

Touchline



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LEWIS COOK

CHAMPIONSHIP APPRENTICE OF THE YEAR

THE DEBUTANTS P6 APPRENTICE OF THE YEAR AWARDS P8 OUT OF THE ASHES P18 BRITS ABROAD P20

the 11

The latest eleven talented teenagers to make the grade in LFE's February line-up, as voted by our team of Regional Officers, were:

- Daniel Gallagher AFC Wimbledon
- Kieran Dunbar Birmingham City
- Dominic Telford Blackpool
- Tyler Lyttle Bristol Rovers
- Ademola Lookman Charlton Athletic
- Jodi Jones Dagenham & Redbridge
- Jacob Hanson Huddersfield Town
- Hayden Coulson Middlesbrough
- Spencer Brown Sheffield Wednesday
- Kyle King Walsall
- Dennon Lewis Watford

Nominations come in on four occasions throughout the season which are made by LFE's regional officers and the winners all receive a certificate, cheque for £50 and coverage on the LFE website.

TUESDAY 28 APRIL 2015
Oxford United FC

WEDNESDAY 29 APRIL 2015
Leicester City FC

THURSDAY 30 APRIL 2015
Huddersfield Town FC

LFE Ready for Club Meetings

LFE's annual club meetings are set to take place at Oxford, Leicester and Huddersfield.

The events are designed to help clubs share best practice and deliver updates on the apprenticeship in sporting excellence programme. Clubs can send up to four delegates to the days and for registration and more information please visit LFE's website.

GOAL OF THE MONTH

BY ELAINE BRAND

Goal of the Month has flourished again this term. More clubs than ever before now submit goals to be shortlisted and viewing figures remain strong.

Over 10,000 votes have already been cast this season and at the time of writing seven players had received monthly awards.

February's selection featured eight superb strikes but Derby County's **James Carvell** came out on top with 37% of the voting for his quick-footed tap in against Bolton Wanderers.

WATCH THE GOALS AND CAST YOUR VOTE

lfe.org.uk/goal-of-the-month LFETV

FA Youth Cup

In brief

While big guns Chelsea and Manchester City face off in the final, this season's FA Youth Cup threw up some great stories for clubs on LFE's programme. Several clubs reached the latter stages. Touchline takes a look at them...

BY GAVIN WILLACY



Crewe Alexandra

Crewe were the poster-boys for the Football League after reaching the quarter-finals. A 5-0 fourth round victory over Bolton was followed by a stunning 3-2 win over Arsenal at Barnet's Hive ground thanks to strikes from Liam O'Neill and Andre Brown that bookended an own goal.

Their remarkable run was ended at Manchester City. A 6-1 defeat against an Under-18 team boasting a wage bill that would be the envy of League One was harsh on the Alex youngsters.

Leicester City

Seven of the Foxes team that lost to Man City in the semi-final were LFE apprentices, having started on the programme last season when Leicester were winning the Championship. They had a hard-fought route to the last four, the highlight being a 2-0 win at Southampton, before an exciting quarter-final against Birmingham. In front of nearly 2000 fans at the King Power Stadium, a late header by England youth international Darnell Johnson clinched a 2-1 victory following Harvey Barnes' equaliser.

Birmingham City

The Blues did it the hard way winning two ties in extra-time at Blackpool and Liverpool to get to the last eight. A fantastic 3-2 win over Liverpool in the previous round was secured thanks to George O'Neill scoring a first-half equaliser and setting up Sam Deadfield to put them ahead.

The Blues conceded again but won it in extra-time with Kieran Dunbar tucking home a rebound. In the sixth round at Leicester, they were dreaming of the reaching the semis when O'Neill gave them a first half lead and they were level as the full-time whistle beckoned only to concede an 88th minute winner.

Nottingham Forest

Forest scraped past MK Dons after extra-time, won 3-0 at West Brom and beat Burnley - with a group of LFE apprentices in their side - in the last 16 before falling at the quarter-final stage to Tottenham, losing 2-1. Matty Cash had got Forest back into the game after they trailed 2-0 and their efforts did not go unappreciated by the vocal home crowd of over 4,000 at the City Ground in a real taste of the big-time for Forest's youngsters.

Coventry City

Finally a word for Coventry, whose apprentices will never forget their Youth Cup experience this season. The Sky Blues saw off an amateur club (Peterborough Northern Star), won two high-scoring thrillers (one of them in extra-time) before being well beaten at Manchester City in the fourth round. Their Youth Cup adventure had everything!



The FA Youth Cup is the most prestigious of prizes at under-18 level

Welcome to Touchline, brought to you by League Football Education



LFE was established by The Football League and The Professional Footballers Association



LFE is supported by:



Academy League Round-Up



As the season draws to a close, we analyse how the league season has panned out.

North West Alliance

At the time of writing Bury, Wigan Athletic and Rochdale were embroiled in a rat race for top spot. The Latics' 3-2 victory over the Shakers backed up by another win against Accrington Stanley has given them the upper hand and they were set to leapfrog their Lancashire rivals with a victory over Preston in their penultimate game.

North East Alliance

Bradford City became the first club to confirm their status as champions, claiming back-to-back North East Alliance titles. Chesterfield are now fighting it out with Doncaster Rovers for second place and the two teams excitingly face each other in the last game of the season.

South East & West Merit 1

The top performers from both the South East and South West Alliances combined to create a post-Christmas play-off division and it is Plymouth Argyle who are standing tallest. The Pilgrims remain unbeaten in ten games and if that record is extended to eleven, they will be crowned champions ahead of second placed Luton Town.

South East & West Merit 2

The best of the rest in the South will be determined in one week's time and it is Bristol Rovers and Leyton Orient who lead the charge as the two contenders for a gold medal. The O's will be hoping to take advantage of their one game in hand and that captain Freddy Moncur can continue his goal scoring form from midfield.

