

We must build on success to help lost boys find their way



Recent initiatives, such as the Elite Player Performance Plan, have gone some way towards preparing boys in the event of rejection, but that more than half of academy rejects between the ages of 15 and 18 suffer clinical psychological issues shows a need for more action

Philip Brown/The Times

James Ducker

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Exclusive: In the final part of our series on the fate of footballers who fail to make the grade, James Ducker says there is still lots to do after recent progress

The father of a six-year-old boy recently invited into the development centre of a Barclays Premier League club was taken aback when one of the coaches asked if he could provide the height and weight for members of the child's immediate family. In addition to the father's particulars, they wanted those of the boy's mother and both sets of grandparents.

As an insight into some of the selection procedures facing aspiring footballers from such an early age, it was revealing, but then the pursuit of a professional career in a sport where the

rejection rates are alarming has never been a routine, stress-free exercise.

The Times reported yesterday how a new study by the University of Teesside has found that more than half of young British footballers aged between the ages of 15 and 18 who are released before earning a scholarship or professional contract suffer clinical levels of psychological distress within a month of rejection. For those in the game tasked with ensuring that today's cast-offs do not become tomorrow's tearaways or simply directionless, this is not a new problem.

The recent strides taken to try to create better-educated individuals who, in the event of rejection, have received the right help to enable new doors to open, are marked.

Yet it would be remiss not to ask what more needs to be done, what does not work, and whether more joined-up thinking is still required as English football attempts to produce the next generation of stars and, failing that, youngsters who are not a burden to society.

The Premier League is more than halfway through its commitment to investing £340 million over four seasons in its Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP).

Introduced in 2012, EPPP has sought, beyond the vast improvement of academy facilities and coaching standards, to enhance education and welfare programmes. For some clubs, that has required wholesale improvements; for those ahead of the curve, it has involved tweaks and fine-tuning. What has materialised is a system that makes extensive demands of its clubs.

Naturally, a player's schooling forms a central pillar in his time as a trainee and several clubs have established strong ties with local schools and colleges to raise standards. Schooling alone is not enough, though. Encouraging players to develop life skills and consider "exit strategies" — in effect, a Plan B — is increasingly important. Sunderland, for example, have talks on everything from personal finance and IT skills to mental health and sexual awareness. They employ a mental skills coach, Greg Irvin, who holds sessions with all age groups. The club have seven former graduates working within the academy.

Matt Hale, the Southampton academy manager, said that the club run about five annual parents' education programmes and host life-skills tutorials for players over the age of 12. Rejected scholars at Chelsea are given a salary for a year after leaving to provide financial breathing space.

For young players leaving home to move into club accommodation, the process can be daunting. James Wilson, the Manchester United striker, wanted to stay with his parents so that he was 16 before moving out. United insist that they tailor to individual needs. Dave Bushell, their head of education, is now assisted by Marek Szmid, who himself went through the club's academy system. Bushell operates an open-door policy that ensures contact with graduates up to four years after they have left. United's success rates are impressive. In six of the past eight years, all their scholars have won professional contracts.

Last season, 76 per cent of scholars in Premier League academies were awarded professional contracts at their club or another in English football. Only 2 per cent got lost in the ether. Of the 262 under-16s registered at Premier League academies in 2013-14, 72 per cent were offered scholarships.

The issue of so-called "early specialisation" is contentious. Geoff Scott, the chief executive of XPRO, which offers help and advice to former players, believes that youngsters are at risk of

becoming “cocooned” in a tiny bubble for too long, a view shared by numerous coaches, education chiefs and parents. But whose fault is that?

Grassroots football in schools has gradually been eroded by governments who have slashed physical education timetables and sold off playing fields. As such, professional clubs have stepped in to fill the void. *The Times* spoke to parents of 11 children between the ages of 9 and 15 enrolled in Premier League academies. Many had similar stories to tell about the intense scrutiny on their sons, yet one parent said that their son’s club, Everton, had excelled at managing their expectations, arguing that parents were often at fault.

“A lot of parents won’t acknowledge it, but it’s a three-way street,” the boy’s father said. “If parents or that child don’t want to hear what clubs are saying, I’m not sure what the clubs are supposed to do. I find it staggering how many parents think their boy, at 12 or 13, has made it.”

Complaints about the volume of foreign players being fast-tracked into academies at the expense of British talent do not tally with the statistics; 96 per cent of all 8 to 18-years-olds in Premier League academies are British.

Other headaches loom. Critics of Fifa’s plans to deregulate agents from April worry that an army of unlicensed, unqualified intermediaries could be particularly damaging for young players whose welfare is ignored. Are clubs also at risk of creating problems by paying exorbitant sums to young players who may never actually go on to have professional careers?

“After care” is essential but, for some youngsters, the last people they want to converse with is the club or game that has just rejected them. As such, the need for independent, impartial advice seems clear, but those who have made efforts to engage with football’s authorities invariably complain of resistance. “We have tried tirelessly to work with the PFA and FA but they see us as a threat,” Scott said.

Steve Bannister, who set up Edge FA a year ago to provide more support for players, believes that there is an “acute shortage of advice to young players and particularly their parents”.

Pete Lowe, the former head of education and welfare at Manchester City, said: “We spend vast amounts recruiting players from various parts of the world, but I wonder if the same due diligence is being afforded at the other end to players who leave the game.”

Dr David Blakelock, the clinical psychologist who carried out the study for the University of Teesside, has made a range of recommendations, including the creation of a “therapeutic” service provision to help those cast aside and those considered “at risk” in the event of rejection.

Others have had more joy. Gavin Heeroo, a former Crystal Palace player, built up gambling debts of £40,000 in three months after his professional career ended prematurely, but went on to establish Focus Fitness UK, which has provided wellbeing solutions to more than 100 former players referred by the Professional Footballers’ Association (PFA).

The PFA recently introduced an independent youth advisory service that is available to parents of all players in the academy system aged between 9 and 16. In the past financial year, the PFA’s education department made grants to members worth more than £1.5 million and provides up to £6 million in funding for other educational programmes.

Of 651 apprentices at Football League clubs between 2012 and 2014, 286 won professional contracts and 188 went into semi-professional football, of which 114 were in education. Twenty are unemployed and the whereabouts of 37 others are unknown.

Hard work is clearly being done. There is just a lot more still to do.

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James Prosser

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Sebastian Cargutt

January 27, 2015 11:06

Many young men have the mental resilience to bounce back from rejection and go on to have very successful careers in football or wherever. Equally, those who are considered 'successful' have led such protected lives that they do not know how to cope when the going gets tough.

As an example, on Saturday, Bradford City's team of 14 consisted entirely of players who have been rejected by (or failed at) higher division clubs, some of them numerous times. They defeated Chelsea's 'playboys' both physically and mentally. Cahill and Ramires barely celebrated their goals such was their sense of superiority, yet by the time they needed to fightback they realised they do not have the ability to do so.

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Essex Man

January 16, 2015 13:10

No sympathy, I'm afraid. So they didn't make it. So what? Very disappointing, for sure, but not exactly the end of the world.

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Mr Howard Knight

January 16, 2015 12:44

Clive Betts MP - Chair of the All-Party Football Group - has written a good article linking these issues to the Ched Evans' issues.

<http://clivebettsmp.blogspot.co.uk/>

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Hey kid, boo hoo. Now go get a life.

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