

Touchline



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RYAN'S
FINDING
A

BALANCE

P6

DEBUTANTS P8 CHECKATRADE CHANCES P10 ANDREW MILLS P12 UNI LIFE P14 COMMUNITY SPIRIT P18

PFA Boots



The Professional Footballers' Association have committed to provide all apprentice players with a pair of PFA branded Nike boots. LFE will communicate full details to players who will be able to place orders until the end of February 2018.

In the meantime, players can contact The PFA on 0161 236 0575 or 0161 228 2733 if they require any further information

Education Support Fund

LFE Chief Executive Alan Sykes has encouraged clubs to submit claims for the Education Support Fund to improve their apprenticeship programmes and the support they offer to young players.

Three clubs - Bolton Wanderers, Fleetwood Town and Sheffield Wednesday - have already claimed their full allocation for the 2017-18 season utilising the funding on offer to cover the cost of new IT equipment including tablets, a sports filming mast and monitors and additional academic tuition.

However all clubs have to work to a 28 February deadline for notifying LFE of their intentions and Sykes is keen to ensure that clubs do not miss out altogether.

He said: "I would advise all clubs to work to the deadlines that we have set-out to ensure that they can maximise the fund fully. This support is available to help clubs innovate and improve the apprenticeship experience across English Football League clubs."

For further information about the fund, please contact LFE on **01772 326 870** or email: asykes@lfe.org.uk



University in the UK and USA

Over 220 apprentices have started degrees in the UK or USA in the last three years. So if you're thinking about heading to University in the UK, please download our Guide to Higher Education from the LFE website: www.lfe.org.uk/downloads

For those considering going across to the other side of the Atlantic, LFE's chosen partner Pass4Soccer can help. Coaches in America are already searching for new recruits to reinforce their squads for the next academic year.

For more information download our Guide to American Scholarships: www.lfe.org.uk/downloads

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



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Accredited Until 2019



the 11

Here is the latest set of apprentices to excel on and off the pitch and make LFE's 11 for December:

Callum Styles
Bury

Finlay Sinclair-Smith
Blackpool

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



BY JACK WYLIE

FA Youth Cup

The story so far

The FA Youth Cup has sparked into life with the introduction of Premier League and Championship teams into the competition at the third round stage.

EFL sides, who have largely avoided any slip-ups so far have sprung a few shocks of their own, delivering performances to knock-out some of the competition's biggest names and stun some of the best resourced academies.

The most astonishing result came at Home Park where Plymouth Argyle triumphed over Manchester City on penalties. City, losing finalists for the past three years, included the World Cup-winning captain of England Under-17s Joel Latibeaudiere, that England team's goalkeeper Curtis Anderson and Eric Garcia, the centre-back who was part of the Spain squad that lost the final and until recently had been at Barcelona, in their line-up.

On a cold Thursday night in Plymouth though and after 120 minutes without a goal, Michael Peck held his nerve to convert the decisive spot kick in a shoot-out and book a fourth round trip to Burnley.

Blackpool were another to send shockwaves round the competition,

winning at West Ham with Emil Jaaskelainen netting the only goal of the game to secure a tie against Southampton in the next round.

Derby County also triumphed, squeezing past record 10-time holders Manchester United on penalties after the Reds had been reduced to nine men through a sending off and an injury. Substitute goalkeeper Joe Fryatt was the hero for the young Rams, making three saves in the shootout.

Elsewhere, Ipswich Town produced a stunning result to defeat Everton 2-1 at Goodison Park, with Ross Marshall and Idris Elmouzouni getting on the scoresheet.

A double from midfielder Jack Evans secured a 2-1 win for 2015-16 semi-finalists Blackburn Rovers against Stoke City, who made it to the last four in last year's competition, while Stevenage eased past Fleetwood Town 5-1 thanks to three goals from Andronicos Georgiou to confirm a fourth round tie with Middlesbrough.

Having earned a place in round three for the first time since the 2010-11 season, Scunthorpe United fought admirably against eight-time winners Chelsea but conceded three goals in the final 12 minutes to eventually lose 4-0.

Mansfield Town reached the third round for the fourth year in a row and took Professional Development League South leaders Crystal Palace all the way after Jacob Dumbleton had equalised in the 115th minute, but they were ultimately sent out on penalties, while Portsmouth were edged out 2-1 in extra-time by Leicester City.

Meanwhile, Cheltenham Town striker George Lloyd produced the most impressive individual performance of the competition so far as he netted eight times in a 9-0 win against AFC Totton in the first round. The Robins then needed extra-time to overcome Welling United to clinch a third round contest with Bury.



Academy Leagues Round-Up

BY JACK WYLIE

North East Division

There is a familiar feel to the top of the North East section as Mansfield Town, Oldham Athletic and Rotherham United sit in the top three places, just like they did to end the 2016-17 season.

The Stags lost for just the second time this calendar year in October against Oldham, but have displayed the sort of resilience that has carried them to two successive league titles by responding with four clean sheets and four victories since that result to lead the way.

The Latics have piled on the pressure with eight wins from nine games to move level on points at the top, while Rotherham remain the only unbeaten side across all four Youth Alliance leagues, although six draws out of 11 leaves them three points adrift in third.

North West Division

The battle to set the pace in the North West is heating up with a number of clubs in the mix, including the return of some usual suspects with the last three winners all in the hunt; Blackpool, Wigan Athletic and Bury.