U18 Professional Development League North

Nottingham Forest have climbed to the summit of the league, storming past Huddersfield Town and midlands rivals Birmingham City. While Forest have a 10 point advantage their rivals both have two games in hand and will be determined to claw back as many points as possible.

U18 Professional Development League South

Brentford remain out in front with a total of fifty-three points but their fate may be determined by Charlton Athletic who could equal that tally by taking maximum points from their two games in hand.

U18 Premier League

With the North and South divisions combining into three groups based on positions at the midway stage, we can report that it is Middlesbrough who top group one with Craig Liddle's starlets taking nine points from four games. Group two is led by Wolverhampton Wanderers, with Sunderland and Derby County closing in from second and third respectively. Blackburn Rovers are proving to be the in-form team in Group 3 with an unbeaten run of four games heading into the final stages of the competition.

Education Support Fund

BY ELAINE BRAND



As the deadline for making a claim from the Education Support Fund looms nearer, LFE chief executive Alan Sykes has warned clubs to 'not leave things to the last minute'.

Claim forms and supporting documentation must be received at LFE before 31 May for an award to be made.

To date just thirty-five per cent of the fund has been drawn down by clubs and Sykes is eager to ensure the clubs do not dwell over applications.

"I would urge clubs to make claims as soon as possible and not leave things until the last minute," said Sykes. "Clubs run the risk of being unable to maximise their claim or missing out altogether otherwise."

Any queries should be directed to Alan Sykes on 0870 458 9250 or email: asykes@lfe.org.uk

Pass4Soccer

Pass4Soccer the organisation LFE has been working exclusively with to open up the opportunity for players to pursue soccer scholarships in America is hosting a trial game in May.

The event which will take place on Friday 8 May at Sutton Coldfield Town FC, is open to players who have come through LFE's apprenticeship programme and will be attended by scores of US University soccer coaches keen to recruit players for their squads for next season.

For more information about the opportunity and to register please call Pass4Soccer on 0191 229 5263 or visit www.pass4soccer.com

Assessment Trials 2015

LFE's annual Assessment Trials offers players the chance to showcase their talents in front of an army of scouts from professional clubs, non-league and from Universities in the UK and abroad.

The events which are open to those who are coming towards the end of their apprenticeship or the end of a first professional contract (Under 19 year), aim to help players find a route back into the game at an appropriate level.

FOR MORE INFORMATION VISIT

www.lfe.org.uk/trials2015



THURSDAY 30 APRIL 2015

Bradford City Football Club, Valley Parade Park



TUESDAY 5 MAY 2015

Staines Town Football Club, Wheatsheaf Park



WEDNESDAY 6 MAY 2015

Port Vale Football Club, Vale Park



THURSDAY 7 MAY 2015

Walsall Football Club, The Banks's Stadium



Bright Osayi-Samuel, Henry Cameron, Dom Telford and Mark Waddington Blackpool

1 It may have been a horrific season for Blackpool, but four apprentices have taken advantage of the Seaside's plight to make their full debuts in the Championship.

After a two minute cameo on the opening day, Telford had to wait until Christmas for his second chance, and promptly came on and scored the equaliser against Rotherham! He had clocked up a dozen appearances by Easter. Midfielder Waddington also played in August, in the League Cup and made his league debut against Rotherham. Winger Henry made his bow in January.

Mark and Henry both now have half a dozen appearances to their name, Henry signing pro for the League One campaign next season, Mark currently out injured. They were joined in the team in March by first year winger Bright, a Londoner, who came on against Sheffield Wednesday and Charlton.



Ryan Sweeney Wimbledon

2 Centre-back Ryan was handed a professional deal early in 2015 and made his first-team debut in the defeat at Dagenham & Redbridge on Easter Monday. Ryan is the third apprentice to be involved in Neil Ardley's side this term, with left-back Ben Harrison a regular in the match-day squad and midfielder Dan Gallagher recently making the subs bench. Local lad Ryan, from Chessington, has been with the Wombles since he was eight!



Jodi Jones Dagenham & Redbridge

3 Midfielder Jodi Jay is one of the few first year apprentices to make his league debut this season. The 17-year-old from Bow in London's East End, came on in the goalless draw at home to Portsmouth and made three more appearances off the bench for the Daggers, managed by former Academy manager Wayne Burnett.

The Debutants



Connor Chaplin Portsmouth

4 Forward Connor was the stand-out player for Pompey on their pre-season tour to Holland last summer, impressing the opposing management at top Dutch clubs Vitesse Arnhem and FC Twente with his energetic and creative attacking play. They will not be surprised to hear Connor made his first-team debut with a five-minute cameo in December and returned to Andy Awford's side with a series of substitute appearances from February onwards for the League Two big fish. His progress saw him crowned the League Two Apprentice of the Year in April.



Ben Kennedy Stevenage

5 Few apprentices will have had the start to 2015 that 'Kenners' has had. The Northern Ireland youth international was playing in central midfield for Stevenage Under-18s when he celebrated his 18th birthday in mid-January. On the last day of the month he was handed a call-up for the first team. By Easter Monday he had played 13 league games and scored four goals as well as contributing several assists in his new found role as a striker! Ben, who is from Lisburn and lives in Biggleswade, is now hoping for a pro contract.



Harry Anderson Peterborough United

6 Harry was one of six players left in limbo when Crawley Town closed their academy down last summer. It was the second successive summer that had happened to him after his first club, Aldershot, did the same in 2013! He got a trial with Peterborough and impressed the Posh enough for them to take over the second year of his apprenticeship. Midfielder Harry then got his first-team chance when academy manager Dave Robertson took over from Darren Ferguson. He made his League One debut on the last day of February and has been in every match-day squad since.



