

We must dare to dream but life is too precious to be derailed by failure



Young players in the shadow of Villa Park before the visit of Manchester United last month. Failure to make the grade, in football as in life, is infinitely less important than how we respond to it

Michael Regan/Getty Images

Matthew Syed Sport Columnist of the Year

Last updated at 12:01AM, January 19 2015

This is a column about my best friend, Mark Autherson. He was a keen footballer. We played in my back garden every afternoon as kids, often down Sol Joel, the local park, sometimes other kids would join us, and in the summer we never seemed to leave.

I often think of those long, endlessly absorbing days, game after game, sometimes until it got dark and we played by the dim glow of street lights. In the summer holidays, my mum would make a two-litre bottle of squash and we would pass it from player to player at half-time, none of us deterred by the fact it had got warm in the sun. My, it tasted good.

Mark never made it into the school team. He kept trying, kept going to the “trials”, both at primary and senior school, but he was just off the pace. The disappointment was always bitter. You could see it on his face. He yearned to play, to progress, to be able to read out a match report at school assembly (one of the honours of making the team). But he never did.

In his excellent series on lost dreams last week, James Ducker, my colleague, reported that 98 per cent of those signed by English teams at 16 fail to make the transition into

professional football. Many struggle to cope with rejection at such a tender age. Clinical psychologists report that many suffer anxiety, a loss of confidence and, in some cases, depression. These youngsters are often described as being “left on football’s scrapheap”.

It seems to me, though, that the number rejected is, in fact, far higher. After all, the sifting process starts from the first time you kick a ball at the local park. I was one of the few who made it into my school team (I captained it). But when I went to trial for the district team, surrounded by the best players from all the schools in the area, the standard was high. Parents were everywhere. I remember my heart beating out of my chest when the “scouts” arrived.

I did not make it. I was crushed by the disappointment. How could it be otherwise? But I also realised that the race had only just started for those who had made the cut. Of those who made it into the district team, only a handful were picked by Reading, the local club. And of those who made it to Reading, only a fraction made it into professional football. Perhaps none made it all the way to the top flight.

And that really is the point. When we watch any Premier League match, we are witnessing players who have made it through a filtering process of staggering dimensions. It is a process that does not merely discard 98 per cent of those who aspire, but something closer to 99.9999 per cent. For every first-team player, there are millions of others, like grains of sand on the beach, who have tried, who have dreamt, but who have failed.

The majority, like Mark, never made it through the first lap. Others, such as those covered by Ducker, made it to the final straight, before dropping out. But this is football. This is life. Failure is an inevitable aspect of any competition worthy of the name. Without losers, there cannot be winners. Without pain, there cannot be joy. Without natural selection, there cannot be evolution. Failure is not antithetical to progress; failure is part and parcel of progress.

Take a step back and you will see that football is a beautiful meritocracy. That so many dreams are shattered is testament to just how many dared to dream in the first place. The skills are transparent, the opportunities broad. There is no room for nepotism or cosy alliances. The best of the best shine through, whether they are from a tough part of Liverpool, like Wayne Rooney, or raised in grinding poverty in Uruguay, like Luis Suárez.

Ducker makes the important point that clubs have a responsibility to those who make it as far as the academies. They have a responsibility to create rounded people, with decent educations. Parents must support this approach, too, rather than exerting undue pressure on often vulnerable children. This is not just about giving youngsters a plan B; it is also about enlightened self-interest. Youngsters who are educated and self-assured are likely to be better footballers, too.

The Ancient Greeks understood this only too well. They created strong links between the gymnasiums and the academies and embraced the humane idea that the mind and body grow together. The German football system has embraced this truth, too. The clubs there want intelligent and confident young men. Such a cultural transformation needs to happen here, too. But I wish to make a deeper point. It is that we need to redefine our relationship with failure, not just in football but in life. We need to remind our children that losing is an essential (indeed, a beautiful) part of life. We need to hymn the empowering idea that failure is less important, infinitely less so, than how we respond to it. Failing to make the grade at football is crushing. It is natural to be sad. But it is also a pathway to a new reality.