Wigan, who struggled last year after triumphing in 2015-16, have stormed to the top of the pile thanks in large part to striker Mwiya Malumo, who has netted seven times to help the Latics register seven wins in succession, including seeing off contenders Rochdale (2-0), Blackpool (5-3) and Tranmere Rovers (2-1).

Dale are two points behind after pulling off their own scalps, recording 3-2 and 4-1 victories over second-placed Preston North End and fourth-placed Bury, while last season's league and cup champions Blackpool are currently six points off the pace, although they have looked ominous in recent weeks having won their last three games 6-1 (v Port Vale), 4-1 (v Walsall) and 4-1 (v Carlisle United).

South East Division

MK Dons have built a healthy lead of seven points in the South East division, heavily aided by the contribution of first-year striker Dylan Asonganyi, who has bagged a remarkable 22 goals in all competitions so far.

The Dons have endured a couple of difficult results in recent weeks, however, losing 4-0 to Dagenham & Redbridge and 2015-16 champions Luton Town, but have yet to be punished by closest challengers Southend United, who also slipped up in November.

The Shrimpers were beaten 6-2 by last year's runaway winners Leyton Orient, who are 16 points behind the leaders but have clicked into gear after five games without defeat having taken just four points from a possible 27 prior to their current run.

Elsewhere, Gillingham have enjoyed an upturn in form with impressive wins against Cambridge United and the Daggers to leave the trio locked on 27 points, a distant 10 away from top spot.

South West Division

Exeter have reproduced last season's form that saw them claim the South West regular season title by blowing away the rest of the competition so far, with an astonishing haul of 39 points from a possible 48, netting 57 times and boasting a goal difference of +41.

The Grecians lost their opening fixture to Swindon Town, but responded with a 12-0 win against Cheltenham Town and have since gone 15 matches unbeaten, including 10 consecutive victories, with first-year apprentice Jack Sparkes scoring four in a recent 6-3 win against Yeovil Town.

Swindon remain their closest challengers, but have fallen 11 points behind with two games in hand, while third-placed Oxford United are a point further back, although they missed the chance to cut the gap after a 2-0 defeat to the leaders at the start of December.

U18 Professional Development League North

Just 10 points separate leaders Huddersfield Town and bottom club Crewe Alexandra with none of the 11 teams showing enough consistency to pull away from the pack.

Fourth-placed Bolton Wanderers hold the best unbeaten run having avoided defeat in each of their last four games and recovered from a three-goal deficit to draw 4-4 with third-placed Leeds United at the start of December. The Northern League's top scorer, Jack Clarke (11) netted a brace for United, but Wanderers hitman Dennis Politic (10) matched his tally on the day with a double of his own.

Elsewhere, last year's National play-off champions Sheffield United were steadily rising through the pack after a slow start, but have stumbled of late with just one win in four games since the start of November, having only lost one of their previous eight.

U18 Professional Development League South

Crystal Palace appear to be running away with the Southern section having stretched out a seven point margin ahead of Watford, who do have a game in hand on the Eagles.

Millwall lie eight points adrift in third after shaking off a two-game losing streak to beat Cardiff City 4-3 at the end of November, despite Bluebirds striker Sion Spence bagging his second hat-trick of the season.

Meanwhile, at the bottom of the table, Coventry City have finally replicated the form that saw them secure the regular season crown in 2016-17 with three successive victories.

The Sky Blues suffered 10 straight defeats to start the campaign, scoring just four goals in the process, but have turned things around dramatically with Jack Burroughs netting five times during the three wins against Cardiff (2-0), QPR (4-1) and Colchester United (2-1).

U18 Premier League North

Derby County lead the EFL clubs in fifth place after an impressive start, only sitting behind heavyweights Manchester City, Everton, Manchester United and Liverpool.

The Rams have only slipped to defeat once in a September encounter with Man United, and a subsequent six-match unbeaten run has left them just five points off top heading into a meeting with leaders Man City, who have played a game less.

Wolves have struggled to pick up points since September, but were part of an incredible 5-5 draw with County, with Taylor Perry's double giving Wanderers a 5-3 lead at one stage before late substitute Adam Davie rescued a point for the Rams with six minutes to spare.

Meanwhile, the highlight of the season so far for Blackburn Rovers came in a 4-3 victory over Newcastle United in September as they overturned a 3-1 margin thanks to Hayden Carter's 91st-minute winner.

U18 Premier League South

The Southern title looks to be heading to Chelsea once again with the Blues opening up a healthy seven-point advantage at the top.

Fulham were on the wrong end of a 6-1 hammering by the leaders in September, but have maintained a strong position in the league thanks to the goals of Cameron Thompson, who is up to nine this term to leave them in fourth, nine points away from top spot.

The Cottagers have lost just twice in their 10 matches so far, with the other defeat coming against Aston Villa, who enjoyed three wins in a row against teams above them in the table, seeing off Tottenham Hotspur (1-0), second-placed Leicester City (2-0) and Fulham (3-0).



RYAN'S FINDING A BALANCE

It is fair to say Ryan Sessegnon has made a huge impression during his first 18 months of senior football.

The Fulham starlet has racked up over 50 first-team appearances, scored 11 goals - including a hat-trick on his 50th outing - claimed a European Under-19s Championship winners medal with England and was voted by his peers as being worthy of a spot in The Professional Footballers' Association, Sky Bet Championship Team of the Year for 2016-17.