Kyle Wootton Scunthorpe United

7 Local striker Kyle was delighted to be handed his first professional start against Rochdale, on 21 March, despite tasting defeat. Wootton, who has been on the periphery of the senior squad for the majority of this campaign, was told he would be in the starting line-up by Mark Robins on the Friday morning.

"It was a great feeling, a very proud moment," said Wootton who has been with the Iron since he was ten. "I'm thankful to the manager for giving me the opportunity and hopefully there are many more to come."

CHAMPIONSHIP

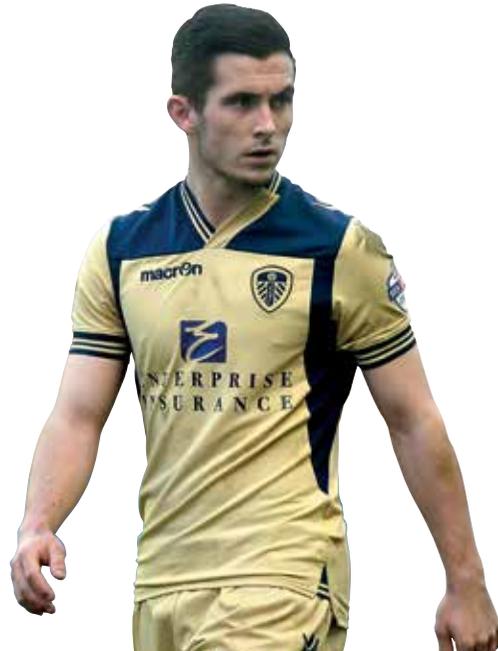
LFE Apprentice of the Year The Football League Awards

Lewis COOK



Leeds United

BY STEVEN SUTCLIFFE



Lewis Cook's emergence at Leeds United has been a shining light during a chaotic season at Elland Road. On Sunday 19 April his star shone a little brighter as he was named LFE's Championship Apprentice of the Year at the Football League Awards.

The youngster who helped England's Under 17 team to European Championship glory has always seemed destined for great things. Those in the know spoke reverently of his progress at Elland Road and he was described as "phenomenal" by Massimo Cellino just days before the start of the current campaign.

"When I first saw this boy Cook play it was phenomenal," Cellino told the Daily Telegraph.

"I wasn't expecting to have someone so special playing for Leeds. He plays with personality and skill. When I found out he was 17, it was a fantastic surprise."

So no pressure then? If there was it hasn't showed.

Since that glowing appraisal Cook has let his football do the talking. He only turned 18 in February but has shown the class and vision to stamp his authority on the Leeds midfield and the Championship.

At times this term coach Neil Redfearn, a figure that Cook knows well from Leeds academy (Redfearn was academy manager before assuming control of first-team affairs in October) has joked about forgetting how young Cook actually is.

In what would traditionally be the second year of his apprenticeship, the central midfielder has been tasked with collecting in cones and other duties oft handed to apprentice players.

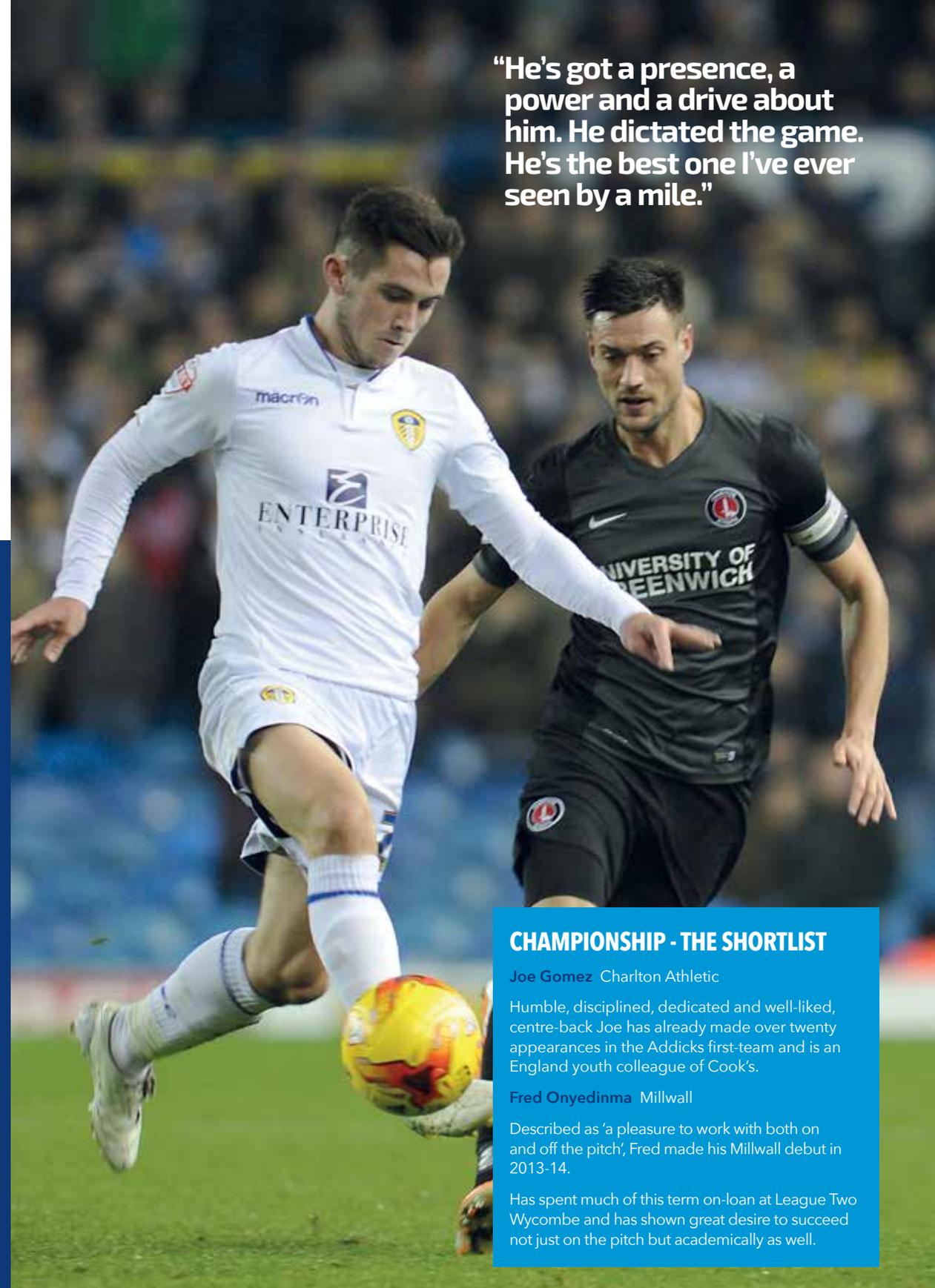
He has continued to work diligently on his education programme and has been active in the community through visits and coaching.

