

## 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

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**James Ducker** Northern Football Correspondent  
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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.

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 **James Prosser**

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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

players out on loan as their presence could provoke disharmony in the squad.

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**Gordon Mackie**

January 16, 2015 00:08

What happened to the concept of a plan B should all not go to plan? The young promising talent might well have a potential future but so will a thousand others too. With spaces few and willing applicants near infinite there are bound to be more cases of disappointment than those of the lucky few who achieve the big time. It is life.

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**Liquidator**

January 15, 2015 13:47

I too have little sympathy for those that don't make the cut, but the drop-out rate between 16-18 at 96% and the drop out rate between 18-21 at 98% shows just how alarmingly poorly our academies are performing on the whole. The experts and armchair commentators are always quick to criticise grass-roots coaching for the failure of the England team, but these boys are generally taken into academy care at U9. Given that at the younger ages, our academies regularly win overseas international tournaments something must be failing at this key stage.

One for the experts to cogitate on I guess.

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**Blue is The Colour**

January 15, 2015 11:12

Wow...you mean people who have their dreams shattered, mainly due to their own under-performance, end up highly in risk of being depressed, anxious and losing confidence? Many then turn to dugs and drink? Who'd a thunk it...

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**Baron von Greenback**

January 15, 2015 10:54

Boo hoo! Welcome to the real world...

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**Professor Sir Tom D Harry**

January 15, 2015 10:43

Great stuff

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**Mr Stephen Riley**

January 15, 2015 09:12

Get on we it,as the saying goes.

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**Mr NigelTate**

January 15, 2015 07:32

Why not start by continuing to educate these players whilst at the clubs and they might be better prepared. By that, I mean the clubs educating them, they have

enough money. They then might grow up to realise football is not sport and get a proper job.

1  Recommend Reply

**Baron von Greenback**

January 15, 2015 13:45

**@Mr NigelTate** "Football is not sport"??

1  Recommend Reply

**Malcolm Slade**

January 15, 2015 06:35

Many teenage boys, and their fathers, dream of emulating their Saturday heroes. They're the best in their school and district. They concentrate more on their football than their studies. Their friends admire and envy them. They are teenagers with all the problems that teen age brings. Bang - it's all gone, they lose face, they've failed, they have to face up to the routine normality of a life they thought they'd escape.

Yeh, I can understand how they could be seriously affected. Same would go for young ladies obsessed with their looks and body shape who want to be models but are told they don't fit. It's the way things are nowadays. You only have to see the profiles and comments of the X-factor finalists - don't want to go back to working in the shoe shop or drive a van, but just be famous and rich (in that order).

Some make it, most don't.

3    Recommend Reply

**Echo**

January 15, 2015 05:33

I now see just how clever I am, realizing early on that I was a rubbish player I took a short cut and saved myself all this Angst and rejection. Instead I took up air guitar and now play in the greatest ever bands with great skill in front of adoring crowds in my bed space. Its easy and for my next career O'll mostly be growing carrots. :)

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**Mike TC**

January 15, 2015 05:23

This is just another example of the consequences of high, and usually unrealistic, expectations not being achieved. No doubt the current trend of 'medicalising' every disappointment in life as a 'mental health issue' will soon be deployed as a potential solution strategy.

This issue applies in so many different areas in life from acting, pop singing, modelling, investing, own business success etc etc. It is called life and people need to develop a proper perspective in order to deal with it.

8       Recommend Reply

**Baron von Greenback**

January 15, 2015 13:46

**@Mike TC** Agreed, it'll be renamed as some sort of condition/syndrome/disorder.

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You are kidding! This is called life. Get over it and grow up.

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**Mr David Taylor**

January 14, 2015 23:46

Oh,the poor little lambs.Never read such a load of pointless codswallop!The vast majority of players never get anywhere near the top of their sports,the case since'Adam were a lad'.Those dealt with in this article probably get nearer than most but fall at the ultimate hurdle for one simple reason.They are just not good enough to make the standard required,again,nothing new about that.Disappointing certainly but generations of players have lived with this,most of them,when looking back,realising how lucky they were to have had a stab at the top,a feat denied to most.

But that's not good enough these days,nowadays lads are expected to analyse failure and seek inner knowledge as to why.Being subjected to some of these quacks is enough to drive anyone to drink!

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**Freebooter**

January 14, 2015 23:29

Twaddle is the word that comes to mind for this article. In the first month after you have lost your job half the people concerned were suffering psychological problems. Were they expected to shrug and say 'ah well, that's life'. I wonder what the percentage would be for people who had failed their A-levels and not got to university. Or for people who have a family, kids and a mortgage and get the boot.

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**Richard Caddy**

January 15, 2015 06:41

**@Freebooter** what you said, completely right. It's stating the bleeding obvious. It's an investigation that's as enlightening as me investigating my leg and finding my foot at the end of it. Failure hurts. Try something else.

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**Mr Frank Roby**

January 15, 2015 08:20

**@Richard Caddy @Freebooter** Well said, I would love to see if they have done a comparison against 'real life' and see what the variance is there. When I lost my job and was unemployed for the first time in 25 years I went through all of these emotions.. but I also had a mortgage to pay for.

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