His success has not been restricted to just on the pitch, with the 17-year-old showing great commitment to his education by staying on track to achieve the BTEC qualification.

Sessegnon told LFE: "I started in the first-team pretty much straight away (after starting the apprenticeship) but it's not been a problem really. I've been able to manage everything."

"I was told when I signed that I'd probably be with the first-team so I knew I'd have to work a balance between the two. I come in before training to do work and then sometimes I miss classes, so I'll stay behind to catch up if that happens."

Sessegnon burst onto the scene by becoming the first player born in the 2000s to score in the English leagues on his third senior appearance in a 2-2 draw with Cardiff City and has since developed into a mainstay in the team for the Cottagers. Remarkable when you consider that he does not turn 18 until May.

With such stunning progress on the pitch, it can be easy for players to overlook other aspects in life, particularly education, but the talented left-back has remained focused on fulfilling every part of his apprenticeship, even after securing his future for the next three years when he signed his first professional contract in June.

"Even though I've played a lot and got that security, it's still been important to me to pass my education because you never know what can happen, so I've made sure I've stayed on track to get my BTEC and stuff like that," he said.

"I don't really get a lot of free time but when I do I make sure I do the right things and just keep working on making myself better, whether that's football or education."

A significant amount of media attention has surrounded the youngster, particularly during the summer when he was the subject of a £25million bid from Tottenham Hotspur. Sessegnon cites his studies as a positive tool to avoid any distractions.

The second-year apprentice added: "I don't pay much attention to any media talk. I'm just focused on making sure my education is complete and getting more chances to play for Fulham."

"It definitely keeps you grounded because you have no time to sit back and take things easy. As soon as I'm finished with the first-team I'm back to doing work and mixing with the rest of the academy guys again."

"EVEN THOUGH I'VE PLAYED A LOT AND GOT THAT SECURITY, IT'S STILL BEEN IMPORTANT TO ME TO PASS MY EDUCATION BECAUSE YOU NEVER KNOW WHAT CAN HAPPEN"

Academy Head of Education Sean Cullen is one of many staff members that have guided the teenager through his apprenticeship so far and he hailed Sessegnon's efforts.

He said: "One memory that sticks in the mind with Ryan is when he made his League debut on a Tuesday night away at Leeds United. He played 90 minutes and then didn't get back until gone 2:30am."

"We weren't expecting him in the next day but it was one of his first games with the first-team and he didn't know any different. He ended up being the first one in class that morning. That pretty much sums up Ryan."

"It's always difficult for a player involved in the first-team but whether he's been with them or away with England he's always kept up with his work and now he's close to completing his BTEC and has stayed on top of his Functional Skills."



THE Debutants

1 Jordan Stevens Forest Green Rovers



Jordan Stevens has enjoyed a whirlwind start to the 2017-18 season. The 17-year-old midfielder was registering almost a goal a game in the Youth Alliance South West when Rovers manager Mark Cooper handed him an opportunity in Sky Bet League Two and then rewarded him for his progress with a two-year professional contract.

Since being introduced as a late substitute against Lincoln, Stevens has added a further eight senior appearances to his tally, catching the attention of other EFL and Premier League clubs.

2 Max Bird Derby County



First-year apprentice Max Bird is being tipped for great things after lining up for the Rams during their Carabao Cup tie at Barnsley earlier this season. Bird appeared in central midfield alongside George Thorne at Oakwell to make his first team bow a week before his 17th birthday.

He played 81 minutes before he was replaced by 20-year-old Callum Guy - also making his debut after completing the apprenticeship programme two years ago. Bird, who has now signed a three-year professional deal, described his senior bow as an "unreal experience".

3 Michael Cooper Plymouth Argyle



Michael Cooper answered an injury crisis to excel on his league debut in Plymouth's 1-1 draw at high-flying Blackburn. The 18-year-old, who is fourth choice goalkeeper at Home Park, was introduced at half-time after Kyle Letheren - who had been deputising for injured duo Luke McCormick and Robbert te Loeke - tore a thigh muscle.

Cooper stepped into the breach though and did not put a foot wrong, producing a couple of outstanding saves to secure a hard earned point.

The young stopper, who has been with the Pilgrims since the age of 10, called the experience "brilliant". It was certainly a world away from his regular gig in the club's development side, which plays in the South West Peninsula League - the 10th tier of English football.

4&5 Benjy Aghadiuno & Dwight Pascal Barnet



Striker Benjy Aghadiuno had made substitute appearances at Luton in the Checktrade Trophy and at Blackburn in the FA Cup before the Bees' new manager Mark McGhee handed him a league start against Grimsby.

Defender Dwight Pascal went into the history books last term becoming the clubs' youngest ever player during their Checktrade Trophy clash against Peterborough United.

At 15 years and 250 days, Pascal, who had been at school in the build-up to the match, played the full 90 minutes, delivering an assured performance and in the process breaking a record held by former apprentice Matt Stevens.

Fast forward 12 months and his first league start was also memorable. Though this time for all the wrong reasons with the right-back dismissed in the 54th minute of a 0-2 reverse to Grimsby.

6&7 Ben Wilmot & Andronicos Georgiou Stevenage



Andronicos Georgiou featured in LFE's Goal of the Month on three occasions during the first year of his apprenticeship and impressed enough to receive a professional contract in April.

