at Chelsea, all the things that everybody dreams of as a kid. But I've got no regrets.

"If I make it to the Premier League in two years' time, then I'll know that I really deserved it. If not, then I'll know I've put in all the hard graft and it's just not meant to be."



Find out more

[PFA](#)

[Onside Sports Academy](#)

[Sporting Chance](#)

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.

Comments are subject to our community guidelines, which can be viewed [here](#).

0 comments