Ten of thousands do not make it to Oxbridge. Hundreds of thousands of actors never win an Oscar. Tens of millions fail to make it into Manchester United, Arsenal, or Chelsea. But this is not the end of life. It is merely the beginning. It is an opportunity to conceive a new dream, a new hope, a new way of finding meaning in this curious journey called life.

Mark died in 2008 from cancer. He left a lovely wife, Sally, and three beautiful young children. I think about him every day. And I am thankful that his failures in football, so important, so trivial, never deterred him. He created new dreams, new aspirations and lived a life that inspired all who knew him.

Life is too short, too precious, to be derailed by failure. We have to accept it. We have to embrace it.

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

24 comments

 **James Prosser**

5 people listening



+ Follow

Post comment

Newest | Oldest | Most Recommended

C J Delmege

January 22, 2015 03:59

Mark was rubbish at football, but a winner where it mattered; in Life.

[Recommend](#) [Reply](#)

Mrs Fiona Nicoll

January 19, 2015 14:57

Excellent piece

[Recommend](#) [Reply](#)

Mr Anthony Roberts

January 19, 2015 14:25

Lovely article Mathew. I will remember it the next time my latest short story gets nowhere.

Presumably a high "failure " rate in cricket as well. When they whinge I think, get real, you are paid to play the greatest game in the world.

[Recommend](#) [Reply](#)

matthew syed

January 19, 2015 15:24

@Mr Anthony Roberts Thanks! Fictional short stories are the toughest genre to write, I think. A high failure rate is probably inevitable!

Edward O'Brien

January 19, 2015 12:30

I told my children: measure your failures as success, for in failing you have a result. You have demonstrated ambition. Failure is not defeat. It is not the end, and in many cases is really the beginning. In a word, failure is not a cul-de-sac. There are other avenues leading off. To even greater things...

Like just about everybody else, I too had friends at school who did not make the team. Some took it harder than other, of course, but one boy - in gymnastics - was heartbroken. His teacher - not the Sports teacher - took him to one side after hearing of his heartbreak. My friend told me afterwards -- words to the effect: "She said I was very fit and strong. Even more so than some who are in the team. That makes me good enough to play tennis, cricket, badminton or squash."

My friend played all of them and was not really much good at any but did get into the diving team. And he made a lot of friends, two of whom later joined him in a business enterprise. All three became millionaires.

We are still good friends today, 65 years on, and his children and my children are good friends too.

I doubt there are many who fail at everything....

1  Recommend Reply**Foreversideways**

January 19, 2015 11:38

Tell this to the Labour politicians, left wing intellectuals and PC fanatics who killed competitive sport in schools and introduced the prizes for all, no one must ever loose philosophy.

2   Recommend Reply**Mr Alec Sanders**

January 19, 2015 11:08

What a first class article. I have recently lost faith with The Times after 47 years

Subscription but I found this piece of wisdom brilliant. I hope my grandchildren and others of their generation can be brought up with these ideas. Thanks Matthew

9     Recommend Reply**RT**

January 19, 2015 10:50

What a beautiful article Matthew! My article of the year so far - well done indeed!

6     Recommend Reply**gerry needham**

January 19, 2015 10:50

As I understand it professional football academies do emphasise the importance of a continuing formal education. They purport to prepare future players for life outside of the game. This stands many youngsters in good stead if they fail to make the professional ranks. Unfortunately there are always going to be some youngsters who are unwilling or incapable of taking advantage of educational opportunities. These are the ones who are most likely to react badly to failing to make the grade.

The USA college system as a way into a professional career seems better as it is aligned to a degree qualification. However, the athletic aspect is sometimes very discouraging with factors like 'red shirting.' This involves any player being transferred to another college, because they have not made the team, having to sit out the season before they are allowed to play. Competition is extremely intense which makes it hard to cope with being unsuccessful.

[Recommend](#) [Reply](#)

Hannah Jones-Walters

January 19, 2015 10:36

What a lovely article to read on a Monday morning. Thanks Matthew!

3    [Recommend](#) [Reply](#)

Robert Holmes

January 19, 2015 10:20

But how is it parliament is so full of failures? B and B to name but a pair.