The 17-year-old has gone from strength to strength since then, making his league bow in October in a 1-0 defeat at Crewe Alexandra. The forward did his chances of gaining further first-team opportunities no harm by scoring a hat-trick in Stevenage's 5-1 FA Youth Cup third round victory over Fleetwood Town.

Liverpool and Tottenham are among the Premier League clubs reportedly tracking Stevenage's 18-year-old defender Ben Wilmot.

The young centre half has earned rave reviews for his three senior appearances this term with his manager Darren Sarll likening him to a senior professional: "He plays like a 30-year-old, he's got a wonderful, mature outlook on the game." Sarll said.



CHECKATRADE CHANCES

Apprentices from across the country have benefited from the Checkatrade Trophy this season, with almost 50 players from 20 clubs being handed senior experience during the group-stage fixtures.

The likes of Bury, Doncaster Rovers, Newport County, and Wigan Athletic have blooded a large contingent of current apprentices in the competition.

Five Doncaster apprentices were given their first-team debuts during October when the club faced Sunderland Under-21s and Scunthorpe United.

Second-year apprentices Morgan James, Cody Prior, Jacob Fletcher and James Morris all featured for Doncaster in their 1-0 victory over the Black Cats, while Lewis Scattergood appeared for his first senior appearance against The Iron.

"All the lads do the right things in training, they all listen and are attentive and that's all I can ask for," said Rovers Under-18s coach Paul Stancliffe.

"The development doesn't come straight away for everybody, but overall I've been pleased with the way we've been moving forward.

"We've got a great set of lads in the academy and that could be seen as a downfall because maybe sometimes they are too nice, but they're all serious about what they do. If they keep their heads down they will do well."

Northern Ireland Under-19s international Danny Amos was another current apprentice to appear against Scunthorpe having emerged from the bench against Mansfield Town in the competition last season.

The 17-year-old was awarded his first professional contract in November and has pleased Stancliffe with his progress. "Danny has kicked on over the last six weeks to two months and we can't ask for any more than that," he said.

"He's got his head down and the gaffer has seen the potential in him. It's up to him now to repay the faith and work hard. I don't think it's in his character to get carried away and I think he'll keep his feet on the ground."

Bury introduced a clutch of apprentices into their Checkatrade Trophy campaign, including first-years

Saul Shotton and Cameron Hill, while Ryan Cooney, Rob Harker and Callum Styles also featured.

The Shakers youngsters received exposure to men's football during fixtures with Rochdale, Blackburn Rovers and Stoke City Under-21s and helped the club progress to the last 16 of the competition, where they will face Fleetwood Town.

Academy manager Mark Litherland said: "Since I came to the club three and a half years ago, we've had 19 players make their debut from the academy. We want to give them experience of the first-team and the Checkatrade Trophy provides those extra set of games to give some of the lads that opportunity.

"We have two or three youth players train with the first-team each week, so they get the chance to make an impression there and then the Checkatrade provides a further opportunity to test themselves in a match.

"It's important because it shows them where they are and how close they are to being ready because some of them find it easy in the Under-18s and we don't have an Under-21s team to bridge the gap between youth team and senior team."

The competition includes 16 Category One Under-21 outfits, although only four of those clubs progressed to the second round, with Leicester City U21s and Chelsea U21s the only remaining survivors after Swansea City U21s and West Ham United U21s were both knocked out.

"You don't know how they are going to cope until they are given the opportunity and I think we found a situation where a couple did very well and some perhaps struggled a little because they're just not ready physically yet," Litherland added.

"But the important thing for us was to see that they have belief in themselves and each of the lads involved took it in their stride. They are all capable tactically and they showed they're ready mentally. Now for some of them it's just making sure they're up to the task physically and that will come as they continue their development."



CAMBRIDGE UNITED

Sixteen-year-old midfielder Ben Worman watched from the bench in Cambridge's opening two outings before becoming the club's youngest player in a competitive match when appearing for the final seven minutes of their group game with Peterborough United. Meanwhile, second-year Leon Davies earned two starts out of the three fixtures.

LUTON TOWN

Full-back Jack James was introduced as a half-time substitute during Luton's 2-2 draw with Tottenham Hotspur Under-21s. Second-year apprentice Arthur Read joined him on the pitch as a 77th-minute substitute and then came off the bench for the final few minutes of a 4-0 second-round victory over West Ham United Under-21s.

NEWPORT COUNTY

Newport used their final group game with Cheltenham Town to give 90 minutes to Lewis Collins, Thomas Hillman and Evan Press, while Owen Taylor came off the bench to play the final 20 minutes. Jay Foulston had already appeared in the Carabao Cup prior to his two starts in the trophy.

ROTHERHAM UNITED

Left-back Akeem Hinds started two of the three group games. He shone in a convincing 3-0 win over Bradford City, where Northern Ireland youth international Reece McGinley was also introduced as a late substitute. Striker Joshua Kayode came off the bench against Manchester City Under-21s.

SCUNTHORPE UNITED

Second-year apprentice George Hornshaw featured in Scunthorpe's second round fixture with Leicester City Under-21s, having been an unused substitute earlier in the competition. Although the Iron lost the game 2-1, the 17-year-old was named man-of-the-match and shared pitch time with the likes of Kelechi Iheanacho, Daniel Amartey, Aleksandar Dragovic and Premier League winner Leonardo Ulloa.