Redfearn, however has been delighted by Cook's maturity in the heart of his midfield and suggested that despite his tender age, the Leeds team is a poorer place without him.

"What an immense talent," Redfearn said, after Cook had terrorised high flying AFC Bournemouth earlier this term.

"He's got a presence, a power and a drive about him. He dictated the game. He's the best one I've ever seen (come through the academy) by a mile. If we want to be successful and get into the Premier League we have to keep Lewis Cook."

With both Manchester clubs and Arsenal, Liverpool and Chelsea all rumoured to be circling for his signature that may well prove the next challenge but for now Cook's star continues to rise at Elland Road.



"He's got a presence, a power and a drive about him. He dictated the game. He's the best one I've ever seen by a mile."

CHAMPIONSHIP - THE SHORTLIST

Joe Gomez Charlton Athletic

Humble, disciplined, dedicated and well-liked, centre-back Joe has already made over twenty appearances in the Addicks first-team and is an England youth colleague of Cook's.

Fred Onyedinma Millwall

Described as 'a pleasure to work with both on and off the pitch', Fred made his Millwall debut in 2013-14.

Has spent much of this term on-loan at League Two Wycombe and has shown great desire to succeed not just on the pitch but academically as well.

LEAGUE ONE

LFE Apprentice of the Year
The Football League Awards

George COOPER



Crewe Alexandra



Crewe starlet George Cooper followed in the footsteps of Nick Powell to collect LFE League One Apprentice of the Year prize at the Football League Awards.

Second year apprentice George, who has already been named in "The 11" this term - has been a regular in and around the Alex first-team squad since making his debut in the Johnstone's Paint Trophy in September.

Described as a 'game-changer' by manager Steve Davis, the 18-year-old's stock has risen since he celebrated his full home debut with a stunning winning goal against Coventry.

The Warrington-born forward has made the majority of his 25 appearances to date from the substitute's bench, scoring 3 goals, however Davis has predicted a bright future for the youngster and spoken of his desire to integrate him into his starting eleven

"We are always looking at how we can fit him in and where is best for him in the system we're playing at the moment," Davis said.

"We want to try and keep the two forwards up the pitch and that makes it more difficult for George as he's used to playing off the front, or wide.

"We all know what George can do," Davis continued "he can change the game with a little bit of quality that he has got in his locker.

"We are using him in the right way at the moment but we know he's a quality player and we are sure he will become the player we know he can be."

Cooper's progress on the pitch has been coupled with a strong academic effort on the Apprenticeship programme, which has impressed Reaseheath College lecturer Lauren Goff, Alex's head of education Dave Whiteside and LFE's Keith Leighton.

LEAGUE ONE - THE SHORTLIST

Giorgio Rasulo Milton Keynes Dons

The 18-year-old England youth international with an eye for goal has been a regular contender in LFE's Goal of the Month contest. Signed professional terms last year and became a regular feature in Karl Robinson's first-team towards the end of 2013-14.

Louis Reed Sheffield United

In his first year as an apprentice Louis was an integral part of the youth team that reached the FA Youth Cup quarter-final. He has since gone on to become an established member of the first-team squad but has remained committed to his education and is active in the local community.

LEAGUE TWO

LFE Apprentice of the Year
The Football League Awards

Conor CHAPLIN



Portsmouth



Portsmouth striker Conor Chaplin started this year on LFE's pre-season tour to the Netherlands and finished it by becoming the League Two Apprentice of the Year.

Chaplin, who has been on Pompey's books since the age of 6, was one of the star men on the Under-18's tour last summer. He has made the most of the second year of his apprenticeship after being hampered by injury in the 2013-14 campaign and recently fulfilled a life-long dream by scoring his first goal in the Football League against Morecambe in April.

"I just concentrated on my touch and putting it across the goal like every coach teaches you to do, either the keeper parries it and someone gets a tap in or it goes in. Thankfully mine went in," Chaplin said.

While Pompey slipped to a 3-1 defeat against the Shrimps the 18-year-old's contribution capped a memorable season.

Chaplin said: "Scoring that goal is the best feeling I have ever felt. I would have preferred it in better circumstances but it is something I have grown up dreaming of doing.

"Since I was six I have been at Pompey, it is the only club I have ever played for and to even think of playing for the first-team is something I had dreamt of. For that to happen in December was a dream come true.

"And to then actually score my first goal for a club I enjoy playing for is an unbelievable feeling.

"This season I have played youth team, reserve team and first-team and it's only the start. I have got to work harder next year and hopefully make it into the first-team on a more regular basis, getting starts and getting more game time.

"I set myself small targets but I'm just trying to help the team be as successful as we can be."

For now hitting those small targets have helped Chaplin sign a first professional deal last October, appear and score in the first-team and win the League Two Apprentice of the Year Award, a fine start for the Worthing lad with a big future.

