

No. 36 / OCTOBER 2018

Touchline

League
Football
Education

**INCLUDES EXCLUSIVE
INTERVIEWS WITH**

// JAMIE SHACKLETON

// MITCH AUSTIN

// MILES WELCH-HAYES

+ MORE



BIG MONEY

MOVERS

A SELECTION OF THE BIGGEST TRANSFER DEALS OVER THE SUMMER

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LFE was established by
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GOAL OF THE SEASON

Almost 15,000 votes were cast across the eight LFE Goal of the Month competitions during the 2017-18 season. Each GOTM winner qualified for the Goal of the Season poll, with over 6,800 votes being recorded.

APRIL: JON SMITH
(LINCOLN CITY - 46%)

SEPTEMBER: CAOLAN BOYD-MUNCE
(BIRMINGHAM CITY - 37%)

AUGUST: MATT MAYES
(PORTSMOUTH - 5%)

**OCTOBER/NOVEMBER:
ELLIS CHAPMAN**
(LINCOLN CITY - 4%)

DECEMBER: JORDAN DOHERTY
(SHEFFIELD UNITED - 4%)

JANUARY: ALEX HUNT
(SHEFFIELD WEDNESDAY - 2%)

FEBRUARY/MARCH: DYLAN SUMNER
(BLACKPOOL - 1%)

MAY: REGAN HUTCHINSON
(ROTHERHAM UNITED - 1%)

View all the contenders at
[youtube.com/LFEOnlineTV](https://www.youtube.com/LFEOnlineTV)



LFE Apprentice of the Year Awards

Sky Bet Championship Ryan Sessegnon (Fulham)

Sky Bet League One Anthony Hartigan (AFC Wimbledon)

Sky Bet League Two Ben Wilmot (Stevenage - now Watford)

Academy Leagues Winners 2017-18

North West Division
Rochdale

North East Division
Mansfield Town

South West Division
Exeter City

South East Division
Milton Keynes Dons

Southern Merit League One
Gillingham

Southern Merit League Two
Leyton Orient

**U18 Professional
Development League North**
Leeds United

**U18 Professional
Development League South**
Crystal Palace

U18 Professional Development League National Play-Offs
Charlton Athletic

U18 Premier League North
Manchester United

U18 Premier League South
Chelsea

U18 Premier League National Play-Offs
Chelsea

The 11 2017-18 SEASON

Forty-eight Apprentices were nominated for LFE's 'The 11' last season having been recognised for their outstanding efforts on and off the pitch.



October
2017

Niall Watson (Accrington Stanley) // **Max Bird** (Derby County) // **Jordan Stevens** (Forest Green Rovers) // **Steven Sessegnon** (Fulham) // **Connor Simpson** (Hartlepool United) // **Jamie Shackleton** (Leeds United) // **Jack James** (Luton Town) // **Lewis Freestone** (Peterborough United) // **Lewis Fensome** (Preston North End) // **Ben Wilmot** (Stevenage) // **Mitch Candlin** (Walsall)



December
2017

Finlay Sinclair-Smith (Blackpool) // **Callum Styles** (Bury) // **George Lloyd** (Cheltenham Town) // **Joe Lynch** (Crewe Alexandra) // **Danny Amos** (Doncaster Rovers) // **Jack Tucker** (Gillingham) // **Jesse Debrah** (Millwall) // **Tommy Hope** (MK Dons) // **Matthew Longstaff** (Newcastle United) // **Sam Cartwright** (Peterborough United) // **Reece McGinley** (Rotherham United)



February
2018

Roy Sylva (Barnet) // **Matthew Wolfe** (Barnsley) // **Sam Squire** (Cambridge United) // **Ryan Schofield** (Huddersfield Town) // **Toby Stevenson** (Leyton Orient) // **Harry Bircumshaw** (Mansfield Town) // **Momodou Touray** (Newport County) // **Alfie Payne** (Norwich City) // **Tom Hamer** (Oldham Athletic) // **David Parkhouse** (Sheffield United) // **Alex Hunt** (Sheffield Wednesday)



May
2018

Jack Evans (Blackburn Rovers) // **Alex Render** (Chesterfield) // **Elliot Bonds** (Dagenham and Redbridge) // **Cameron Cresswell** (Derby County) // **James Morris** (Doncaster Rovers) // **James Gillard** (Northampton Town) // **Atli Barkarson** (Norwich City) // **Adam O'Reilly** (Preston North End) // **Adam Kelsey** (Scunthorpe United) // **Joe Romanski** (Swindon Town) // **Ryan Giles** (Wolverhampton Wanderers)

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Academy Leagues Round-Up

North East Division

Mansfield Town have been the team to beat in the North East division for three seasons running, but are currently being denied of their usual top spot by Doncaster Rovers on goal difference.

Paul Stancliffe's team are yet to taste defeat so far from their opening five games and consolidated their place at the summit of the table with a 4-0 win against Scunthorpe United thanks to a double from Rieves Boocock.

Mansfield slipped up against the same opponents in August, but have won each of their last two outings to set up a top of the table clash between them and Rovers at the end of September.

Grimsby are the only other club to match Donny's unbeaten record, although they have only played three games and currently stand in seventh after two wins and a draw.

North West Division

Wigan Athletic's Under-18s have ran riot so far this season, smashing 25 goals in just six games to claim a perfect 100 per cent record and stretch out a six-point lead in first position.

Last year's runners-up have been led by England Under-17 international Joe Gelhardt (six) and Charlie Jolley (five), with both in fine scoring form. The latter netted on three occasions in a 6-1 win against Wrexham in August, while Gelhardt repeated that feat during a 6-2 victory over Accrington Stanley a month later.

Elsewhere, Preston North End bounced back from an opening day 4-2 loss to the Latics with four victories in succession and have a game in hand, while Port Vale are also in contention six points behind the leaders.

Defending champions Rochdale endured a stuttering start with one point from their opening two matches, but have since got their season up and running by defeating Fleetwood Town (3-2) and Carlisle United (2-0).

South East Division

Two teams are yet to be beaten in the South East division, with Northampton Town leading the way on 17 points from seven matches, two points clear of Stevenage.

The Cobblers dismantled Southern Merit League Two holders Leyton Orient 5-1 to hit the front in September, but their run of four straight victories was brought to a halt by a 2-2 stalemate with nearest contenders Stevenage.

Jorden Gibson's team also managed to collect four consecutive wins, but have now drawn two on the bounce to lose ground on the leaders, while last season's Merit League One champions Gillingham have dropped to fourth after one win in five league games.

At the other end of the table, 2017-18 winners Milton Keynes Dons have produced a solitary win to their tally so far, which came against winless Orient.

South West Division

It has been a flying start for Oxford United, claiming 16 points from their opening six outings to lead Yeovil Town on goal difference having also played a game less.

Following an opening day draw with AFC Bournemouth, the U's have sealed five wins on the trot, with first-year striker Slavi Spasov grabbing a brace in each of his last two matches.

Yeovil appeared to be keeping pace with Leon Blackmore-Such's side, but were then thrashed 5-2 by Forest Green Rovers, with Lewis Spurrier capping off the performance with a fantastic individual run and finish.

Meanwhile, reigning South West victors Exeter City lost three games in succession to fall into mid-table having previously produced a fine display to recover from a two-goal deficit and overcome third-placed Bournemouth 3-2 at the end of August.

U18 Professional Development League North

Sheffield Wednesday have been a dominant force in the opening two months of the new campaign, racking up 17 points from seven matches to maintain the only remaining unbeaten record in the Professional Development League.

The Owls have already registered five clean sheets to boast the best defensive record in the North, as well as being the leading scorers thanks to goals from Charles Hagan and Iyad Hamud (five each), plus four from Jordan O'Brien, who notched a hat-trick at the start of September as they overcame Crystal Palace 5-0.

Closest challengers Nottingham Forest are two points adrift, but fell to a 1-0 loss to the pacesetters, while last year's Northern champions Leeds United are currently in fourth with a game in hand.

U18 Professional Development League South

There is an unfamiliar look to the top of the Southern section as Ipswich Town lead the pack by three points ahead of Cardiff City, having played a game more.

The Tractor Boys youngsters have found the net 11 times in their last two fixtures, breezing past fourth-placed Bristol City 5-0 and seeing off National Play-Off holders Charlton Athletic 6-3, with first-year apprentice Zak Brown gaining a treble.

The Addicks have suffered a tough start after also being hit for four by Northern leaders Wednesday, although 2-1 victories over Bolton Wanderers and Leeds offered some respite.

U18 Premier League North

Derby County have enjoyed a terrific start to top the list of EFL clubs in the Northern section, sitting in fourth place on 11 points from six games.

The young Rams possess one of the league's joint-top goalscorers in their ranks, with first-year apprentice Jack Stretton bagging nine goals already, including four in an 8-0 win against Newcastle United, while they also claimed impressive draws against Manchester United (3-3) and Manchester City (2-2), with their only defeat coming against unbeaten leaders Everton.

Meanwhile, Blackburn Rovers are rooted to the bottom, but recorded their only points of the season against fifth-placed Man City as 16-year-old Isaac Whitehall netted the winner in a 2-1 triumph.

U18 Premier League South

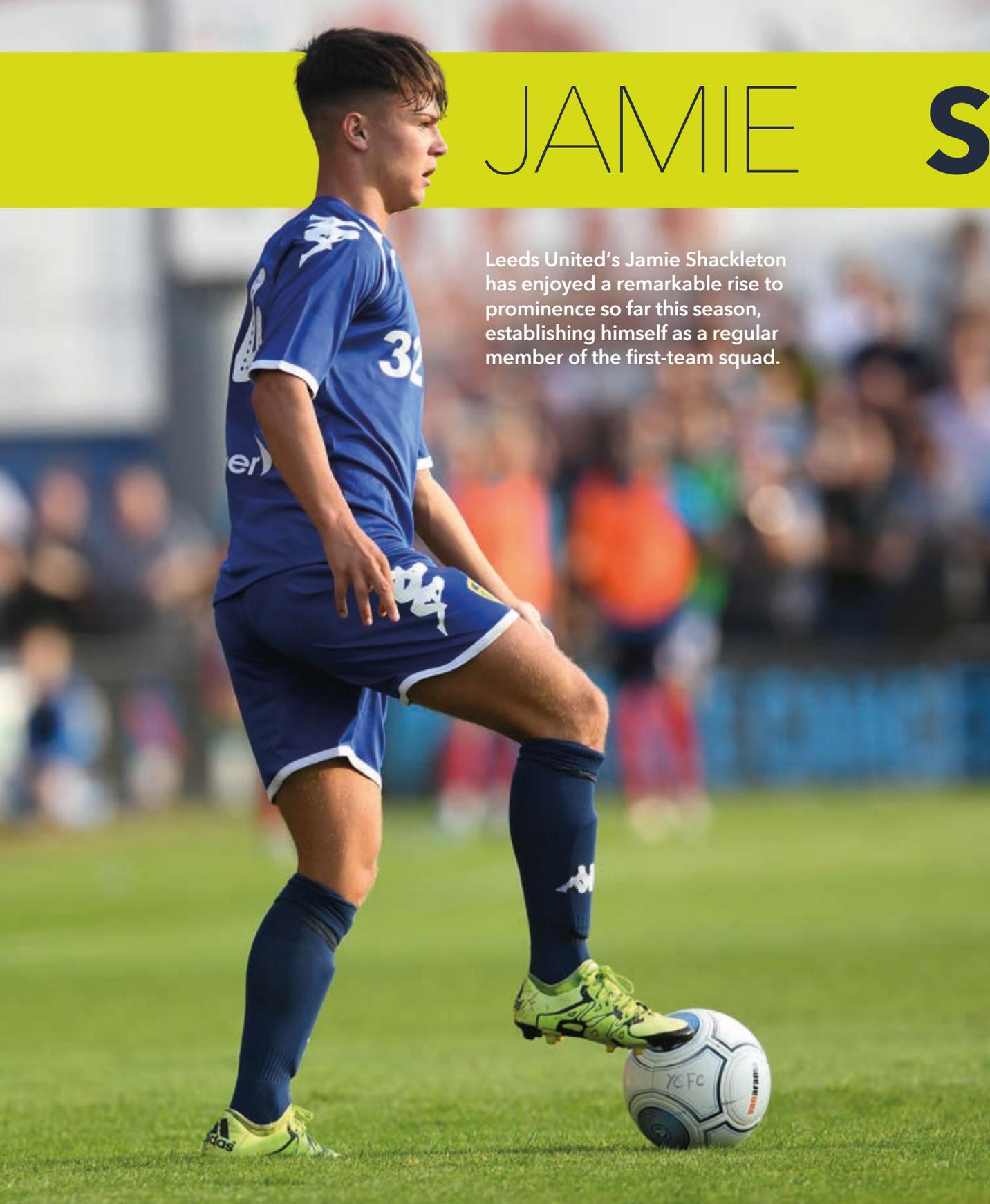
A streak of four wins on the trot has lifted Aston Villa into fourth position in the South, with their only two defeats coming narrowly against second and third-placed sides Arsenal (2-4) and Chelsea (1-2).

