

No. 38 / JUNE 2019

# Touchline

League  
Football  
Education

# MAX BIRD

TOUCHLINE TALKS TO DERBY COUNTY'S  
MAX BIRD FRESH FROM BEING CROWNED  
THE LFE APPRENTICE OF THE YEAR



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



**EFL AWARDS**  
2019

Apprentices past and present received recognition in various categories at the 2019 EFL Awards.

**LFE APPRENTICE OF THE YEAR**

Max Bird (*Derby County*)

**LFE LEAGUE ONE APPRENTICE OF THE YEAR**

Dan Adshead (*Rochdale AFC*)

**LFE LEAGUE TWO APPRENTICE OF THE YEAR**

Arthur Iontton (*Stevenage FC*)

**EA SPORTS YOUNG PLAYER OF THE SEASON**

Max Aarons (*Norwich City*)

**SIR TOM FINNEY AWARD**

Joe Thompson (*formerly of Rochdale AFC*)

**PFA PLAYER IN THE COMMUNITY**

Will Vaulks (*formerly of Tranmere Rovers*)

**PFA LEAGUE TWO PLAYER IN THE COMMUNITY**

Dan Butler (*formerly of Portsmouth*)

**FOOTBALL MANAGER TEAM OF THE SEASON**

Max Aarons (*Norwich City*)  
Liam Cooper (*formerly of Hull City*)  
Krystian Pearce (*formerly of Birmingham City*)  
James Justin (*Luton Town*)  
Alex Mowatt (*formerly of Leeds United*)



**Progression Guides**

For those thinking about going to University or heading out to the United States on a Soccer Scholarship, LFE's 'Higher Education Guide' and 'Guide to American Scholarships' provide extensive information on application processes, entry requirements and include accounts from former apprentices regarding their experiences.

[www.lfe.org.uk/downloads/apprentice-downloads](http://www.lfe.org.uk/downloads/apprentice-downloads)



**Erasmus+ Player Placement Programme**  
Sweden



Another crop of former apprentices have been sent out to Sweden via LFE's Erasmus+ Player Placement programme, which sends players out to Scandinavia for three months.

Around 40 per cent of players have gained professional contracts following the initial placement period since the scheme began in 2008, with 19 youngsters making the switch to foreign soil on this occasion.



Ytterhogdals IK	Former Club
Jake Davies	Burton Albion
Harry Turner	Fleetwood Town
Liam Collings	Fleetwood Town

Gottne IF	Former Club
Ciaran Gordon-Stearn	Luton Town
Graham Bryan	Oxford United
Mwiya Malumo	Wigan Athletic

Bodens BK	Former Club
Craig Thordarson	Blackpool

IFK Östersund	Former Club
Sam Tingle	Barnsley
Theo White	Gillingham

IFK Mora	Former Club
Lewis Clayton	Cheltenham Town
George Keys	Colchester United
Adao Manuel	Crewe Alexandra
Bilal Sesay	Grimsby Town
Matt Mayes	Portsmouth

IFK Holmsund	Former Club
Lanre Balogun	Dagenham & Redbridge
Sam Salis	Dagenham & Redbridge
Ty-Rhys Paul-Jones	Grimsby Town

ESKilstuna City	Former Club
Mekhi Hyde	Dagenham & Redbridge
Leroy Hlabi	Gillingham

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# Academy Leagues Round-Up

## North East Division

Mansfield Town's three-year supremacy at the summit of the North East section came to an end in May after Grimsby Town sealed silverware in a dramatic season finale.

Doncaster Rovers appeared to be heading for the title when they overcame the Mariners 3-0 at the end of March, with 26-goal striker Rieves Boockock bagging a hat-trick.

But they gifted away top spot on the final day after suffering a 2-1 defeat to Notts County, while Neil Woods' Grimsby edged a 1-0 win against Lincoln City thanks to first-year apprentice Lennon Stead, who broke the deadlock in the 94th minute after keeper Ollie Battersby had earlier saved a penalty.

County were also responsible for pushing third-placed Bradford City out of contention as they triumphed 4-1 in April, with the Bantams completing the campaign three points adrift.

## North West Division

Wigan Athletic proved to be almost unstoppable this season as they claimed an unprecedented treble, winning the North West division, EFL Youth Alliance Cup and Lancashire FA Youth Cup.

The Latics boasted the best defensive record in the region and scored the most goals too, led by prolific striker Charlie Jolley, who notched over 40 goals in all competitions this season.

Peter Murphy's talented youngsters remained unbeaten in the league until the middle of April, having already wrapped up the title with a 2-0 victory over Bury thanks to a double from 17-year-old Mackenzie O'Neill.

Their closest challengers were last year's champions Rochdale AFC, although they were 11 points behind the runaway leaders, while Preston North End - one of just two teams to beat Wigan - were third.