LEAGUE TWO - THE SHORTLIST

Ben Harrison AFC Wimbledon

Since joining the club in 2007, Ben has developed his footballing talents alongside social, academic and personal skills to become a likeable and mature member of the club. His hard work, focus and dedication on and off the pitch has been rewarded with a professional contract and regular call-ups to the first team.

Ryan Johnson Stevenage

Signed on a two-year scholarship in 2013, Ryan was rewarded for his outstanding progress with his first professional contract just a year later. He entered the record books when he became the youngest-ever Football League debutant for Stevenage at just 17 years and 215 days in May 2014.

LIFE SKILLS

Each season LFE runs a series of Life Skills programmes with a series of partners, here's how that played out statistically.

160

Sessions covering diversity, emotional well-being, equality and diversity, sexual health and respectful relationships, social media, sports psychology and lifestyle education.



559

The total number of sessions that have taken place across the last four seasons.



2400

The total number of players to take part in at least one Life Skills Event

MY FUTURE TODAY

Added into the mix this year, My Future Today, which effectively replaced LFE's national careers event, hit the ground running.

The workshops which kicked-off in February aimed to help players discover their own psychometric and personality profiles and highlighted the need for continued professional development.

Designed to help players realise their own potential by understanding their employability skills and raising awareness of opportunities away from the game, MFT really came to the fore.



Simon Williams
League Football Education

"The events have all been geared towards personal development and providing an opportunity for apprentices to explore what they can do to become better as an individual. In turn that delivers an on and off the pitch benefit.

We homed-in on self-identity, understanding what personality traits and transferrable skills they have and how that can be valued in a wider sense.

We need to help Apprentices realise that they are more than just footballers and aren't limited to being only that. The presence of ex-professional's hammers home the reality that one day everybody will be a former footballer. We ensure everyone leaves knowing what support networks and opportunities are out there to progress and overcome any concerns."

1890

Goals were identified by players. Recorded on postcards, players can now expect to receive those targets in the post as a reminder of the commitments they made to themselves.

Craig Heap
Dame Kelly Holmes Trust
Former British Olympic Gymnast

"We've actually set them a challenge it is all well and good turning up for a day and thinking, 'that was ok' and then not follow it up. So we asked all the players to set themselves three goals over the next three months. They don't have to be football specific, they can be anything from to pass a driving test to starting to learn a new language.

I hope the guys have learnt that there's more to them than just footballers. The things they're learning on and off the pitch make them really great employable people. Days like these are crucial not just for the future but for the right now as players, we've worked on loads of things that the players can take with them to use on the training pitch tomorrow."

630

Players took part, engaged and learned a little more about their personal development



80

Hours of listening, interaction and learning

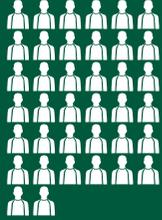


Fraser Horsfall
Huddersfield Town

"It's about looking at the bigger picture. The actors were good because they provide the link between different activities and they act as though they are you or me. It's an eye opener and helps you think. All the staff have been good because it's a very interactive, they express their opinion and ask for ours."

We train every day, we've got games so we are active all the time and we don't really get time for this sort of stuff. Nobody really sits down and talks about your future so it's been a good opportunity to do that."

38



Staff from LFE, the Dame Kelly Holmes Trust, The PFA and Theatre group AFTA Thought alongside some enthusiastic players made the days possible



James Ledsham
AFTA Thought (Drama based training)

"Our presentation is about trying to help players identify themselves outside football and recognise and think about the skills that they already have and how they could apply them."

Instead of just talking to them or putting something on PowerPoint, we're up in front of them trying to portray their inner thoughts and relating to the situation they're in."

We're not just a team of people conveying our thoughts, we've done our research, spoken to current players and we addressed true to life scenarios that were representative of the groups."

Kyle King
Walsall

"I really enjoyed the 30 second sales pitch which is set-up to make you focus on your attributes and sell them in to an employer."

It was good because you don't really think about these skills and it brought it sharply into focus. It's been an enjoyable day - before I came I thought 'oh man this is going to be boring' but it's been fun and all the activities we've done have been helpful and really good."

16



Venues across the land hosted the workshops



45

Clubs attended the events. The name of the game was engagement and integration with 2-3 clubs attending localised workshops.



Jake Weaver
Birmingham City

"We took part in a lot of tasks that made us realise what employers look for and how the skills we develop as footballers are transferable. Simple tasks like building a tower out of paper in groups were designed to foster teamwork and help us understand the different types of personalities in our group and which of those personalities worked best together."

Football teaches you a lot of life skills, we're in a profession that demands dedication, discipline, independence and the ability to manage ourselves. There are lots of other areas as well that are often overlooked, the inter-personal skills and communication and how you interact with people you work with to get results."

A lot of players think solely about football but events like this help them realise skills that they are nurturing day-in, day-out are transferable to the wider world."

KIERAN D'ARCY



BY STEVEN SUTCLIFFE

Kieran D'Arcy was released by Premier League bound Blackpool in the summer of 2010.

It was a rejection that no young footballer wants.

Yet while the Seasiders fortunes have dwindled since then their former employee is moving onwards and upwards.

Instead of searching for a route back into football D'Arcy elected to use his academic background to move his career forward. He took advantage of the long standing relationship between The Professional Footballers' Association (PFA) and Salford University by enrolling on their BSc (hons) degree course in Physiotherapy.

"IT SHOWS THAT EVEN IF YOU COME OUT OF FOOTBALL YOU CAN ACHIEVE HIGH – A LOT OF THE LADS WHO ENTER THE COURSE FROM FOOTBALL GET VERY HIGH MARKS AND FIRST CLASS HONOURS DEGREES.

And last summer he graduated with the distinction of the highest mark on that programme across all students (full and part-time) at the University, dispelling the myth that footballers cannot succeed in academia.