The highlight of their promising run of form was an emphatic 7-1 victory over Norwich City, which involved seven different scorers.

In contrast, David Wright's Canaries are yet to get off the mark, while Fulham's five points from a possible 18 leaves them languishing in ninth.



* Information correct as of 24 September



JAMIE

SHACKLETON

Leeds United's Jamie Shackleton has enjoyed a remarkable rise to prominence so far this season, establishing himself as a regular member of the first-team squad.

Marcelo Bielsa's side have taken the Sky Bet Championship by storm, with Shackleton adopting an unfamiliar role at right-back in August before being sidelined with a minor ankle knock.

But for the highly-rated 18-year-old, being a professional footballer is just one aspect of his identity.

Shackleton was named in LFE's 'The 11' last October - which recognises apprentices for their outstanding performance on and off the pitch - with the emerging star earning plaudits for his commitment to the academic side of the apprenticeship.

"You can learn a lot about yourself in a classroom," he told LFE. "I did the Extended Diploma, which was a bit more challenging with the extra units involved, but I was able to balance my time well and get through it.

"Being at a football club, there are plenty of distractions around and you've got to keep your head focused. You've also got to work with your classmates and there is teamwork involved in that, which can be taken on to the pitch.

"In my opinion, the way you are in the classroom reflects the type of player you are. If you work hard, get your work done, focus and try to make others work hard too, then it's more than likely that you're going to be that type of person on the pitch, in terms of being a leader and someone that the rest of the group look to when they need a bit of a lift."

Shackleton's efforts to go above and beyond do not end there. The Leeds Academy graduate has dedicated a significant amount of his spare time to helping the local community by attending local football team events to hand out new kit and encourage participation at grass roots level, as well as supporting various local charity initiatives.

"It started when a couple of friends, who are Leeds fans, had asked me to just show my face at some of their events and speak a bit about what I do," said Shackleton. "Although it wasn't that big of a crowd, it's the first time I've really spoken in front of a group of people, so that experience definitely gave me a lot more confidence.

"You see senior footballers doing that sort of thing all the time, so if you're aspiring to be like them on the pitch, there's no reason not to do the same off it as well."

The talented youngster even helped to raise money for a local man who had developed a life limiting illness and could no longer work, while Shackleton also spoke fondly of his experience visiting the Martin House Hospice, which provides family-led care for children with life-shortening conditions.

He said: "It was another set of friends who live just up the road from me that told me about the guy. He is a massive Leeds fan and so are his family, so they were over the moon that I'd come down to speak a bit and get to know them and ultimately it helped to raise some money for him, which is great.

"I know it's probably not the usual sort of thing that a young player would be doing but it was just a case of 'why not'? They're local and know I play here and they'd asked if I would help out, so I didn't turn the opportunity down. It was a different experience to anything I've done before, so it was a bit daunting but it was really enjoyable.

"As a club, we've also been down to Martin House - we go every Christmas. It's a place for children with serious illnesses to get a change of scenery, enjoy some fun activities and hopefully make some great memories.

"We went to meet some of the residents there at the time and were shown around all the different rooms. I loved the experience, it was really interesting to see the work they do and puts everything into perspective.

"It's so important to visit places like that because we can make a positive impact on their lives and it shows us what's going on in the real world away from this bubble of football, so it's important to get those life skills and be able to relate to people with different backgrounds and needs.

"I only see positive outcomes from getting involved in community stuff like that and helping people who are less fortunate. It's not just about being good at football, that sort of thing will help you become a good person and a good role model. ►

"You're learning a lot and you're developing yourself off the pitch as a person and if staff and other people around the building can see that then they'll know that's going to help you be a better team-mate and ultimately a better player."

Shackleton's off-field development has certainly contributed to his increasing success on it.

Aside from his academic progress, the Leeds-born teenager also displayed great resilience to overcome a seven-month injury lay-off during the first year of his apprenticeship, eventually returning to Under-23 action before signing his first professional contract and earning a spot on the club's end-of-season trip to Myanmar.

"It's tough coming into training, seeing the boys out on the pitch and knowing you've got to go in the gym instead," he said. "But I made sure I came back in good shape. I didn't get much of a summer, but I was ready to go for the next season."

"I got a lot stronger and when I got back on the pitch I was able to put myself about a bit more, so I'd say there were definitely some positives that came from being out for so long."



“

IT WAS JUST A DREAM COME TRUE FOR ME AS A LEEDS FAN AND LOCAL LAD TO GO ON THE PITCH AND PLAY FOR THE CLUB.

”



"Going to Myanmar was my first experience of being away with the club. They're mad for football out there - so many people treated us like celebrities and it was all a bit mad really!"

"I don't think they knew who we were but just seeing an English club coming to play in their country, they loved it. It let me know I was close to the first-team at that point and gave me an insight into first-team experiences and being around the senior players."

And under new manager Bielsa, Shackleton has become a permanent fixture in the first-team set-up.

"I've enjoyed working with him and his staff from the first day of pre-season," Shackleton added.

"It's been really tough - there's been a lot of fitness training, but also a lot of ball work as well. There were a few of the Under-23s players that were selected to train with the first-team from day one of pre-season and I was one of them."

"In the second week of pre-season, we spoke about the fans and how they're the most important people to this club, how passionate they are and what it means to them to go and watch us play football."

"Their lives involve a lot of hard work throughout the week to be able to afford a ticket for the weekend, so we had our own insight into a bit of hard graft away from football by going round the whole training ground clearing all the litter from the pitches, bushes, everything really."

"At that stage I hadn't played in the first-team yet, so it was still my dream to play for the club and I'm a Leeds fan, so I knew exactly what it meant to come and watch anyway. The lads are all really grounded anyway, but a task like that definitely just reinforced what the club means to everyone."

The versatile midfielder-turned-defender ensured he was prepared to hit the ground running with a disciplined off-season schedule and has benefited from the tactical wisdom of his Argentine boss.

He continued: "Obviously, going from Under-18s and Under-23s football up to the first-team is a challenge and you've got to be ready for that. We had five or six weeks off over the summer and I just kept working hard on my fitness and made sure I was ready to go."

"To start with, he's played me a bit at right-back and he's spent a lot of time with me, learning different movements and different requirements for the position because I've never played there before."

"The manager's obviously seen qualities in me to put me there and I feel I've adapted well so far. I've enjoyed playing there, with the way we play it's an attacking position and I like to go forward as I did in midfield, so it does suit my game."

"I think it's a good quality to be able to play a few positions. I used to be a winger when I was nine or 10, then I've played centre-midfield ever since and now I've been pushed to right-back for a few games."

A 4-1 away victory at Derby County was the occasion for Shackleton's first involvement at senior level, appearing as a 73rd-minute substitute, while he then played the full 90 minutes of a 2-1 Carabao Cup win against Bolton Wanderers three days later.

And the starlet was thrust into the spotlight the following week as he was handed a full debut in the Championship live on Sky Sports against Swansea City, providing an assist in an impressive display after filling in at late notice for Liam Cooper, who was injured in the warm-up.

"It was pretty special, I didn't sleep much that night," Shackleton said. "It was just a dream come true for me as a Leeds fan and local lad to go on the pitch and play for the club. This club's got a great record of producing top players from the Academy and hopefully I can be one of them."

"I found out about three minutes before we went out to the tunnel, so there wasn't really any time for nerves, so I guess that helped really and I think I did fairly well on the night too."

"Now I just want to see if I can get as many appearances as possible under my belt and help the team in any way I can towards our goal of getting promoted to the Premier League."

Despite penning a new three-year deal in August and drawing plenty of acclaim, Shackleton's ambitions off the pitch continue to grow, with plans to get back in the classroom.

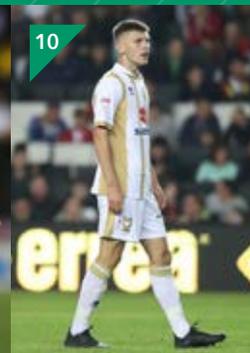
"I'm looking at studying for my UEFA B Licence in Coaching this year and get that in the bag early so that I'm in a good position already for when I finish playing," he said.

"It's definitely something that I'll be able to use as a way of focusing my mind off my own performance and probably take some pressure off in that way, as well as obviously setting me up for a future after football, which hopefully won't be for a long time yet."

"It can also help my game right now, learning how to support and deal with players and it makes you think about the bigger picture of the game rather than just your own individual role, so it's definitely something I'm hoping to sort out soon." ■



DEBUTANTS



Branden Horton
Doncaster Rovers

1 Defender Horton stepped up just 17 minutes into Doncaster's Checktrade Trophy meeting with Newcastle United Under-21s due to an early injury to the experienced Tommy Rowe and slotted in seamlessly at left-back. Despite the team suffering a 3-1 loss, the 18-year-old was singled out for praise by manager Grant McCann.



Joe Gelhardt & Jensen Weir
Wigan Athletic

3&4 Sixteen-year-old Gelhardt has made a flying start to the campaign having been nominated for LFE's August Goal of the Month, earning a call-up to the England Under-17 squad, agreeing his first professional contract and making his first-team debut. The highly-rated forward enjoyed a 12-minute cameo during Wigan's 3-1 Carabao Cup defeat to Rotherham United in August.

Meanwhile, Scotland youth international Weir also featured in the dying minutes for his first appearance as an apprentice, although he did get a run out in the Checktrade Trophy as a 15-year-old last season.



Jay Williams
Northampton Town

7 After impressing in pre-season friendlies, second-year defender Williams was included in Northampton's week-long training camp in Spain in July. Fast forward to September and the 17-year-old played the full 90 minutes of a 1-0 Checktrade Trophy defeat to Wycombe Wanderers, lining up alongside former Premier League centre-back Leon Barnett.