SHREWSBURY TOWN

Shrewsbury manager Paul Hurst used their fixture with West Brom Under-21s to hand a full debut to 17-year-old Christos Shelis just 24 hours after the defender had signed his first professional contract. Ryan Barnett and first-year apprentice Lifumpa Mwandwe were introduced off the bench for their first senior action during the 3-0 win, while Shelis gained a second outing as an 82nd-minute substitute against Walsall a month later.



THE RENAISSANCE MAN

The Swedish season may have just ended but when the Europa League resumes in February a handful of former apprentices will be given the opportunity to write their names into football folklore.



IN RECENT SEASONS OVER 30% OF PLAYERS HAVE RECEIVED PROFESSIONAL CONTRACTS AFTER EMBARKING ON LFE'S PLAYER PLACEMENT PROGRAMME.

Opportunities to go to Sweden will be available from February 2018 for players who were released at the end of the 2016-17 season. Apprentices who are released at the end of the 2017-18 season will be able to apply to go to Sweden or Spain this summer. Please contact LFE for further information on 01772 326875.

Led by Graham Potter, their intrepid English coach, Curtis Edwards, Doug Bergqvist, Jamie Hopcutt and Andrew Mills will all hope to play a part when Ostersunds FK face Arsenal in the last 32 of European football's second major competition.

It is a tie of David vs Goliath proportions especially when you consider that Arsene Wenger has been manager at Arsenal longer than Ostersunds have been in existence.

Until recently that existence was in the lower reaches of Swedish football, but Potter and his band of English imports have inspired three promotions and also a first trophy, last season, when they won the Swedish Cup.

Mills, the latest recruit, a goalkeeper who hails from Huyton in Liverpool, had been discarded by Macclesfield Town, when LFE provided him with assistance by sending him out to Sweden on the Player Placement programme.

"I'd stopped playing and lost the love [for football] after being released, so it was a big thing," he told Touchline.

"I spoke to LFE and they were really helpful explaining how it would be and that it might be a good opportunity to get back into football. It was tough moving away because I was close to my Mum and little brother but now they see this and how far I've come and are really proud. She always says it's the best decision I've ever made, which I agree with.

"I started off in Division Four. I went from being at Macclesfield to the 5th or 6th tier in Swedish football."

It was a startling life change, as was dealing with the sub-zero temperatures that have been known to plummet towards minus 20 in Northern Sweden where Mills was located. It was certainly a far cry from the North West of England.

While Arsenal's superstar players are likely to test that comfort zone further, it is not a concept that the Ostersund players are unfamiliar with. The OFK players performed Tchaikovsky's ballet Swan Lake to local residents last summer before more recently producing a concert, where the squad were asked to rap on stage.

"It was in front of two-and-a-half-thousand people," Mills said. "I'm not a singer or a rapper by any stretch but it was a good experience, something I'd never done before and it opens your mind to what you can do and your confidence grows from it.



"As a football player, when you take yourself outside of the football pitch and put yourself in that kind of environment it does make you braver facing other situations you're not used to."

Mills's story is one of perseverance and hard work and he is making the most of the opportunity he has been handed.

"I have loved it and wouldn't change any part of my journey," he adds.

"It's all just one big learning curve and I've matured as a person. Starting at the lower level you see the bigger clubs out here on TV and it feels a million miles away but one or two good seasons can change everything. It's crazy.

"When I first moved over I could just about make beans on toast but you get used to it and start to enjoy things like that. You have to adapt and cooking is now one of my favourite hobbies."

Mills had been in Sweden for just over three-and-a-half-years, earning contracts with various clubs when his big chance arrived in the summer.

"I'd signed at IFK Ostersund in Division Two but the manager said there would be opportunities with Ostersunds FK, the team managed by Graham (Potter) which was a big attraction and convinced me to turn down other offers," he continued.

"Within the first two weeks at IFK, Ostersunds called me up to go on a pre-season tour to Tenerife because they needed a keeper. When the second choice goalkeeper at Ostersunds got injured, I was called-up to their Europa League squad away at Galatasaray.

"We went to the ground three hours before kick-off and all their fans were booing and going crazy. It was what you'd imagine an away game at Galatasaray to be like, especially after we'd beaten them 2-0 at our ground.

"It just made the experience more special, seeing that kind of atmosphere."

A permanent transfer will see Mills sign a one-year deal at the Swedish top flight club in January when he will again become eligible to feature in the Europa League, after their passage was confirmed by a 2-0 victory over Zorya Luhansk in November.

"It was kind of surreal really because you're checking like how AC Milan, Arsenal, teams like that, who I've always watched growing up on TV, were doing, just in case we got them," Mills said. "I was hoping we'd get Everton but they haven't got through. I've got a few mates that are Blues back home and they've messaged me saying it's funny that we're still in it and they are out."



FORMER APPRENTICES SHARE THEIR EXPERIENCES

To a certain extent it is true that football is a numbers game, whether that's points, attendances or finance. The notion also applies to professional footballers and contracts particularly at 18 years of age, when there are more apprentices completing apprenticeships than professional contracts on offer.

Yet despite leaving Crewe Alexandra in the summer, things are adding-up for Goalkeeper Jake Hilton who is now following his passion for numbers at Loughborough University.

Hilton arrived in the East Midlands a month after departing the Sky Bet League Two club to start pre-season training at a University famous for its academic and sporting prowess.

A top ten University in every national league table, Loughborough also enjoys an unbroken 37-year record of being the British Universities and Colleges Sport Champions. It has also had success helping former apprentices back into professional football. The most recent, George Williams, went full circle, returning to MK Dons - the club that released him as an apprentice - via Barnsley but with a degree in Sports Science and Management degree to boot.