"I had an idea that I was going to get a decent mark but to get the highest was a nice surprise on top of graduating," D'Arcy said.

"It shows that even if you come out of football you can achieve high - a lot of the lads who enter the course from football get very high marks and first class honours degrees.

"It was The PFA that helped me make my decision to come to Salford University because of the significant funding that they provide and support they offer," he continued.

"I used to think my two-year apprenticeship at Blackpool was demanding but when you come on to the (physiotherapy) course it opens your eyes up further," D'Arcy explained.

"Four years felt like forty at times. It's study day in day out, writing essays and going on placements. You see and help patients of all different ages and backgrounds though and it is rewarding."

Now based at the Blackpool Victoria Hospital a couple of miles down the road from Bloomfield Road, D'Arcy has so far resisted any temptation to try and get back into football and admits that he enjoys the challenges working in his current role in the NHS.

"I'm currently employed as a permanent rotational physiotherapist in the clinical area of cardiothoracic surgery," D'Arcy added.

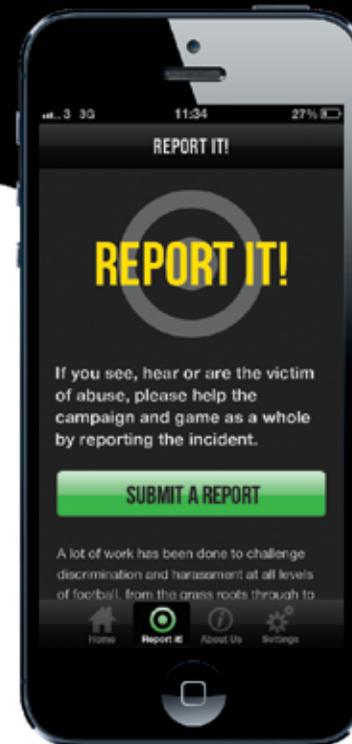
"This involves me working daily on a Cardiac intensive care unit to treat post-surgical patients who have had either cardiac (heart) or thoracic (lung) surgery.

"I work closely as part of a multidisciplinary team with cardiothoracic surgeons, anaesthetists, critical care nurses, occupational therapists, pharmacists and at times, speech and language therapists, to each provide our input to collaboratively treat individual patients.

"I'm often asked if I want to work back in football but I've enjoyed working with people from all different ages and it's opened my mind and options up."



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OUT OF THE ASHES

BY GAVIN WILLACY



"THAT AFC WIMBLEDON COULD FIELD HALF A DOZEN OF THEIR FORMER UNDER-11S IN THE FOOTBALL LEAGUE NEXT SEASON IS REMARKABLE PROOF OF THAT."

LFE's Gavin Willacy discovers the remarkable journey that half a dozen AFC Wimbledon youngsters have taken to reach their apprenticeship and beyond.

Ten summers ago, Mark Robinson became coach of AFC Wimbledon Under-9s in the Surrey Youth League.

The little Wombles paid to play 7-a-side football for fun at a local playing fields on Saturday mornings, while the club's first team were in the Ryman League Premier Division.

It was just two years into their rebirth following Wimbledon FC's ground-shaking move to Milton Keynes. The Under-9s' manager was Mark's mate, Terry Wilson, whose son Callum was in the team.

A decade later, Robinson is coaching the same players in AFC Wimbledon's Under 18 team. Of the half a dozen who started out at primary school age, three have already turned professional with another three offered contracts at the League Two club.

Midfielder Wilson and centre-back Ryan Sweeney were in that original Under-9s team and were joined a year later by Ben Harrison (pictured left) and Dan Gallagher (pictured right), then at Under-11s, by playmaker Egli Kaja. Left-back Harrison has been in the first team squad all season, Sweeney made his league debut over Easter, midfielder Gallagher has been on the bench and all five have signed professional contracts this year! Three others also made it all the way to become apprentices.

"We were just volunteers and parents, trying to

develop players," Robinson told Touchline. "It wasn't about winning. We were usually third or fourth in the league or even mid-table. Then it all kicked in when we started playing 11-a-side at Under-11s. We had 104 successive wins and won three trebles! I thought 'Hang on, we've got some boys here' but still I never dreamed any of them would be pros."

Playing in local Sunday leagues made it hard for Robinson to judge the standard of the talent in his team. However, when London's top clubs started to take a keen interest in his players, he realised they may be ready for a higher level.

"It was hard to tell how good they were until we beat a league club's academy 8-0. It got to the stage when Academies didn't want to play us and their scouts wanted to poach our players. We had to put a lot of effort into keeping them at Wimbledon. There was a lot of soul-searching, wondering if we were doing the right thing by the boys. The first team were in the Conference South and I was selling the Under-13s the dream that they could be playing for the first team one day. We told them this was the best place to be as they had a great opportunity here. It's amazing that it's actually happened."

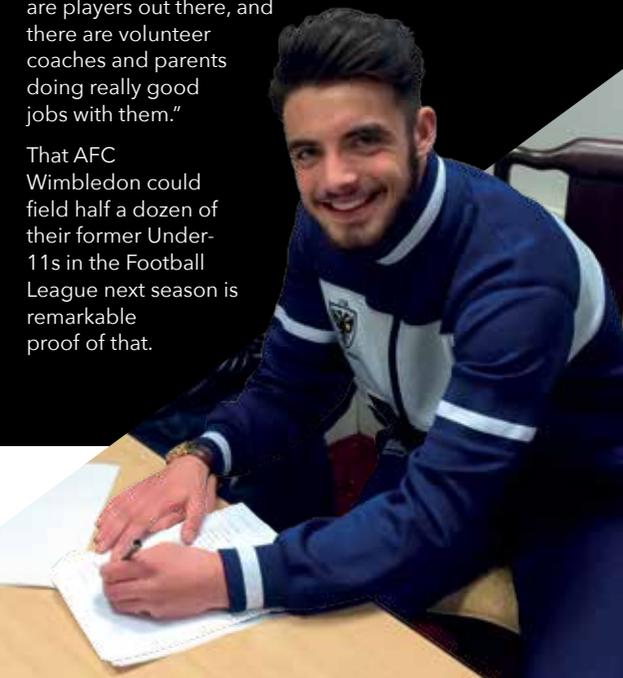
With AFC Wimbledon completing their incredible rise through five levels of non-league football to take their place in the Football League again, the youth-team were able to become full-time apprentices and have

held their own in the FL Youth Alliance. This season, they have stepped up to reserve team football, competing against League One and Championship sides' second teams in the Final Third Development League and the Premier League Under-21 Cup.