Elsewhere, fellow apprentice Jack Daldy appeared on the bench, while first-year pro Sean Whaler was introduced late on to earn his first outing in the senior team.



Dylan Asonganyi & Charlie Pattison
Milton Keynes Dons

9&10 Striker Asonganyi produced a prolific scoring record in the Under-18s last season and was rewarded with a promotion into the first-team to start the second-year of his apprenticeship. The 17-year-old was handed a starting role in MK Dons' Sky Bet League Two opener against Bury before netting his first professional goal three days later during a 3-0 victory over Charlton Athletic in the Carabao Cup.

Team-mate Pattison made his senior bow in the Checktrade Trophy at the beginning of September, appearing as an 84th-minute substitute in a 3-3 draw against Peterborough United.



Callum Hulme
Bury

2 Bury have continued their theme of producing first-team debutants, with Hulme becoming the 22nd academy product over the last four years to make a senior appearance. The teenage midfielder was handed a brief taste of the action in Sky Bet League Two as he came off the bench in the 89th minute during a 4-0 win against Grimsby Town.



James Hill & Dylan Boyle
Fleetwood Town

5&6 Under-18s captain Hill put his name in the Fleetwood record books at the end of August by becoming the club's youngest ever player in a competitive fixture. At the age of 16 years, 7 months and 18 days, the first-year apprentice played the final half an hour of a 4-0 Carabao Cup defeat to a strong Leicester City side at the King Power Stadium.

Meanwhile, fellow 16-year-old Boyle featured for 12 minutes of a 2-2 draw with Leicester's Under-21 side in the Checktrade Trophy, while second-year apprentice Ryan Rydel was an unused substitute.



Josh Neufville
Luton Town

8 Striker Neufville is the latest player off the Luton Town Academy conveyor belt to play first-team football.

Having signed his first professional contract a day earlier, the 17-year-old celebrated his new two-year deal with a five-minute outing against Brighton & Hove Albion Under-21s in the Checktrade Trophy, with the Hatters holding on for a 2-1 win.



Slavi Spasov & Fabio Lopes
Oxford United

11&12 First-year apprentice Lopes has been thrown straight into the first-team set-up having impressed in a pre-season friendly against Oxford City this summer. The 16-year-old has been tipped for the top by U's manager Karl Robinson, who sent him on for the final quarter of an hour of a 2-0 Carabao Cup win against Coventry City.

Lopes' first start came on a night when Spasov announced himself on the senior stage as Oxford beat Fulham Under-21s 3-0 in the Checktrade Trophy. The first-year starlet came off the bench after 63 minutes and ended up opening his account from the penalty spot four minutes from time.



JAMES MADDISON
Norwich City to Leicester City
undisclosed

Playmaker Maddison earned a well-deserved move to the top flight after working his way up the ranks at Coventry City before shining at Norwich City. The 21-year-old was a revelation in his only full season with the Canaries, establishing himself as an England Under-21 international and being named in the Sky Bet Championship Team of the Season at the EFL Awards after registering 15 goals in 49 appearances in all competitions.



BEN GIBSON
Middlesbrough to Burnley
£15m

Former Boro captain Gibson has reportedly attracted a number of suitors over the past few seasons having impressed in Middlesbrough's promotion campaign in 2015-16, as well as comfortably making the step up to Premier League football the following year. The central defender, 25, received a call-up to the senior England national team in March 2017 and has now added Europa League experience to his CV having become Burnley's joint club record signing.

ALFIE MAWSON
Swansea City to Fulham
£20m

Central defender Mawson admitted he had considered retiring after tearing his meniscus near the end of the 2013-14 season during a loan spell at Welling. Since then, the Brentford academy graduate starred at Barnsley in Sky Bet League One before propelling himself into an England Under-21 international during two years in the Premier League with Swansea City. The 24-year-old was even tipped as a potential outsider to make England's World Cup squad this summer until injury forced him out of the reckoning.



DAVID BROOKS
Sheffield United to AFC Bournemouth
undisclosed

Sheffield United academy graduate Brooks rose to prominence after receiving the Player of the Tournament award following England's triumph in the Under-20s Toulon Tournament last summer. Brooks, 21, carried on that form for the Blades as he produced a series of dazzling displays, most notably in a 4-2 victory at arch-rivals Sheffield Wednesday, which has led to the midfielder being capped five times for Wales' senior side so far.

BOBBY REID
Bristol City to Cardiff City
£10m

Reid enjoyed a coming-of-age season last term as he amassed 21 goals in 52 appearances in all competitions for his boyhood club Bristol City. The 25-year-old forward spent 18 years at Ashton Gate and emerged as one of the hottest talents outside of England's top division last year, with his impressive campaign being rewarded with a spot in the Sky Bet Championship Team of the Season at the EFL Awards.



DANNY WARD
Liverpool to Leicester City
£12.5m

Former Wrexham apprentice Ward has made more appearances for Wales than Liverpool since joining the Merseysiders in January 2012, even featuring in the European Championships in 2016 in a 2-1 win against Slovakia. The 25-year-old keeper has impressed during loan spells at Morecambe, Aberdeen and Huddersfield Town, who he helped reach the Premier League by saving two penalties in a shootout victory in the 2016-17 Championship Play-Off final against Reading.



JOE BRYAN
Bristol City to Fulham
£6m

Left-back Bryan received plaudits for his work off the pitch last season as he was named PFA Player in the Community at the EFL Awards, while also catching the eye with his playing performances after 48 outings in total to help Bristol City reach the Carabao Cup semi-final stage. During the cup run, the 25-year-old Robins academy product showed off his capabilities against Premier League opposition by scoring in victories over Crystal Palace and Manchester United.



OTHER NOTABLE MOVERS

DAN BURN
Wigan Athletic to Brighton & Hove Albion
undisclosed

DUANE HOLMES
Scunthorpe United to Derby County
undisclosed

JACK MARRIOTT
Peterborough United to Derby County
undisclosed

CANICE CARROLL
Oxford United to Brentford
undisclosed

ELLIS HARRISON
Bristol Rovers to Ipswich Town
undisclosed

CALLUM STYLES
Bury to Barnsley
undisclosed

TSUN DAI
Bury to Oxford United
undisclosed

EZRI KONSA
Charlton Athletic to Brentford
undisclosed

BEN WILMOT
Stevenage to Watford
undisclosed

BIG MONEY

With the transfer market continuing to escalate at a rapid rate, fees for ex-apprentices have totalled in excess of £100million this summer. Touchline runs through a selection of the biggest deals.

MOVERS

Miles Welch-Hayes



MILES WELCH-HAYES' FOOTBALL CAREER SO FAR HAS BEEN A TALE OF OVERCOMING OBSTACLES.



At 16, he was deemed too small to merit a two-year scholarship as an Academy footballer before eventually earning a professional contract and making his Sky Bet League One debut three years later.

Now standing 6ft tall, the former Oxford United apprentice is back in the EFL with Macclesfield Town having dropped out of full-time football last season.

"It depends how you react when you have a setback, but for me it gave me extra motivation," he told LFE. "When things don't go your way, that's the time to work even harder. You've got to set your target and then out-work everyone else that's currently where you want to be.

"Football is a crazy game and you've just got to keep working hard and keep knocking on the door for a chance and if you've prepared correctly you'll be rewarded."

Welch-Hayes' first stumbling block came in 2013 when he was enrolled onto Oxford's one-year YDS programme instead of becoming an apprentice, but showed early signs of his determined attitude as he went on to flourish in the U's youth set-up.

He said: "The club thought I wasn't physically ready, which was very frustrating and hard to take as the rest of my friends had been signed. But it actually ended up helping me in the long run because they put me on a gym programme that set me up for my apprenticeship.

"There was a big focus on maintaining discipline. There were times when you would actually be forced to miss training sessions if your work wasn't up to scratch, so that really enforced how important it was to keep up with your education.

"We also had to do jobs around the club, like cleaning boots, cleaning the corridors and changing rooms and stuff like that. It keeps you grounded and earns you respect from your actions as a person, not just as a player."

After temporary spells at Banbury United and North Leigh as an apprentice, Welch-Hayes worked his way into Michael Appleton's first-team selection at the Kassam Stadium, playing the full 90 minutes of a 2-0 defeat to Fleetwood Town in August 2016.

"It felt like all my hard work to get a scholarship and then earn a pro contract had all paid off," he added. "Watching the games and being around the players and coaches means you learn a lot more about the game and your own game, so it's a lot to take in at first but it's all positive."

But that proved to be the defender's only senior appearance for the Yellows and he was released at the end of the 2016-17 campaign, eventually moving on to Bath City in the Conference South.

"I was gutted but it never crossed my mind that I would ever give up," said Welch-Hayes. "Obviously it was a big change going from full-time to part-time training, but I just made sure I did a lot of work on my own whenever I had the time to keep myself sharp and ready to perform.

"I played with Chey Dunkley at Oxford and he's been a big influence for me because he's been through that process of being released and dropping down. It's really important to be open to advice from people who have gone through the same situation.

"He's spoken to me if I've ever been struggling and kept me on track by just saying keep your head down, keep grafting and you'll get back up the leagues. I looked at his journey and it inspired me that it's definitely achievable, so that really helped me keep my focus and carry on giving it my best."

Having lost his professional footballer status, Welch-Hayes raised his commitment to the game even further in a bid to revive his career with countless hours of individual training.

He continued: "Moving down to non-league, you're not training every day and it's not your full-time job anymore, so you've got to be committed to do the work on your own whenever possible if you want to keep progressing.

"It's hard work but you can't get too disheartened. I tried to maintain that mindset of being a professional by putting in the hours and doing all the right things off the pitch and in the end it has paid off."

Despite his best efforts, the 21-year-old struggled to establish himself at Bath initially, although his endeavours eventually paid dividends.

"We lost our first three games, so the manager changed the team and I wasn't in it and they went on a run of 10 or 12 games unbeaten after that," he said. "That was very hard because I'd gone from being in full-time football to getting released to not even playing in non-league.

"It was very mentally challenging because I had put in so much extra work whenever I could over pre-season and then ended up not playing for a couple of months.

"But a few changes happened and I went out on loan to Oxford City in the same division and that really turned things around for me. I had a good game in the

FA Cup where we beat Colchester United and then Bath called me back when a new manager came in. I ended up having a great run and was named in the Conference South Team of the Season.

"It was a really good lesson for me to grab my chance and not let go of my place because I knew what it was like to be out of the team and couldn't let that happen again."

And after sealing a summer switch to Sky Bet League Two newcomers Macclesfield, Welch-Hayes has gone from sitting on the bench in England's seventh tier to playing at the London Stadium in the Carabao Cup Third Round against West Ham United in less than 12 months.

YOU'VE GOT TO BE PREPARED TO MOTIVATE YOURSELF. YOU'RE THE ONLY PERSON WHO CAN GET YOURSELF OUT THERE AND PUT THOSE EXTRA YARDS IN.

"It just makes all the little things worth it," he said.

"You've got to be prepared to motivate yourself. Without a full-time coach picking you up or calling you out, you're the only person who can get yourself out there and put those extra yards in.

"The most invaluable experience from playing in non-league for me was that every time you're on the pitch is an opportunity to impress and you have to show your best, otherwise you're just wasting chances to improve your situation.

"It makes you a more consistent player and gets you into good habits. This definitely helped me to hit the ground running at Macclesfield and I felt like I was up to speed straight away.