Like Williams, Hilton is keen to make the most of student life having started a Foundation Year with the objective of earning a degree in Mathematics further down the line.

"I always enjoyed Maths, so I thought that would fit with coming to University and continuing my education," he said.

"The foundation year allows me to progress that. I've always enjoyed doing it and always been good at it so I thought that is where I want to go. Even when I signed my apprenticeship, I'd always thought about University so I kept up my effort educationally and got good results on the BTEC which allowed me to get a place here.



Jake Hilton

"As part of the foundation year I have to complete multiple subjects. I've got Biology, Chemistry, Sports Science and Maths to get me through onto the next phase of the course and the ultimate aim of getting a degree in Maths at the end."

Hilton admitted that he is already enjoying his new freedom away from home. "Nights out and socialising" was high on the agenda earlier in the term but he has also balanced that against academic requirements, stressing that the school of hard knocks, that is professional football, has stood him in good stead.

"I've had that practice of being in a working environment for the last two years which has allowed me to come here and enjoy myself," he said.

"Yes it's going to be hard work but you're going to come out of it with a degree which takes you on in life doing what you love and have a passion for.

"You work on being independent, your organisation, making sure you turn up to lectures on time at the right place, making sure your work is organised, completed and handed in on time and life management. You couldn't turn up to a job late and expect not to be in trouble. You have to be on time and work to the best of your ability.

"That's what the last two years have prepared me for at Crewe. We had coaches that were tough on us, trying to make us the best we could be and that's what's helped me progress to University."

When Dan Murray was sat on the treatment table at Wolverhampton Wanderers he could not have imagined that it would lead directly down another path.

As a young player, football is all about being given breaks. Opportunities to impress and develop and show that you merit a professional contract.

So for midfielder Dan, who moved out of his family home in Stockport to live in digs in the Black Country, a broken leg and long period of rehabilitation was exactly the sort of impediment that every youngster fears.

While five of his peers signed professional deals at Molineux, a decision was delayed on Murray. Hope remained temporarily but he had lost too much ground and was eventually released.

Three years on, none of Murray's five former teammates remain at Wolves. However his experiences at the club did spark an interest in another area and he is now midway through a BSc (Hons) in Physiotherapy at Salford University.

"I spent close to a year with the physios and it was just picking things up and looking at everyone else's injuries that caught my interest. I got talking to the physio's and it just triggered from there," he said.

"You need that other interest because if you have a bad day at football it can take your mind off it. Obviously I still had aspirations to be a footballer but then it was always in my mind that being a physio was a good job that I'd be interested in."

The course at Salford is one that proves popular with footballers due to its long established link with the Professional Footballers' Association. Last summer's graduates included the former West Bromwich Albion and QPR striker Rob Hulse and one-time Manchester City and Burnley left-back Stephen Jordan.



Dan Murray

Murray, who did an A Level in Biology ahead of joining the student ranks, stressed that while it has been an academic "step-up", many of the traits he identified with professional football have enabled him to settle quickly and enjoy his new surroundings.

"There probably is a gap between the education programme at Wolves and coming to University but if you're willing to put your mind to it and work hard you can bridge that quite easily," he added. "It's one of those subjects where you think, 'I'm going to have to treat patients in the future', it's really important that I don't just scrape through but aim to be the best physio possible.

"I've made some great friends here. At football everything is quite competitive, there is a certain self-interest battling for a professional contract. But this is a nice environment to come into. You're pitched together with other students, people are prepared to stay behind and help each other, you're working together for the same thing, we do a lot of group work, we go out socially and it's a really nice vibe.

"I started doing this from a sporting background, thinking treating ankle and knee injuries is what physiotherapy is about and then you learn about other things particularly on placements to hospitals. I recently had to give a 30 minute talk to 20 members of NHS staff on frailty which is something from a sporting interest I'd not had much interest in but when you're in a hospital it's different and it changed my perspective."



continued...

Tyler Guy may not have ventured far since leaving Meadow Lane in the summer of 2013 but he has already covered significant ground on his journey towards a new career.

The former Notts County defender is now in his fourth year at Nottingham Trent University, which is located less than a couple of miles away from the club he served as an apprentice.

After graduating with an Upper Second-Class Honours (2:1) degree in Law in the summer, Guy turned his attention to the next phase of his training to become a solicitor and embarked on a postgraduate, Legal Practice Course.

This covers topics like Taxation, Accounting and Litigation while enhancing skills developed on his degree in areas like drafting documentation, advocacy and interviewing to support his next career goal.

"I'm looking to pursue a career as a solicitor specialising in Sports Law," Guy told Touchline.

"When I was playing football that was the goal. That was all that was initially in my mind but when I started that second year of my apprenticeship I decided that I would apply for University.

"I've always been really interested in the legal side of Sport and it's a growing area with intermediaries, player's contracts and the finance now in football.

"When I first started playing football I was under the impression that a club consisted of the manager, coaches and playing staff and that was it. From working in a club and in the industry on a daily basis you begin to understand that there are so many things going on around football and sport in the UK.



Tyler Guy

It opened my eyes to think that there are loads more things that I can do in Sport apart from playing.

"A lot of lads in football think they are going to be footballers so why plan for anything else but I thought it was important to have another avenue. It's not to say I wasn't fully focussed on football but it was good to keep my options open.