"I'm very proud of what the boys have achieved but looking back they were all quite even then. The only stand-out player, Patrick Roberts, left for Fulham and he's in their first team already! The others were not particularly special at an early age but they developed together as a group.

"Seeing what happened here has certainly helped me keep an open mind about where good players are. We have to play against good Sunday league teams because I do believe there are players out there, and there are volunteer coaches and parents doing really good jobs with them."

That AFC Wimbledon could field half a dozen of their former Under-11s in the Football League next season is remarkable proof of that.



BRITS ABROAD



BY SIMON WILLIAMS

Eleven former Apprentices have signed up to LFE's Erasmus+ player placement programme in a bid to kick-start their football dreams in Sweden.

The players are being hosted by four clubs during a 13 week placement which aims to help them develop on and off the pitch. Over 30 players have signed professional terms with Swedish clubs since this programme began in 2008 - effectively taking full advantage of what in pure football terms is akin to an extended trial.

Ange IF welcomed Oliver Martin, Doncaster duo Jordan Ball and Scott Brown and former Peterborough defender Tarik Moore-Azille in March, while midfield trio Moses Duckrell, Nathan Hudson and Dylan Stringer-Moth jetted over to BK Sport. Defender Harold Joseph joined Gottne IF and North West based Charlie Holt and Alex Naylor headed to the football outpost of Ytterhogdals alongside new team-mate Jimmy Hartley.

The Swedish season officially started in April and runs until October though there will be a mid-season break in June. At that point all the players will be hoping to have received an offer to stay for the second half of the campaign at their current club or at a club in a higher division.

With pre-season training done and dusted, the player's weekly schedule is now built around training, physical conditioning and matches. The lads have also been brushing up on their linguistic skills. The norm is for all players to have weekly Swedish lessons to help them integrate with the wider community.

That integration process is helped by delivering coaching sessions to youth-teams and within their local community. Embracing cultural difference and understanding life outside of the UK is a key outcome of the programme and allows players to decide if living and playing elsewhere in Europe is where their future lies.

Ange IF won all five of their pre-season fixtures and head coach Benny Matsson is hopeful that their good form will continue, "The team is very strong now," Matsson said.

"Jordan and Scott joined us earlier and have been very important players for us. Tarik and Oliver played well in their first game and will only get better once they have settled in."

Former Wolves youngster Stringer-Moth has also acclimatised well to life at newly promoted BK Sport.

"Everything's great and I'm enjoying it out here," the former Wolves winger told Touchline from his base just outside Stockholm.

"My aim is to be kept on for the rest of the season. The setup is really convenient, the three of us live in the clubhouse which has everything we need and then we train and play at the Tunavallen stadium which can hold 8,000 spectators."

Further North, the snow is falling and ex-Stevenage defender Harold Joseph has made a positive start at Gottne IF, "Harold played for the first time in a cup semi-final game against Härnösands FF, he has been working hard in the gym and we have been impressed with him so far on and off the field," said coach Jens Lindahl.

Over in Ytterhogdal, former Plymouth Argyle and WBA starlet turned head coach Ben Smith has been as equally satisfied by his new recruits, "Alex has really impressed me, he's composed on the ball and looks to get forward early. Jimmy is a bubbly character with plenty of banter which is backed up by his ability, he has quick feet and has done really well down the right-hand side so far. Unfortunately for Charlie he picked up an ankle injury but is now back up and running and is pushing for a starting place."

"Tarik and Oliver played well in their first game and will only get better once they have settled in."



WHO'S GONE WHERE?

Jordan Ball (Doncaster Rovers) Ange IF

Scott Brown (Doncaster Rovers) Ange IF

Oliver Martin (Fleetwood Town) Ange IF

Tarik Moore-Azille (Peterborough United) Ange IF

Moses Duckrell (Barnet) BK Sport

Nathan Hudson (Accrington Stanley) BK Sport

Dylan Stringer-Moth (Wolverhampton Wanderers) BK Sport

Harold Joseph (Stevenage) Gottne IF

Charlie Holt (Burnley) Ytterhogdals IK

Jimmy Hartley (Stevenage) Ytterhogdals IK

Alex Naylor (Morecambe) Ytterhogdals IK



Dylan Stringer-Moth BK Sport



Harold Joseph Gottne IF



Alex Naylor, Jimmy Hartley & Charlie Holt Ytterhogdals IK



Ytterhogdals IK



Jimmy Hartley in action for Ytterhogdals IK

Bouncing Back

BY SIMON WILLIAMS

A two-year apprenticeship is not a long time. Hearing that you're going to be released is painful and sudden. Whichever way it is dressed-up the words can be stinging and quick.

Proving you're good enough to return to professional football is another matter. It can be painstakingly slow, mentally tough and a difficult road to take.

It took Dan Hanford five years.

His journey had started and nearly ended at Rochdale.

At 16, Hanford like numerous youngsters across the nation had left his family home in Swansea to follow a dream. It just so happened that at the time it meant living in the shadow of Dale's Spotland stadium.