"Now I see every game as another opportunity, like when I was playing in non-league. It's important to not get comfortable and keep pushing on and try to get to as high a level as possible."

RETURNING TO THE



Welch-Hayes is not the only former apprentice to earn a move back into the EFL this summer, with another 18 players working their way back up the divisions having dropped into non-league...

Steve Arnold
Norwich City apprentice (2005-07)
Barrow AFC to
SHREWSBURY TOWN



Reise Allassani
Crystal Palace apprentice (2012-14)
Dulwich Hamlet to
COVENTRY CITY

Andy Dales
Derby County apprentice (2011-13)
Mickleover Sports to
SCUNTHORPE UNITED
via the V9 Academy



Luke Simpson
Oldham Athletic apprentice (2011-13)
York City to
MACCLESFIELD TOWN

James Ball
Bolton Wanderers apprentice (2012-14)
Stockport County to
STEVENAGE



Manny Oyeleke
Brentford apprentice (2010-12)
Aldershot Town to
PORT VALE



Luther Wildin
Notts County apprentice (2014-16)
Nuneaton Town to
STEVENAGE

Jake Caprice
Crystal Palace apprentice (2009-11)
Leyton Orient to
TRANMERE ROVERS



Callum McFadzean
Sheffield United apprentice (2010-12)
Guiseley AFC to
BURY

Reece Grego-Cox
QPR apprentice (2013-15)
Woking to
CRAWLEY TOWN

Brendon Daniels
Crewe Alexandra apprentice (2010-12)
Alfreton Town to
PORT VALE



Fejiri Okenabirhie
Stevenage apprentice (2012-14)
Dagenham & Redbridge to
SHREWSBURY TOWN

Rhys Oates
Barnsley apprentice (2011-13)
Hartlepool United to
MORECAMBE



Morgan Ferrier
Watford apprentice (2011-13)
Boreham Wood to
WALSALL



Mitch Pinnock
Southend United apprentice (2011-13)
Dover to
AFC WIMBLEDON

Jason Oswell
Crewe Alexandra (2009-11)
Stockport County to
MORECAMBE



Louis John
Crawley Town apprentice (2011-13)
Sutton United to
CAMBRIDGE UNITED

James Montgomery
Middlesbrough apprentice (2011-13)
Gateshead to
FOREST GREEN ROVERS

Fourteen EFL academy teams stepped up their preparations for the new 2018-19 season with a pre-season trip organised by LFE and funded by Erasmus+.

Eight clubs tested themselves in the Netherlands, while six sides jetted off to Spain for a two-week tour that promoted development and facilitated the exchange of ideas between coaches and players.



Mark Kelly
PORTSMOUTH
ACADEMY MANAGER

We learned a lot about the players individually and as a group and on the football side we certainly saw enough to tell us what we need to be looking at back here.

The games gave us a different challenge and the boys really enjoyed it because we play similar to the Dutch teams. We like the lads to be comfortable with the ball and use the ball properly, so from that point of view it was nice to have that challenge placed back on us. We don't always face that week in and week out over here as a lot of teams like to play a bit longer and with a bit more physicality. That's the great thing about youth development, you're learning - they learned from us and we learned from them.

As a footballer and an international footballer, you'll come up against all sorts so if you do get to that level of competition, you're going to have to learn to play against lots of different styles, so it's not enough to just play in your own country.

PRE-SEASON AT-A-GLANCE

Netherlands 2018



Chris Brown
ROCHDALE
LEAD PDP COACH

The trip was superb for everybody - staff and players. The whole set-up, the games we played, the hotel we stayed at, the training venue, what the lads did - I couldn't speak highly enough of the trip.

The facilities for the lads were superb. The swimming pool, gym, meeting room, the training venue which was just across the road, were really, really good.

It was interesting to see how the lads operate on a day-to-day basis, to see who does what and how they look after themselves. At the start of the week I think the lads felt it was more of a relaxed training camp - and they soon found out that it wasn't! We were there to do some hard work on the grass.

The first couple of days opened their eyes to what we were there for, then after that we got some good training sessions in and the lads started to gel together, which will help us throughout the season.

The matches were good for us. The first game - Feyenoord were an unbelievable team. We played okay, but I think the lads were shocked at how good the opposition were. Progressively, from the first game to where we ended up, was quite good.



Results

 **BIRMINGHAM CITY**
1-7 L FEYENOORD U19
1-4 L KAA GENT U18
1-0 W NAC BREDA U19

 **CREWE ALEXANDRA**
2-2 D VITESSE U17
4-2 W ARMINIA BIELEFELD
5TH SP LOCHEM U19
TOURNAMENT

 **GRIMSBY TOWN**
7-0 W FC DORDRECHT U17
0-0 D VITESSE U17
2ND VOLENDAM 'ZILVEREN
BOTTER' TOURNAMENT

 **LEEDS UNITED**
1-1 D VITESSE U19
0-2 L AZ ALKMAAR U19
3RD SP LOCHEM U19
TOURNAMENT

 **NEWPORT COUNTY**
4-2 W KV MECHELEN
6-1 W FC DORDRECHT U17
7TH SP LOCHEM U19
TOURNAMENT

 **PORTSMOUTH**
3-0 W FC DORDRECHT U19
1-3 L VITESSE U19
1ST VOLENDAM 'ZILVEREN
BOTTER' TOURNAMENT

 **ROCHDALE**
0-3 L FEYENOORD U17
5-0 W KAA GENT U16
1-1 D NAC BREDA U17

 **SHEFFIELD UNITED**
3-1 W ARMINIA BIELEFELD
2-1 W FC DORDRECHT U19
1ST SP LOCHEM U19
TOURNAMENT



Netherlands 2018



Tate Campbell
BIRMINGHAM CITY U18S

It was great to visit the War museum in Overloon. One part that particularly stood out was the section where a Dutch person after World War 2 had built up a huge collection of equipment and machinery from all the fields and battle scenes and put it into the museum. It's cool to see but it's also heart-breaking to see how this equipment caused the deaths of many and damaged people's lives. It's important to get a better understanding of history. We've got video games now that promote shooting and re-create these sort of wars and even though they're fun to play, there's a deeper meaning which we need to be aware of and avoid in the future.



Jordan Amissah
SHEFFIELD UNITED U18S

The Dutch coaching sessions were really good. They were special for me because with Sheffield United I'm just with the goalkeeper training, but the Dutch bring everyone together, so for me it was good to be with the players, to be more technical and play a bit in small-sided games, instead of just being in the goal.



Harrison Neal
SHEFFIELD UNITED U18S

Training with Dutch coaches was quite similar to back in England, except they focus more on technical ability, one/two-touch passing and your ability to receive the ball in tight areas. We had a presentation discussing Dutch youth development and it looks like they have a well-structured plan to progress players into the first-team at younger ages. In Holland at young age groups, they focus on technical ability and skills and they play in a variety of positions across the pitch, whereas in England you're in a team and you're given a position very early on.





PRE-SEASON AT-A-GLANCE

Spain 2018



Finn Brennan
MILTON KEYNES DONS U18S

The Spanish teams control the tempo of the game with how they pass and where they use the ball, which is something we're not really used to. We're used to a pass breaking the lines and high tempo but they were able to switch it very quickly and kept playing out from the back even though we put them under severe pressure. We're trying to incorporate a Spanish style of play into our game mixed with an English style, so to see it at its best is really good for us.



Fran Pérez
SPANISH FA COACH AND
DELHI DYNAMOS YOUTH MANAGER

English players are stronger, English football looks for more space to run and they like to play with the wind. Spanish players enjoy to play with the ball, which is a big difference. In England, if they don't have the ball maybe they don't suffer, but in Spain they suffer a lot - they need to have control of the match, they need the ball all the time.

Our training is according to structure and related to the positional game. We are used to working in smaller groups, we separate the groups, so the English coaches were with one group and the Spanish coaches were with the other one and then we rotated. I was very surprised by the players because they would ask 'coach why are we doing this, why are we doing that', they want an explanation to understand how we are really working here in Spain, so from my side it is perfect.

With my experience in the United States, Qatar and India, I realise the key is how players understand the game and this is why I try to provide them the tools to be better players and then be ready for the challenge. I consider football is from your heart and it is up to the player to decide to be a professional or not, so this is what I really want to share with them as well as the specific knowledge and specific duties and responsibilities of each position.



Luca Connell
BOLTON WANDERERS U18S

The coaching that we had was excellent. It's similar to what we do back at Bolton but it's more passing-based and you could tell that in the games we played, with their one and two-touch passing. Being taught that over the few days of training has helped me in my game, with my body-positioning and checking over the shoulder. Even though it was only a couple of sessions, it's made an impact on my game.



Results

 **BOLTON WANDERERS**
0-0 D CD TIRO PICHON
1-0 W MÁLAGA CF

 **BURY**
0-0 D CD SAN FELIX
4-2 W ANTEQUERA CF
4-0 W MARBELLA FC

 **MILLWALL**
1-0 W AD ALCORCON
1-0 W CD LEGANÉS
0-6 L REAL MADRID U17

 **MILTON KEYNES DONS**
2-1 W RAYO MAJADAHONDA
0-2 L RAYO VALLECANO
0-5 L ATLÉTICO MADRID

 **MORECAMBE**
3-1 W UD TOMARES
2-0 W JEREZ DEPORTIVO
1-1 D REAL BETIS

 **NORWICH CITY**
0-2 L SEVILLA FC
1-1 W CADIZ
2-0 D AD NERVION





Joe Adams
BURY U18S

The tempo of the sessions are a lot higher, most of the sessions are two-touch and they're all based on game situations instead of in England where pre-season training usually involves a lot of running. They don't believe in that, they believe in football fitness.

In the first session, one of the coaches could speak English, so he was able to translate, but a few of the later sessions were just with a Spanish-speaking coach. We had a few language lessons, so in those lessons we asked about what some of the things he'd been saying meant. We've tried to use the language where we can, so me and a few of the lads went to ask the hotel reception for something and she couldn't speak very good English, but we managed to get across what we wanted to say by using some of the Spanish we'd learned. We nipped to the shop as well and managed to speak to the people behind the counter there. They found it funny but we just gave it a go.

It's been good for team bonding because we can get everyone together and have a bit of a laugh with the coaches in a social situation, not just professional.



Chris Perry
MILLWALL PDP COACH

We're trying to integrate a system that we've not really played much before and it was good that the teams in Spain gave us different problems to what we've had from English teams.

Once we see those problems, we can then identify them and work on how we're going to address that, which will stand us in good stead as the season goes on.



Stewart Drummond
MORECAMBE
ACADEMY MANAGER

Taking the youth team, which included three of our Under-16s, out to Seville was a great experience for all involved. To experience the different culture, coaching and playing styles in Spain should be of great benefit to the lads individually and as a squad going into this season.

It was pleasing to see how quickly the boys adapted to the temperatures over there and the type of opposition we were playing against and took on board the coaches' instructions to come away from the trip with some excellent performances against top level opposition.

To be able to play at Real Betis' training ground against their youth team and perform the way they did should fill them with confidence. The boys' attitude and behaviour throughout the trip made it an excellent experience to be a part of, so all credit to the boys.





NORWICH CITY COMMUNITY WORK

with Puebla CF U12s

Six Norwich City apprentices used some of their free time in Spain to show support to the local Seville community by putting on a morning coaching session for Puebla CF Under-12s.