1  [Recommend](#) [Reply](#)

Spike

January 19, 2015 11:35

I can think of some very 'successful' politicians, men who succeeded in re-shaping a country to their ideas. And I am made grateful for the failures of ours.

[Recommend](#) [Reply](#)

Stephen Barney

January 19, 2015 09:39

What an excellent article

12      [Recommend](#) [Reply](#)

MARTIN LESLIE

January 19, 2015 09:22

No mention of Bruce and the Spider, also when I played there was too much shandies after any game, which I believe still happens according to latest stories about footballers.

[Recommend](#) [Reply](#)

Devon Cameron

January 19, 2015 09:20

Mr Syed, I envy your ability to write such beautiful and relevant prose. I have sent this article to my daughter (an aspiring athelete).

Thank you again for the piece.

9      [Recommend](#) [Reply](#)

Ben

January 19, 2015 09:11

Football a beautiful meritocracy? Perhaps, though there is still a degree of 'who you know not what you know', or what you can do with a ball.

However, it is nothing compared to the levels of cronyism and nepotism throughout the rest of our society which make being in that 99.999% of failures all the more likely.

[Recommend](#) [Reply](#)

sultan

January 19, 2015 10:07

@Ben there is also a bitter and twisted 'failure' category

1  [Recommend](#) [Reply](#)

Ben

January 19, 2015 10:35

@sultan @Ben Indeed there is. Touché!

[Recommend](#) [Reply](#)

ebee

January 19, 2015 09:09

Thoughtful piece. I agree we need to factor in failing as part of the reality of living and progressing. The idea that 'everyone is a winner' promoted in schools delays the reality that everyone can't be. Promoting how to deal with failure, to pick yourself up and move on is a much more valuable message and life skill

3    [Recommend](#) [Reply](#)

alex cordwell

January 19, 2015 08:54

Another wonderful piece from the best writer in this newspaper .

8     [Recommend](#) [Reply](#)

Richard Thomas

January 19, 2015 08:04

Brilliant, persuasive piece of writing, well said. And a devastating penultimate paragraph. Didn't see that coming...

4     [Recommend](#) [Reply](#)

Paul Phillips

January 18, 2015 23:05

A very thought provoking piece Matthew.

I'd be very interested in hearing your views on the American system where top flight athletes in the NFL, NBA, NHL and MLB are required to attend college with sports scholarships, leaving college with a degree, playing college football, basketball, ice-hockey or baseball BEFORE they can play their sport (hopefully) at the highest level.

Perhaps a topic for you to research(?)

It does seem to me that football clubs act entirely in self interest with little to no regard for the players who don't make the grade.

7     [Recommend](#) [Reply](#)

Professor Sir Tom D Harry

January 19, 2015 12:02

@Paul Phillips That system is a total scam to exploit poor black men's

labour and pretend to educate them.

[Recommend](#) [Reply](#)

gerry needham

January 20, 2015 14:14

@Professor Sir Tom D Harry @Paul Phillips Sir Tom, which system are you referring to, football academies or US collegiate sport?

If the latter, it is worth remembering that the majority of players who make it into the NBA are black, many of whom earn vast sums of money compared to sports people in other countries of the world.

1  [Recommend](#) [Reply](#)

Livefyre

© Times Newspapers Limited 2016 | Version 5.15.2.0(181272)

Registered in England No. 894646 Registered office:

1 London Bridge Street, SE1 9GF

[My Account](#) | [Editorial Complaints](#) | [RSS](#) | [Classified advertising](#) | [Display advertising](#) | [International print subscriptions](#) | [Encounters Dating](#) | [Sunday Times Wine Club](#) | [Privacy & Cookie Policy](#) | [Syndication](#) | [Site Map](#) | [FAQ](#) | [Terms & Conditions](#) | [Contact us](#) | [iPhone](#) | [Android smartphone](#) | [Android tablet](#) | [Kindle](#) | [Kindle Fire](#) | [Place an announcement in The Times](#) | [Sunday Times Driving](#) | [The Times Bookshop](#) | [Times Tutorials](#) | [Times Currency Services](#) | [Times Print Gallery](#) | [Handpicked Collection](#)