He earned international caps for Wales Under-17 and Under-19 teams but a professional deal did not automatically follow and a spell on work experience at non-league Clitheroe helped him plot a new course.

"It was hard being away from home and family at a young age," Hanford said.

"It was a different environment and tough but I learned massively from non-league."

Men's football gave the stopper the platform to impress and former England coach Glenn Hoddle came calling with the offer of a place at his (now defunct) academy in Spain.

"It was an unbelievable experience for me. It was academy football in a first-team environment, we played league football against men and it was a different type of football than we were used to."

"I found moving away quite easy that time and especially with 26 of us all from a similar background in the UK," Hanford added.

From there the Welshman joined a Hereford side under the charge of former West Bromwich Albion keeper Russell Hoult. He walked straight into Hoult's first XI.

"It was a great day for me when I made my debut, I went on to play 10 games before they sat me out. I was still young and it was good for them to provide me with a chance."

Unfortunately the Bulls were heading towards financial oblivion. "Nobody knew when or if we were going to get paid and that was hard for all of us," Hanford said.

"I had a friend who was in touch with Tony Warner, the ex-Liverpool goalkeeper, he had just left Floriana who play in the Maltese Premier League and they needed a replacement so I was put in touch with the club's president before flying over for a trial and eventually signing."

"It was a new culture again and one of the best times of my life.

Sixty-four games and a cup win later, the offer of a trial at Brunton Park, Carlisle was the option that appealed the most.

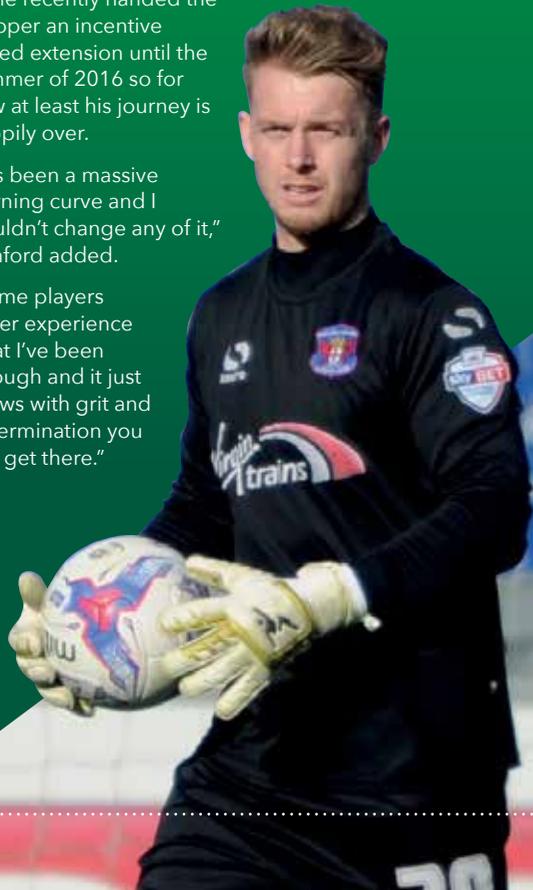
"I did well and after speaking to goalkeeping coach Tony Caig, I signed a short-term deal as cover for Mark Gillespie, though Keith Curle has given me a chance to play.

"He saw I was training hard and unfortunately Mark got injured but that's the chance a keeper has to wait for. I finally made my professional debut with a clean sheet against Tranmere Rovers back in September."

Curle recently handed the stopper an incentive based extension until the summer of 2016 so for now at least his journey is happily over.

"It's been a massive learning curve and I wouldn't change any of it," Hanford added.

"Some players never experience what I've been through and it just shows with grit and determination you can get there."



What they've been tweeting...

WITH SO MANY CURRENT AND EX APPRENTICES ON TWITTER, WE'VE PICKED OUT SOME OF THE BEST TWEETS WE'VE SEEN RECENTLY:

Derby County welcome local students in to Moor Farm to help them hone their writing skills

Derby County Academy @dcfcacademy
Pupils from @FrederickGent school working with @dcfcacademy improving English grades. @LFEOnline education + football



Former Southampton & Reading boss Nigel Adkins lauds LFE's work with The Sporting Chance Clinic

Nigel Adkins @TheNigelAdkins
Good work by @LFEonline + Sporting Chance Clinic on helping young players understand the pitfalls of being a Professional footballer.

LFE's Gavin Willacy captures MFT on camera

Gavin Willacy @gavinwillacy
@leytonorientfc striker @Victor_Ade_9 pitches his skill set at @LFEonline My Future Today event with @DameKellysTrust



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Watford's Official Twitter account celebrates the achievements of Dennon Lewis

Official #watfordfc @watfordfcsays
#watfordfc Academy scholar Dennon Lewis made the @LFEonline 11 for achievements the season



The Derby squad show their is no 'i' in team posing with #GOTM winner James Carvell

Derby County Academy @dcfcacademy
Youth team @dcfcacademy @dcfcofficial with @jscfootballer in recognition of superb team goal for @LFEonline award



SOCIAL MEDIA

A short guide to the Do's and Don'ts for young players

Do's

- Talk positively about your experiences at your football club
- Engage positively with fans, other players and community groups
- Raise awareness about any charitable/ community activities you or your club undertakes
- Use images in a positive fashion to express yourself and your work
- Consider blogging to boost your own and your clubs image
- Think about what you are posting and how it may be interpreted by others

Don'ts

- Use social media as a replacement to SMS. Using social media is not personal, what you say, do or show can be viewed by anyone
- Comment on matters of a sensitive nature regardless of if they are football related or not. Anything you say is published and open to misreporting and misinterpretation
- Be critical of anyone or use foul, abusive or discriminatory language
- Comment on injuries or team selection, it could land you in trouble with your club
- Post comments when angry or frustrated



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