The Canaries have started a leadership programme within the Under-18s squad, with Atli Barkarson, Aaron Ekumah, Louis Lomas, Denzelle Olopade, Matt Richardson and Isak Thorvaldsson all stepping up to set an example to the rest of the squad.

Second-year apprentice Lomas told LFE: "The club have put together a group of leaders to organise the whole team, to set positive standards and to put more responsibility on the players and make us work together and bring us closer as a group.

"It's been a challenge for us but we've all dealt with it well. It's taken us out of our comfort zone and it's important for us to put ourselves in these roles because it drives the rest of the team on to succeed.

"I hadn't experienced being in a foreign country with the rest of the boys while having the responsibility of knowing I had to step up and take charge, so it was a positive experience. Two weeks is a long time to be together and you have to keep the standards up throughout.

"Taking leadership off the pitch still requires the same qualities as on it, in terms of being a good communicator, having confidence in yourself and your team-mates, setting an example in the way you behave and making sure your preparation is right.

"That's just as important because if you do things right off the pitch, you're constantly developing those skills that transfer onto the pitch."

While the rest of the squad prepped for their final tour fixture against AD Nervion the following day, the six youngsters delivered various training drills and taught some football-related English words and phrases, before finishing the visit by presenting a Norwich kit to each young Puebla player.

Lomas said: "It was a really productive morning. We had a lot of fun and the kids seemed to get a lot out of it and really enjoyed it - it was great to see them with smiles on their faces all through the day.

"All of us boys worked together to try to improve the skills of the kids and give them a taste of the English language. We're not used to coaching and especially in a different country and dealing with the language barrier, so it was a great opportunity for us to push ourselves and represent the club in a positive manner.

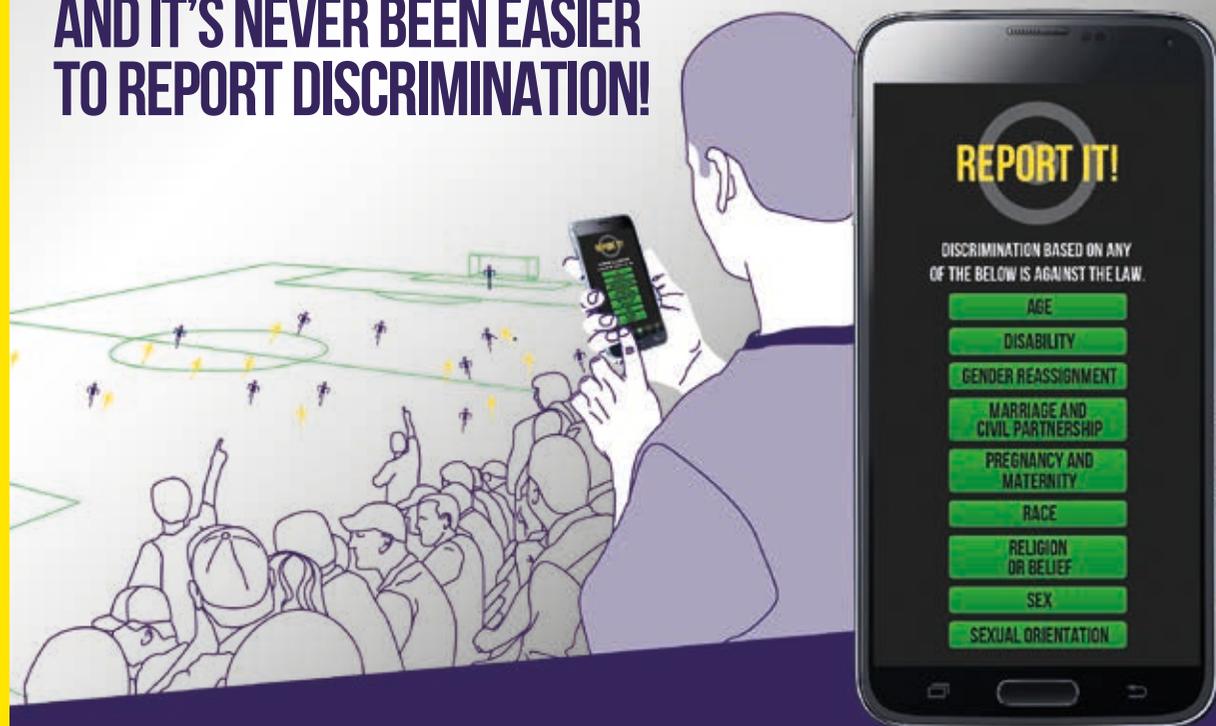
"Being a role model on and off the pitch is really important for any player because you need to set your standards high and remain disciplined at all times because it's a competitive environment, so for us to be developing ourselves in this way at this stage is great preparation for moving up the age groups.

"I think it's given me more confidence in myself and my ability to communicate and mix with the rest of the group, so it's definitely been very rewarding."



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Accrington Stanley Real Betis

PARTNERSHIP



As a result of LFE's Erasmus+ Coaches Trip to Spain last November, Academy staff at Accrington Stanley and Real Betis have established a partnership to exchange ideas and provide new and unique opportunities for players and coaches.

Stanley's Head of Coaching Duncan Fearnhead spent five days learning about the Spanish model with staff from a variety of top La Liga clubs, attended numerous training sessions and team meetings and watched Champions League Youth and Senior fixtures between Sevilla and Liverpool, alongside three other EFL youth team coaches.

He told LFE: "It was a brilliant trip. I think it's vital that anyone that wants to improve themselves and improve their Academy has got to look for these opportunities."

"We spent some time with the Andalusian FA, Malaga, Granada, Sevilla and Real Betis and it was while I was out there with Real Betis that I spoke with Alberto Martín, the Head of Methodology. We looked around their facilities and watched them train."

"When I got back to Accrington, Alberto got back in touch and said he'd be interested in seeing what we're like at Accrington, so we discussed whether it would be viable to create some kind of collaboration, with the two clubs becoming partners."

After months of conversing, the first step of the affiliation took place at Accrington & Rossendale College as players from the Under-7 to Under-15 age groups took part in a five-day camp, with football drills led by Betis youth staff and supported by senior coaching staff from the Stanley Academy.

"We've had over 60 kids training with us and that's gone really well," Fearnhead said. "With it being a different voice and the coaches being from a different country, it's interesting for the players."

"The coaches worked on different things. One focused on coordination activities and some technical work, one worked on positional games and another specialised in match situations and the players have had the opportunity to work around the different sections, so it's worked really well."

"In the future, we've talked about players maybe coming here on loan or players who aren't contracted at Betis being able to come over and trial with our youth team, as well as coach internships."

"We're looking at maybe sending some of our coaches out there, their coaches coming here and learning from each other. Hopefully we can take it further and continue growing the partnership."

Even prior to the link with Betis, Stanley have organised numerous trips in recent years in a bid to develop playing and personal skills by exposing their young footballers to new ideas and cultures.

"We've tried over the last few years to take teams abroad," said Fearnhead. "We've been out to Paris, we've had a team out in a tournament in Las Vegas, we've been to Madrid twice and the youth team went to Holland last year through LFE's pre-season trip."



"We've got another group lined up to go to Madrid again in October and then, having talked to Alberto, we're looking at maybe taking some groups out to Betis at some point in the next season or two."

"The culture is important and the wider learning that the players can get from things like this is really important. The players have started greeting the coaches in Spanish. It's simple things at the minute but hopefully we can help players develop a curiosity for learning and try to develop themselves in other ways as well."

"All the boys here want to be footballers, we want them to be footballers, but it's unrealistic to think that every player in our system will go through and all make it as professionals. We need to educate them in as many areas as we can and help them develop confidence and a positive mindset which can help them in other areas. Languages would be one of them and it's a great opportunity for them."

"Learning in anything is essential, they've got to have desire, they've got to want to better themselves and it might spark something in them and help them realise they've got a passion for something else if football doesn't work out."

Experienced Betis coach Martín also spoke highly of the experience and echoed Fearnhead's desire to formulate a long-standing link between the two clubs.

"The most important thing I can learn here is the opportunity to share knowledge with the coaches," the Spaniard told LFE. "I can get different ideas about the English understanding of football, which we can then apply back at Real Betis."

"The sessions on organisation and structure are very interesting for us and it is also good for Accrington because we can show our methodology, so they can learn too."

"In Spain, the players are a little bit different because I teach control and pass, whereas the first step here is to dribble the ball, so the skills that they learn are a bit different. The aim of our drills was to create different techniques for keeping the ball, with positional games."

"We want to continue this plan because it's very interesting for both clubs to interchange knowledge and to provide new opportunities for players and coaches with internships going both ways."

"We must also remember that not everyone becomes a professional player and it is important for them to develop personal skills, like learning other languages. During this visit, I have tried to teach some Spanish words and phrases to the children and the coaches and I have been working on our English."

The next LFE Coaches Trip - fully subsidised by the Erasmus+ fund - will take place in February 2019.



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Blackburn Rovers & If U Care Share



Blackburn Rovers highlighted their commitment to raising the profile of emotional well-being within the club by organising a Mental Health Awareness Week for Academy players, parents and staff.

In conjunction with LFE's Life Skills programme, Rovers welcomed If U Care Share to the Brockhall Academy Training Ground to deliver their workshop, led by Matthew Smith, to players and parents from the Under-12 to Under-16 age groups.

"Over the last 18 months it's been pretty evident the amount of footballers that have come out and talked about suffering at some point with mental health problems," Blackburn's Head of Education Neil Chadwick told LFE.

"We felt it was important as an Academy that we address these issues, not just with players but also with parents and staff as well because we know it's a pressured environment, so we felt we had to do something to raise the awareness of what you might feel. You will feel rubbish sometimes and it's about raising the awareness of talking about things."

A key message for the youngsters throughout the week was that physical and mental training go hand-in-hand during a player's development through the ranks.

Chadwick added: "There are stigmas placed with mental health and there are expectations of what people think it's about and we're trying to normalise that really."

"We're trying to make sure that physical health and mental health are seen on an even keel in terms of how you would address and deal with it. We're a big believer that if you're happy and you're enjoying yourself and you've got a smile on your face, it will have more of an impact on your performance."

If U Care Share have visited LFE Apprentices across the country since 2010 to promote their mental health and well-being seminar.

Founder and Project Coordinator Smith said: "No matter what age, at some point in their lives, these lads are going to face rejection and possibly what they might perceive as failure. It might be at 15 or 16, it might be at 18, it could be when they retire. The more we can do around when that actually comes round and how to deal with and how to react to it, the better."

"I've seen a culture change and it comes from LFE and them acknowledging that this is something that has to be spoken about at all ages. I've seen from the first season when clubs were still of the opinion that this is separate to football."

"But I think what Blackburn are doing and what Neil's trying to do this week is evidence that we are changing. You can see football actually trying to grab a hold of this and acknowledge that we have the ability within football to help so many people and share a really important message."

"Working with the Under-18s is fantastic because they're at a very tough point of the process, but if we can start this education at a younger age then by the time I see a lad when he's 18, I might have already seen him two or three times and hopefully by then it's just a normal conversation."

"These young lads, they're the future professional footballers, they're the future dads, the future uncles and the future coaches, so we might not see the change in our generation, but actually the next generation are going to come through educating and understanding what mental health is."



The EFL have chosen Mind as their Official Charity Partner, with the aim of using the network of 72 clubs and community trusts to help ensure that no one tackles a mental health problem alone.