"I can't begin to explain how quickly three years has gone. I'm in my fourth year at University and it seems two minutes since I was starting a scholarship. Everyone is in the same boat when you get to University. You fit in straight away. It's a week of getting to know everyone and then off you go."

Thriving on the student lifestyle and social life that surrounds Higher Education, Guy has nevertheless also admitted that he has been pleasantly surprised by the standard and level of interest in University football.

"My football experience got better when I came to University," he added. "It's a really solid level of football and there are a lot of lads in the same position as me who have been at professional clubs. I had the best football experience I've ever had playing in the Varsity match against the University of Nottingham in front of a crowd of around 6,000 people at the end of the year. It was amazing."

ERASMUS TOUR

Four academy coaches from English Football League clubs spent five days in Spain on a trip organised by League Football Education. Here Grimsby Town PDP coach Callum Lester tells Touchline about his experience learning La Liga style.

Our first stop of the trip was at the famous academy of Sevilla, which has produced players such as Sergio Ramos, Jesus Navas and Jose Antonio Reyes, to name a few.

We were greeted by the staff of Sevilla C and sat in on their daily meeting before talking to their staff, from psychologists to tactical analysts to the coaches themselves, one of which was 2010 World Cup winner Carlos Marchena. We talked in depth about their philosophy, training model, day to day running, as well as them answering all our questions. I was stunned by the togetherness of the staff and their trust in each other.

We viewed a sample of the first-team and Under-19s training sessions, we were able to chat with some of the youth coaches, who detailed how they prepare for their opposition and the methods they use to develop players to highest level - nothing was out of bounds.

Visiting the Andalusian FA was next on the agenda, which is the equivalent of a County FA in England. This gave us an insight into their regional centre and how it fed to the national team, which was a completely different structure to England and where they believe they've had major success from.

In the afternoon, we were fortunate enough to be VIPs to watch Sevilla Under-19s against Liverpool Under-19s in the UEFA Champions League Youth game. Liverpool won the game 4-0 and it was interesting to examine the contrast in styles between the English side that were very quick and powerful on the break, while the Spaniards were highly technical and determined to dominate possession.

On day three, we made the short trip over the bridge to Real Betis, where Real Madrid's Dani

Ceballos and West Ham United keeper Adrian came through the ranks. The club had more of a family feel to it - smaller in size, training pitches closer together, but top-notch facilities. We had the opportunity to watch the Under-19s, B team and first-team train, who were all working at the same time and on adjacent fields and shared the same focus on tactical play.

We then headed to Granada CF, who operate in the second tier and can claim credit for producing Tottenham Hotspur striker and 2010 World Cup winner Fernando Llorente from their academy.

We met Luis Fradua and Oscar Felipe, who are responsible for nurturing the next generation of youth products. We worked through their whole coaching program and spoke with their sports scientist - I was in awe of how structured and detailed they are in their preparation.

Malaga was the setting for the final day of the trip, which was an intriguing prospect considering their demise with money struggles in recent years.

Coach Manel Ruano delivered a presentation discussing his methodology in great detail. Watching him lead training, it was evident that he is an excellent coach and it was a great privilege to have a front row seat. He even stepped out of the session at one point, allowing his assistants to take over, so that he could talk to us and hear our thoughts.

We sat as a group as he debriefed and self-reflects before asking us if we had any questions, which sparked more interesting discussion. It was a great end to a fantastic visit and I look forward to sharing my experiences with colleagues and extended members of the footballing family.





CAREERS DAY AT SHEFFIELD UNITED

When you arrive at Sheffield United it is easy to see that their 'Forged in Steel' motif is more than just a gimmick. Forging belief and identity runs through almost everything they do.

That message reverberates around the Steelphalt Academy, one of the most productive academies around when statistics turn towards top flight appearances. Graduates include Kyle Walker, Dominic Calvert-Lewin and Harry Maguire, not that anyone is getting carried away here.

Instead methods remain anchored to honesty, integrity, respect and the holistic development of all their players. This approach encourages players to maximise their academic potential, work on life skills and provides careers days designed to support apprentices beyond the football pitch.

"We try to tell our players that education is not part of Plan B, it is part of Plan A in terms of helping them to become a better person, a better footballer and giving them a better understanding of the game they play," said the Blades Head of Education, Mark Wilgose.

"We want them to broaden their horizons and define themselves as something other than just a footballer. There is more to them than just football. They have got a lot of fantastic qualities that have nothing to do with them kicking a football and it's about them realising that and developing their full potential.

"From Day One we try to do that. When we're working on the NVQ or BTEC, we say, 'think about how this will help on the pitch and how this will help you in life'. We're getting them to appreciate how they can develop as a person."

For every case like David Brooks', the most recent academy product to make headlines, the Blades consciously try to help players realise they will not fall off a cliff edge if they are not given professional contracts at the club.

Higher Education, American Scholarships and other employment opportunities are all presented with equal significance.

"We wanted to put some options before them that might help them moving forward so we've brought people in who showcased fairly well trodden routes," Wilgose added.

Goalkeeper Hugo Warhurst, who has featured for both the club's U18 and U23 sides, expressed his interest in one of those.

"I like the idea of going out to America from a football and academic perspective," he said.

"That would cover everything that I'd want. The set-up and facilities look really professional. It looks like it goes above and beyond what is on offer in the UK. Just to have something else in your armoury like a degree means you can go on to do whatever you want in the future."