AUSTIN MITCH

From toiling in non-league to thriving in Australia's top tier, with a detour into the world of E-Sports for good measure. Mitch Austin has certainly forged a unique career path since completing his apprenticeship at Rotherham United in 2010.

The pacey winger had moved Down Under with his family at the age of eight, but returned in 2008 after attracting the attention of the Millers while on a tour of the UK with Sydney club Manly United.

"I came back over on my own once I had finished my Year 10 school studies," he told LFE. "It was really tough being away from home and starting a new life away from Australia, but I was lucky that I had my mother's side of the family in the UK, so I was able to visit them a lot, which made the transition a lot easier.

"It was a really enjoyable time as it was the first time I had been able to train and play full-time football, so I really improved and developed as a player. I felt I matured a lot from my apprenticeship - being on my own and having to look after myself really made me grow up quick."

Despite a promising couple of years, Austin was not offered a professional deal and instead made use of LFE's Player Placement programme to spend three months in Sweden's sixth tier with Unik FK.

Austin said: "There was a lot more on the line for me as I'd moved all the way across the world to try and secure a pro contract, so it was pretty tough to take.

"Sweden was one of the best experiences I've had, I went with three other English guys from different EFL clubs and we all had a blast.

"The Swedish people at the club looked after us extremely well and I still speak to a lot of the guys there now! On top of that, we won the league and the club got promoted while I was there."

Upon his return to the UK, Austin moved to Conference North outfit Stalybridge Celtic, where he stayed for three years before stepping up a division with Cambridge United.

"It was a lot more physical than what I was used to," he added. "The managers are obviously more worried about getting three points than trying to develop young players, so you have to learn quickly otherwise you will get left behind."

"Moving to Cambridge gave me a lot of confidence and I was lucky that we got promoted to League Two in my first season there, so to be back in the EFL was a great feeling."

However, Austin only made one appearance in the fourth tier and ended up on loan at Lincoln City, Brackley Town and Southport in his second season with the U's before pulling the plug on his career in England in favour of a return to Australia.

He continued: "I felt that if I wasn't playing I was wasting my time, which was why I always wanted to go somewhere so I could play to develop. But going out on multiple loans was very tough, you never know where you are going to be and you can never get comfortable somewhere.

"I made a highlights video from my time in the UK and an agent contacted me saying he had sent it around a few A-League clubs and that Central Coast Mariners were quite keen.

"I'd come to a crossroads where I felt I just didn't suit the lower leagues in England and I needed to try something different to save my career as I had just turned 24. I ended up just booking a flight home, met the coach and he signed me from there."

Despite a significant jump in notoriety due to the level of media coverage, Austin adapted seamlessly to his new environment, scoring five goals in 23 appearances in his maiden season in Oz.

Melbourne Victory, where he was able to instantly test himself against elite opposition in pre-season encounters with Juventus and Atlético Madrid.

He said: "It was a great feeling to sign for them. Most of my career had involved handling rejection and clubs letting me go, so to join a club like that made not giving up all the sweeter.

"I got man of the match in the Juventus game playing against the likes of Paulo Dybala, Alex Sandro, Mario Lemina and Hernanes, so it was a huge confidence booster to know I could cut it at the top with players of that pedigree."

Having won both friendlies, Victory narrowly fell short of claiming the A-League title and qualified for the Oceania Champions League before Austin's momentum was cruelly halted by an ACL tear in training, which led to a move into gaming.

"Mentally, it was very hard," Austin added. "The best thing I did was switch off from football and put some time into other things in my life that I would not normally get the chance to do.

"I think it's really important to keep your mind occupied on other things and not just football. I play a lot of FIFA and I had seen a few of my mates start live streaming, so I thought I'd give it a try. It's a lot of fun and you can interact with people in a cool new way."

I REFUSED TO GIVE UP AND I'M HAPPY WITH HOW EVERYTHING IS GOING SO FAR AND WHAT IS TO COME IN THE FUTURE.

"The standard is very good," he said. "The stadiums and pitches are top class, it's a technical league and all the teams like to play football on the ground.

"The league is broadcasted to over 50 countries around the world, so you never know who is watching and there's a lot of interest. It was a bit of a change from not doing much media stuff in England to suddenly being on a global platform, but it's great how much media attention the league gets."

While Austin's journey to the A-League was a tale of persistence and resilience, Mariners team-mate Luis Garcia was winding down a career that included 38 appearances at Barcelona, 20 caps for Spain and a Champions League winners medal with Liverpool.

"It was a great experience playing alongside him," said Austin. "You could ask him anything and he would give you advice.

"I remember his debut, he came on for the last 30 minutes and we were losing 1-0. I made a run in behind the defence not expecting to get the ball but he played a through ball which was unbelievable and we scored. Although he wasn't as quick, his passing was still world class."

The left-footed forward's string of impressive performances attracted the attention of one of the country's top teams,

The 27-year-old's budding hobby as a Twitch streamer then led to him competing against professional FIFA players in the inaugural E-League, enabling him to still represent Melbourne while being sidelined from the pitch.

He said: "It was a great experience and it meant that I still felt like I was doing something for the club despite being injured, which was great for the mind.

"In the final series I picked up a big 5-2 win to go into the quarter finals. I lost 3-2 in extra time to the overall winner, so that was something to be proud about. It's definitely something I will continue to do!"

Having already lived the dream of many kids around the world as a professional footballer and FIFA player, a fresh start at Newcastle Jets is the latest milestone in Austin's eventful journey - a far cry from being deemed not good enough by Rotherham eight years ago.

"There have been ups and downs, but I wouldn't change any of it," he said. "I refused to give up and I'm happy with how everything is going so far and what is to come in the future.

"My experience is proof that if you don't get offered a pro contract, you can still make a career in the game and the lifestyle and football here in Australia is a great combination. I made my A-League debut at 24, so don't give up."



Dan Bent

Dan Bent has enjoyed a significant upturn in fortunes since undertaking a soccer scholarship in the USA. In 2015, he was released by Gillingham at the end of his apprenticeship, yet has now been voted in the top 100 prospects for the new college soccer season.

The 22-year-old was listed as the 84th best college player in the country and second in the Horizon League conference by Top Drawer Soccer as a result of three stellar years in the States.

"It is a great achievement and one that shows the hard work I have put in over the years," Bent told LFE. "It feels great to be recognised for my achievements on the pitch, but hopefully I can carry this into this season and have another great year."

He certainly got off to a flying start as a senior, netting the winner in a 3-2 victory over UNC Asheville in the 2018-19 season opener.

It's been an unlikely rise for the powerful defender, who was playing in the Kent League for Corinthian FC and preparing for a career in coaching until he became an apprentice with the Gills at the age of 17, having spent a year in sixth form.

He said: "At a young age I trained with a coaching company called Pro Soccer Academy. I started off just staying behind helping pick up the gear, then I would get there earlier to help set up the session."

"As I got older I got more involved and got to see what coaching was really like from behind the scenes, which made me realise that it was something I loved to do."

Bent continued coaching alongside his playing and academic commitments at Gillingham, which he believes helped his development as a footballer and on a personal level.

"I was a pretty shy kid growing up but coaching allowed me to get out of my comfort zone," he said. "It certainly helped with my people skills and communication skills on and off the pitch."



"Coaching helped me grow in confidence and mature at a young age. Being a part of different drills and running them myself opened a completely new perspective of football that I hadn't seen. It allowed me to learn football in a different manner and that definitely improved my ability as a player."

Despite completing his apprenticeship without a professional deal, Bent had already planned his next move, with help from Pass4Soccer, as he embarked on a soccer scholarship at Reinhardt University in Georgia.

"I was always prepared for an alternative option," said Bent. "Initially, I was disappointed when I knew I wasn't going to get a contract, but having other options meant I did not dwell on it and instead I already had a new pathway to look forward to. Naturally, I had some fears, but I knew it would be a great option for me to continue my career."

"It's not much different to being an apprentice back home, except for the fact that you're a student first and a player second. The first few weeks were tiring as you try to adjust to the schedule of classes and practices, but it quickly becomes the norm."

Bent's ambition to maximise his potential led to him transferring to Wright State University after his freshman year, where he has flourished on the pitch.

He said: "My first school was small, only around 3,000 students. Moving to Wright State, with a bigger campus and over 18,000 students, was a big change. But the life of a student athlete is great. You wake up, have your classes in the morning, practice in the afternoon and relax at night."

"The standard on the pitch is very high, with players from all over the world sharing the same goal. I've played with and against players who came from Premier League clubs and players who have played at the top tier in their country."

"Just like back home, every team has its identity, whether they are a long ball style team or a possession-based team. It can depend on the school you're at but many schools over here could give teams a test back home."

The 6ft 1in centre-back has been a major success in Ohio, contributing to Wright State Raiders' first ever Horizon League regular season title and earning multiple individual accolades, including being named to the First Team All-Horizon League, Second Team Great Lakes Region Team and First Team All-Ohio Team, as well as receiving the Horizon League Defensive Player of the Year award.

And his hopes of an extended playing career have been boosted by a successful stint in the Professional Development League for South Carolina United Bantams, plus seeing three of his former Raiders team-mates get drafted by Major League Soccer clubs New York City, Seattle Sounders and Colorado Rapids, respectively.



Bent continued: "The PDL is a great way to keep yourself fit over the summer and it is where the majority of the best players from college play. Testing myself against the best is always fun as I know the benchmark of where I am at and where I need to be."

"It is great to have players before me with so much talent get drafted. I am able to see what needs to be done and learn from their mistakes. It gives me great inspiration."

"That's the great part about the US, as not only will I come away with an education having played full-time football, but also there is the opportunity to progress my career and become a professional."

Bent has not restricted his efforts to the playing aspect, becoming one of 99 Wright State student athletes to be placed on the 2018 Spring Horizon League Academic Honor Roll to celebrate achievements in the classroom.

"I wanted to try my best and really apply myself academically," said Bent. "Over the past couple of years, I think it has helped me become much more confident on and off the pitch."

"In many classes you have to speak in crowds and do presentations, so you are able to transfer that confidence into your football, whether that is speaking to the team or doing interviews. Majoring in Organizational Leadership will allow me to hopefully pursue a career in coaching."

"If I had any advice for the current apprentices, I would recommend the need to be open-minded in every situation. Be your own person and don't do something because others wouldn't."

"Be the best person you can be on and off the pitch as you never know who you might meet or bump into. Don't feel that because things did not turn out how you wanted to, that it is the end. It is just the beginning. There are so many ways to still play and enjoy the game more than ever."

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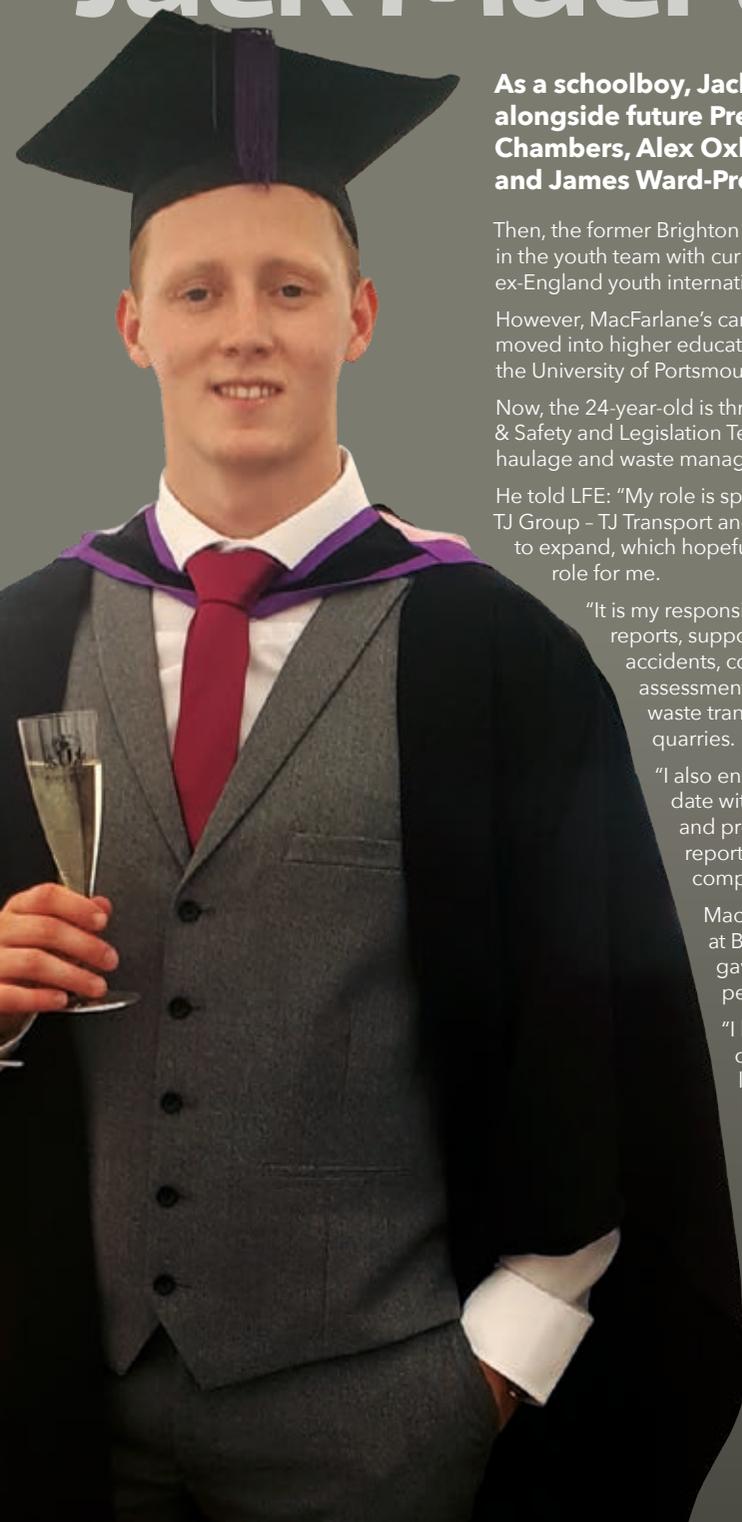
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Jack MacFarlane



As a schoolboy, Jack MacFarlane was playing alongside future Premier League stars Calum Chambers, Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain, Luke Shaw and James Ward-Prowse at Southampton.

Then, the former Brighton & Hove Albion apprentice spent two years in the youth team with current Seagulls first-teamer Solly March and ex-England youth international Jake Forster-Caskey.

However, MacFarlane's career has followed a very different path as he moved into higher education, achieving a first-class degree in Law at the University of Portsmouth.

Now, the 24-year-old is thriving in his new role of Compliance, Health & Safety and Legislation Technician at TJ Transport, who provide bulk haulage and waste management services in the Southern region.

He told LFE: "My role is split across three separate departments of the TJ Group - TJ Transport and TJ Waste - and the plan is for those areas to expand, which hopefully can lead to a supervisor or managerial role for me.

"It is my responsibility to process near misses and accident reports, support all investigations into road-traffic accidents, collisions and incidences and carry out risk assessments and site audits at all TJ office spaces, waste transfer stations, inert recycling centres and quarries.

"I also ensure the entire workforce are fully up to date with external, internal and regulatory training and produce a wide variety of management reports regarding all things related to compliance, health and safety."

MacFarlane has come a long way since his time at Brighton, but he believes the apprenticeship gave him the necessary tools to develop on a personal level and prepare for the future.

"I live in Portsmouth, so I had to move into digs at Brighton," he said. "It was a big learning curve having to live away from home and then being paid to work was a big step as well.

"Being an apprentice is a very different experience to what most 16-year-olds go through. It definitely moulds you as a person, it makes you a lot stronger and more street-wise.

"Unfortunately, after two great years it didn't end up how I wanted, but it definitely gave me the drive and desire to be a better me and I feel that's certainly carried over to the present day."

The right-back suffered an injury towards the end of his apprenticeship, which left him unable to go on trial initially after being released. Although he did eventually find a home in the Conference South, MacFarlane had set his sights on a return to education.

"You are always going to need something after football because it ends for everyone at some stage," he added. "Taking the college stuff seriously makes you consider these options more.

"Education teaches you to be focused, to be disciplined and I felt that once I'd finished my apprenticeship, there was nothing that I couldn't do. Using my Level 2 Coaching qualification, I managed to get a job doing a bit of coaching, which was fantastic, plus I was also working at Tesco as a delivery driver for a while.

"I then got a contract at Eastbourne Borough, who actually trained in the day. I'd planned to build on my qualifications at that point but could only go on evening courses, so I went to my local college and the only course that interested me was law.

"I thought that'd be a good A-level to get and I ended up really enjoying it, so with the UCAS points from that, in addition to the BTEC and NVQ that I did as an apprentice, I was able to gain a place at the University of Portsmouth to start my law degree."

In four years as a student, MacFarlane fully immersed himself in Uni life and left with top honours. He credits much of his success to his time as an apprentice.

"University has been a fantastic experience," said MacFarlane. "You make friends for life and it was another chance to live away from home and deal with the day-to-day challenges that come from that.

"My apprenticeship really prepared me for University in a way I never expected. It taught me to be independent, I was a lot more mature and it gave me life skills that made me ready for the experience of meeting new people, taking on new challenges and living away from home.

"I think apprentices need to realise that they've managed to get to a high level in football and they wouldn't have got there if they weren't intelligent. They've got focus, drive and an ability to absorb and analyse information installed in them, otherwise they would never have got to that stage in the process.

"Those sacrifices like staying in when your mates are out late, eating properly and putting in extra hours of training to build your physical fitness, that sort of attitude to work hard and master your craft are directly transferrable to the experience of University."

In addition to his degree course, MacFarlane became a member of the University's Electric Class 2 Racing Team, wrote for the General Legal Advice Clinic's blog and was a quarter-finalist in the Aspiring Solicitors Commercial Awareness competition.



He said: "The great thing about University is that there is a wider experience attached to it as well, it's not just all work. You're encouraged to go out and experience new things and you come into contact with people from all over the world.

"It's not the end of your football career either. I still play now in non-league. With the various societies as well, you might even end up picking up another sport that you've never considered before and that's what University is all about - trying new things and learning more about yourself.

"The University Electric Racing team was an example of me just pushing myself out of my comfort zone. I took part in an International Engineering competition known as Formula Student, which takes place every year.

"Universities from all over the world attend, like the University of South West Australia attended this year's event. I was surrounded by engineers and my knowledge of the subject is very limited, but it gave me an appreciation of what the other students do and my role was to develop a business presentation, which we presented to the judges."

Six years on from his days at Brighton and primed to succeed in his new profession, MacFarlane's journey is proof that the apprenticeship programme can facilitate a wide variety of alternative pathways.

He continued: "Football for me now is about enjoyment. It's good for your health, mentally and physically, it's a chance to make new friends and you get a type of banter that you don't necessarily get in the office environment.

"The ultimate aim is to become a director of the company and I've set a personal timeline for that as well. My managers and directors that are here now are fully aware of my ambitions and they know that I have high expectations of myself.

"They're very supportive and I've got a lot of training ahead of me, so there's going to be a lot of learning involved over the next few years and I'm really looking forward to it."

AARON JONES

Not many English footballers can boast a list of previous clubs from Sweden, Norway and New Zealand on their playing CV.



Aaron Jones is an exception to the norm, despite admitting he "really hadn't thought about moving abroad" after being released by Doncaster Rovers at the end of his apprenticeship in 2011.

Although he never earned a senior outing for Donny, the defender made the first-team bench as a second-year apprentice in October 2010 for a 3-2 defeat to Derby County and used that experience as motivation to sustain his playing aspirations.

He told LFE: "It was a huge deal for me. In a way, it did make it harder because I'd been so close and got to partly experience it but I think that gave me confidence and a drive to keep going and not give up."

Despite attending LFE's Assessment Trials, Jones initially struggled to commit to a new career path.

"The good thing about the trials is that they can open up doors that you've never even considered and at least make you think about different options," he said.

"I struggled with what I wanted to do for over a year after being released. I went to University and left, then qualified as a Personal Trainer and started working."

However, not content with giving up on his dream of a career in football, Jones decided to take his talent on the pitch to the other side of the globe in New Zealand with Hawke's Bay United.

He said: "I knew a lad that was already over there and he had recommended me to the coach of a Premiership side out there. I was a PT at the time and just thought I'd take the risk."

"I didn't have anything to lose - I was only signing a one-season contract, so at the very worst I knew I was going to get to experience New Zealand and then come back."

"I really enjoyed the lifestyle and I lived in a really beautiful place close to the beach. We would usually train later in the afternoon because some of the lads had work or studies in the day. I had some coaching hours in my contract, so I'd go into schools and put on sessions with a few of the other lads."

The gutsy move clearly paid off for the Chesterfield-born centre-back, who spent two years in Napier before a switch to top-flight outfit Waitakere United ahead of their Oceania Champions League campaign.

Jones said: "The Champions League over there is held after the league finishes and the two teams that qualify from New Zealand can sign a few players from other teams around the league to strengthen their squads."

"It was an unreal experience, playing in Fiji and in the Champions League, albeit not the one I had dreamt of playing in growing up! Although we performed lower than expectations, it is still right up there with being on the bench in the Championship as a career highlight."

With four points from a possible nine, the team were unable to qualify for the knockout stages as they finished third in a group consisting of clubs from Samoa, the Solomon Islands and French Polynesia.

Having experienced the pinnacle of club football on the continent, Jones decided it was time for a new challenge back in Europe, although returning home was not on the agenda.

The 25-year-old said: "My agent called and said he had a possibility in Norway with Raufoss IL. This was a Monday night and by 4am on Tuesday morning I was at the airport. They took such good care of me and made me feel so welcome - I loved it straight away."

"I NEVER THOUGHT I'D GO BACK TO HIGHER EDUCATION AFTER THE FIRST TIME BUT I ACTUALLY REALLY ENJOY STUDYING NOW BECAUSE I'VE FOUND SOMETHING OUTSIDE OF FOOTBALL THAT I AM REALLY PASSIONATE ABOUT"

A promising start was disrupted by breaking both feet within five months of his arrival in Norway, but Jones used the time on the sidelines to get to grips with his new surroundings.

"I have always wanted to learn a language, so as soon as I came I was asking the lads for different phrases and stuff," he added. "When I got injured, I started to take it a little more seriously. I even had the older lady who worked in the gym giving me different phrases to learn every day, then she'd test me the next time I went in."

"The culture shock wasn't too bad. It was summer when I arrived, so I didn't know what all the big fuss about winter was - until the snow came in October and didn't disappear until April!"