Full-back George Cantrill, another to have played for the U23s and U18s, in addition to being an unused substitute for the first-team, already has a more defined pathway in mind.

"I'd personally like to do something in construction like a Level 3 in Quantity Surveying," he said.

"You can move onto property development and things like that. It's a career that has good stability to it. There'll be a point where I'd like to know what I'm going to be doing in five or ten years' time and not moving around the country from club-to-club, looking for contracts, especially if I had a family to look after.

"With football you aren't guaranteed that. You could get injured and even if you have a long career there is a lot of time left in life after football."

Football may offer few career guarantees, but making sure their young players are equipped for life is more than just a catchphrase at Bramall Lane.

Under-17 World Cup winners

Three current apprentices became world champions in October as England lifted the Under-17 World Cup for the first time in the country's history with a 5-2 win against Spain in India.



Steven Sessegnon (Fulham), Morgan Gibbs-White (Wolves) and Billy Crellin (Fleetwood Town) were all members of the victorious squad, with Sessegnon providing two assists and Gibbs-White scoring the equaliser in the final to help the Young Lions overturn an early two-goal deficit.

The success adds more glory to an outstanding 2017 for England at youth level. The young lions were crowned victors at the Under-20 World Cup, Under-20 Toulon Tournament and European Under-19 Championship. They also finished runners-up in the European Under-17 Championship.

WORLD AT THEIR FEET

Joe Gomez England debut

Former Charlton Athletic apprentice Joe Gomez became a full international in November when he helped England's senior side keep clean sheets against the top two ranked nations in the world, Germany and Brazil.

The 20-year-old, who was nominated for LFE's Championship Apprentice of the Year award in 2015, was named Under-21 captain in August, but received his first senior call-up after becoming a regular in Jurgen Klopp's Liverpool team this season.

Gomez kept the likes of Leroy Sane and Mesut Ozil at bay when he replaced the injured Phil Jones as a 25th minute substitute against World Champions Germany, before making his full debut against Brazil, producing a man-of-the-match display to nullify the threat of world transfer record holder Neymar for the full 90 minutes.

Elsewhere, Under-20 World Cup winner Lewis Cook was also called into the senior squad for the first time ahead of the second friendly with Brazil, although he remained an unused substitute.



Here is a list of all apprentices past and present to claim silverware for England's youth teams this year:

Under-20 World Cup

- Dominic Calvert-Lewin (formerly of Sheffield United)
- Harry Chapman (Middlesbrough)
- Lewis Cook (formerly of Leeds United)
- Dael Fry (Middlesbrough)
- Ezri Konsa (Charlton Athletic)
- Ademola Lookman (formerly of Charlton Athletic)
- Luke Southwood (Reading)

Under-20 Toulon Tournament

- David Brooks (Sheffield United)
- George Hirst (Sheffield Wednesday)
- Ryan Schofield (Huddersfield Town)
- Josh Tymon (formerly of Hull City)
- Joe Worrall (Nottingham Forest)

European Under-19 Championship

- Ben Brereton (Nottingham Forest)
- Andre Dozzell (Ipswich Town)
- Tayo Edun (Fulham)
- Aaron Ramsdale (formerly of Sheffield United)
- Ryan Sessegnon (Fulham)

Under-17 World Cup

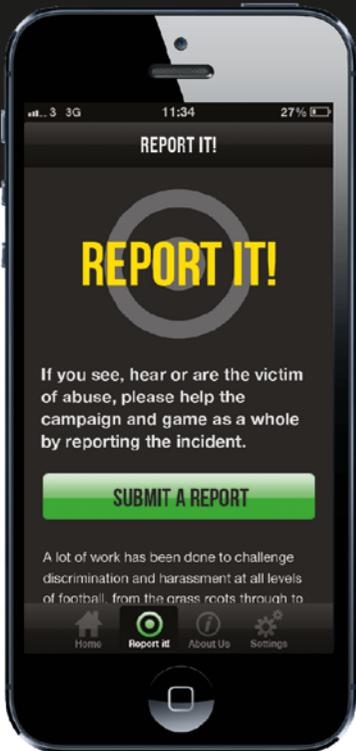
- Billy Crellin (Fleetwood Town)
- Morgan Gibbs-White (Wolverhampton Wanderers)
- Steven Sessegnon (Fulham)



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MFC Academy @ShrimpsAcademy
 Thanks to @LFEonline and @DameKellysTrust for the Life Skills Event for our Under 18s and @CUFCAcademy today at the Globe Arena. Very rewarding and helpful for all the young players involved.



The RUFC Academy @AcademyRUFC
 LFE Education and futures event today at the stadium @OfficialRUFC @LFEonline



LFE @LFEonline
 Arrived and set at a very wet Christopher Park Training Ground for @LaticsOfficial under 18's vs @ASFCofficial under 18's



LFE @LFEonline
 A good 'My Future Today' session with the @LCFCAcademy, @AcademyRUFC and @DRFC_Academy apprentices. #PersonalDevelopment #MFT



Duncan Fearnhead @duncanfearnhead
 It was a great experience and opportunity to visit Spain with @LFEonline on the #LFEcoachtrip - everyone who is seriously looking to improve should be doing things like this.



AFTA Thought @AFTA_Thought
 We've got a busy day with the team working with 2 clients! We're with @LFEonline in Doncaster delivering our #MyFutureToday training, & we're also working with @SafeNet_UK & @NHCSR #busybees





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