After experiencing promotion and relegation with Raufoss, the 6ft 3in defender made a brief return to England, before quickly jetting off back to Scandinavia to captain Ångelholm in Sweden.

Following a nine-month stint, Jones returned to Norway in January to sign for Asker, who are currently battling for promotion against his former side, Raufoss.

And Jones is now preparing for the future having started a Business Management and Economics degree course via the Open University, which he believes is contributing to improvements in his performance on the pitch.

He continued: "I hadn't studied at all since leaving University at 19. But over the past few years I've gained a real interest in business - I put it down to time and maturity I think."

"I never thought I'd go back to higher education after the first time but I actually really enjoy studying now

because I've found something outside of football that I am really passionate about. I still have aspirations to play as high as I can, but I also have dreams and goals away from the pitch for the first time in my life.

"In my opinion, my study has actually helped my football. It gives me something else to concentrate on, which I personally need, otherwise I can beat myself up about a bad training session or game for far too long."

"I've got a long time studying left because it is part-time, but it just makes it so much more manageable and I should have a degree before I have stopped playing, which will set me up nicely for when that time does come."

Jones' current deal runs until the end of 2019, but having enjoyed a six-year journey abroad so far, the Doncaster academy product has no plans to end his foreign adventure.

He said: "Moving abroad and playing has given me everything I want as a player. Off the pitch, I've seen some beautiful parts of the world, I've learned a new language and even met a girl. I don't know anybody that has regretted giving it a go."

"If I could give any advice it would be to keep playing at the highest level you possibly can. Don't worry if you haven't got too much of a plan because from the age of 18 to 24 so much changes, you find out so much about yourself and really mature as a person."

"I'm so happy I took the chance to go to New Zealand and prolong my playing career. It's taken me all over the world and I've done so many things that I'm proud of, while also giving me the time to find out what I want to do after my career."





Sweden Erasmus+ Player Placement

LFE continues to provide past Apprentices with the opportunity to earn a route back into full-time football through the Erasmus+ Player Placement programme, which sends players out to Sweden for three months.

Over 200 ex-apprentices have tried their luck on foreign soil since the scheme began in 2008, with over 60 gaining professional deals at the end of their initial placement period.

Of the previous cohort sent abroad, seven out of 12 players received contract offers from their clubs. Former Stevenage apprentice Zak Guerfi's impressive displays encouraged Bodens BK to offer him a two-year contract, while Ytterhogdals IK tied up deals for English trio Jake Croft (formerly Leeds United), Sam Alderson (formerly Leyton Orient) and Juma Omar (formerly MK Dons), who has now moved to Eskilstuna City.

Elsewhere, ex-Norwich City apprentice Zach Birse earned an extended stay at IFK Ostersund and Luton Town academy graduate Jack Snelus sealed a new contract with Eskilstuna, plus Allsvenskan side GIF Sundsvall expressed their desire to retain goalkeeper Scott Coughlan (formerly Cardiff City), although he chose to take up a scholarship in the USA instead.

The latest crop to head out to Sweden consists of 15 youngsters, with most

featuring in Division 2 – the country's fourth tier – at Bodens BK, Eskilstuna City, Gottne IF, IFK Ostersund and Ytterhogdals IK, while two have signed for Division 3 outfit IFK Holmsund, as well as one in the top flight with GIF Sundsvall's Under-21 squad.

LFE Life Skills Manager Simon Williams said: "The Player Placement programme asks questions of people which are beyond simply: 'Can you play football?' During the 12 weeks, players have a unique opportunity to develop their football with training and matches, as well as wider personal development through language lessons, coaching opportunities, cultural activities and community initiatives.

"It is those who have a willingness to try new things, are prepared to face unusual situations and have the motivation to find ways to seek comfort in new places, who will ultimately be successful on the programme. By success, this is personal to the individual and includes on and off-the-field achievements as one."

PLAYER	PREVIOUS CLUB	SWEDISH CLUB
ADAM NORTH	NORTHAMPTON TOWN	BODENS BK
JACK LEE	DAGENHAM & REDBRIDGE	BODENS BK
JACK CHANDLER	PORTSMOUTH	ESKILSTUNA CITY
TOM REILLY	ACCRINGTON STANLEY	ESKILSTUNA CITY
SAM NAYLOR	COVENTRY CITY	GIF SUNDSVALL
DECLAN SLATER	GRIMSBY TOWN	GOTTNE IF
JOE CAIRNS	WALSALL	GOTTNE IF
BEN CHILCOTT	OXFORD UNITED	IFK HOLMSUND
JAKE THOMAS	PORT VALE	IFK HOLMSUND
LEANDRO RIBEIRO	QPR	IFK OSTERSUND
OLIVER HARRISON	CREWE ALEXANDRA	IFK OSTERSUND
ROMEO AKINOLA	QPR	IFK OSTERSUND
ALEX MCMILLAN	GRIMSBY TOWN	YTTERHOGDALS IK
BAILEY WHALLEY	OLDHAM ATHLETIC	YTTERHOGDALS IK
MATT KEOGH	LEEDS UNITED	YTTERHOGDALS IK



JOHNSON-FIKULA

BACK IN MAY, STEVEN JOHNSON-FIKULA'S AMBITIONS OF BECOMING A PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALLER APPEARED TO BE SLIPPING AWAY HAVING BEEN RELEASED BY EFL YOUTH ALLIANCE NORTH EAST CHAMPIONS MANSFIELD TOWN.

However, the 18-year-old defender was afforded the opportunity to revive his hopes of a full-time playing career via LFE's Assessment Trials, where he caught the eye of Sky Bet League One outfit Oxford United after producing a standout display at the Midlands venue (Stafford Rangers FC).

He said: "As a young lad, when you're at the stage where it comes to contract decisions and you get told that you're not going to get one, it's certainly difficult to take in.

"It took a bit of time for me to process it, it took a bit of time for me to accept it, but with the help and support of my family around me, they helped me get through it."

Three trials events took place this year, with around 250 released players vying for a route back into the game during showcase matches in front of scouts from pro and non-league clubs, as well as Universities from the UK and abroad.

Johnson-Fikula continued: "The Assessment Trials are extremely helpful, especially for a lad who doesn't really know what to do next. It's so simple – you sign up, give your details, you get a confirmation email and from there you're good to go. You just turn up on the day, get assigned to a team and you just play your game.

"There was a side of me that wanted to go out and show that I deserve to be somewhere, but there was the other side that said don't over-complicate it, don't try things I'm not used to, because it might not work out in my favour. I had to limit myself, discipline myself and just go about my normal game.

"I told myself 'go out and enjoy it, express yourself; there's no pressure' and when I enjoy my football, it's when I perform at my best. I went out there, played my natural game and must have done well because I caught the eye of Oxford and a few others.

"I went there not knowing what to expect, but the Assessment Trials are such a good idea. Following the trials, I was signed up in around three weeks. Oxford called me the day after and asked me to come in for another trial; two weeks after that, they gave me a call back and said they were interested in offering me a deal, and a day or two after they wanted me to come in and sign."

U's Academy manager Dan Harris attended the trials in search of recruits for the club's new Under-23s squad. He told LFE: "I think anyone who's been in the game a while knows there's no one way of doing this.

"There are different pathways for different players and some lads take a bit longer to develop, some need a little knockback to come back stronger and so for us as a football club, we're putting an Under-23s team in place next year.

"We've got a manager (Karl Robinson) who will play young players. He's taken Dele Alli at MK Dons and put him in, at Charlton he put Ademola Lookman in and gave him an opportunity, so we're in a very fortunate situation that we've got a gaffer who will play young lads if they're ready and my job is to make sure that these young lads are ready to play.

"We've taken five or six lads out of our existing programme in the academy to set the culture and get things established and if we can find three or four lads that can come alongside them and hopefully add some quality to that as well then that's what we're looking for."

Johnson-Fikula fit the bill for Oxford and he is now making his mark in the new Development Squad with a view to gaining his first taste of senior football in the Checkatrade Trophy.

"It was a massive achievement for myself and a proud moment for me and my family," the tall centre-back added. "My parents sacrificed a lot, taking days off work and things like that to get me to training, to games. Earning this contract was a way of repaying them and saying thank you, letting them know that those journeys down the motorways and everything they did for me was all worth it.

"Oxford have got a really good reputation of getting youngsters through and that's one of the things that attracted me to the club. The target is to try and stay in and around the first-team, to put in the performances in the Under-23s to keep my name in the mix – but the main thing is to keep improving as a player."





ENGLAND'S WORLD CUP HEROES

Six former apprentices enjoyed a memorable summer as they featured in Gareth Southgate's England squad that went on a heroic run to the World Cup semi-finals in Russia.

Leeds United academy products **Fabian Delph** and **Danny Rose**, **John Stones** (formerly of Barnsley), **Harry Maguire** (formerly of Sheffield United), **Jordan Henderson** (formerly of Sunderland) and **Dele Alli** (formerly of Milton Keynes Dons) all featured for the Three Lions.

Manchester City defender Stones started all seven games and scored twice in England's stunning 6-1 group stage victory over Panama, while Leicester City's Maguire also appeared in every match. Maguire and Tottenham Hotspur star Alli provided the decisive touches during the 2-0 win against Sweden as they both found the net to send Southgate's side to the last four.

Elsewhere, left-back Rose earned five outings and midfielder Delph made four appearances, while, incredibly, England were never in a losing position in the 482 minutes Liverpool captain Henderson spent on the pitch.

Three Returning Lions

Three past apprentices were reintroduced to the England fold after being named in Gareth Southgate's most recent senior squad for the UEFA Nations League opener against Spain and Kick It Out international against Switzerland.

Former Charlton Athletic apprentice **Joe Gomez** missed out on a World Cup spot due to injury, but his impressive start to the season with Liverpool saw him back on the international scene, while Southampton academy graduate **Luke Shaw's** revival at Manchester United earned him a first call-up since March 2017.

Burnley defender **James Tarkowski** (formerly of Oldham Athletic) was also included and there were maiden call-ups for ex-Birmingham City apprentice **Demarai Gray** and Leicester City academy graduate **Ben Chilwell**, with the latter making his senior international debut on his home ground against the Swiss.

Here is a list of apprentices past and present to play in major international tournaments this summer:

EGYPT - WORLD CUP

SAM MORSY - WIGAN ATHLETIC (FORMERLY PORT VALE)

ENGLAND U19s - EUROPEAN CHAMPIONSHIPS

TOM BAYLISS - COVENTRY CITY

BEN BRERETON - NOTTINGHAM FOREST

NIALL ENNIS - WOLVERHAMPTON WANDERERS

GEORGE HIRST - OH LEUVEN (FORMERLY SHEFFIELD WEDNESDAY)

BEN MORRIS - IPSWICH TOWN

MAX SANDERS - BRIGHTON & HOVE ALBION

MARCUS TAVERNIER - MIDDLESBROUGH

KELLAND WATTS - NEWCASTLE UNITED

BILLY CRELLIN (TRAINING GOALKEEPER) - FLEETWOOD TOWN

ENGLAND U17s - EUROPEAN CHAMPIONSHIPS

ARVIN APPIAH - NOTTINGHAM FOREST

LUCA ASHBY-HAMMOND - FULHAM

DYLAN CROWE - IPSWICH TOWN

MARCUS DEWHURST - SHEFFIELD UNITED

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