## Southern Merit League One

Southend United's Under-18s made history by becoming the club's first Southern Merit League One winners, finishing three points clear of the chasing pack.

The Shrimpers secured the crown with an impressive 4-1 win against Portsmouth having fielded their exciting three-pronged strike force of Charlie Kelman, Freddy Eastwood and Matt Rush. Kelman struck his 19th youth team goal of the season and Eastwood bagged a brace to take his tally to 17, while Rush was also on the scoresheet to top the trio with 23.

Swindon Town had been contenders heading into the final game, but were beaten 3-0 by South West regular season champions Oxford United, with both sides ending on 20 points.

However, they were both trumped by AFC Wimbledon, who sealed the runners-up spot on goal difference, with their only defeat of the Merit League phase coming in April against the eventual pacesetters.

## Southern Merit League Two

It was a bizarre conclusion to Southern Merit League Two as Forest Green Rovers and Plymouth Argyle were forced to share the honours after registering the same points, goal difference, goals scored and head-to-head record.

The Pilgrims had held an outright lead until losing their penultimate game 1-0 to third-placed Bristol Rovers, while Forest Green cruised past Cambridge United 4-0 to set up a grandstand finish.

Argyle set down the marker with an incredible 9-1 victory over Newport County, but Rovers responded the following day with a 7-3 conquest over 2018 winners Leyton Orient, with Sam Hendy and Dan Jones netting twice each before 16-year-old Ethan Hill struck the crucial seventh late on.

It marks an impressive turnaround for Forest Green, who were rooted to the bottom of the table last season.

## U18 Professional Development League North

Sheffield Wednesday enjoyed a terrific end to the season as they produced a double success, leading the way in the North before claiming the National crown following a nail-biting 3-2 victory over Cardiff City.

The young Owls sealed the regular season title against their arch-rivals Sheffield United, with Conor Grant's spot-kick earning a 1-1 draw, meaning their commanding goal difference advantage saw off the challenge of defending champions Leeds United.

Wednesday's first-year apprentice Charles Hagan completed the season as the leading goalscorer in the region with 15 strikes, including the opener in the National final.

Elsewhere, third-placed Nottingham Forest slipped away at the turn of the year, but did have cause for optimism in April when they thumped Coventry City 7-1 as Will Swan and Keith Asare both grabbed hat-tricks.

## U18 Professional Development League South

A poor run of two defeats and a draw to close out the season proved costly for Ipswich Town as they missed out on the Southern title on goal difference to Cardiff City.

The Tractor Boys triumphed home and away, with Lounes Foudil scoring in both 2-1 wins, but 4-0 defeats to both Sheffield clubs and a 1-1 stalemate with Crystal Palace allowed the Bluebirds to snatch top spot.

Millwall were also in the running for the majority of the season, but suffered a similar drop in form, going four games without a win after beating fourth-placed Queens Park Rangers 6-1 in March, with Harry Taylor and Sean O'Brien both netting three each.

## U18 Premier League North

It was a magnificent campaign for Derby County's starlets as they finished above Academy powerhouses like Everton, Liverpool, Manchester City and Manchester United to top the Northern table.

The Rams recorded 10 successive victories between November and March to climb into the lead before eventually overcoming Liverpool on goal difference. Significantly, Justin Walker's team won both matches against their nearest challengers, with England youth international Morgan Whittaker scoring three of his 19 league goals against the Merseysiders.

They then capped things off with National glory by defeating Southern champions Arsenal 5-2 thanks to a hat-trick from first-year apprentice Archie Brown.

Elsewhere, Blackburn Rovers won five of their last six matches to rise a point above Man City in seventh, with James Connolly finding the net four times in successive victories against Wolverhampton Wanderers (3-0), Sunderland (4-1) and Newcastle United (6-1).

## U18 Premier League South

Norwich City may have finished bottom of the Southern section, but they did manage a couple of positive results in March as Anis Mehmeti and Under-16 player Thomas Dickson-Peters both doubled up during a 5-0 victory over Aston Villa, while the Canaries then held 2017-18 National champions Chelsea to a goalless draw.

Villa endured a difficult 2019, with just 11 points from a possible 33 - a run that saw them fall to sixth position. Aaron Pressley's opening minute strike against Leicester City contributed to them finishing above the Foxes on goal difference, with the Villains also seeing off fourth-placed Southampton 3-1.

Elsewhere, Fulham were another team to struggle down the stretch, although they did play out an exciting encounter with Chelsea as second-year striker Timmy Abraham scored twice in a 4-3 defeat.





# SETTING THE STANDARD

DERBY COUNTY'S MAX BIRD HAS MADE HIMSELF THE BENCHMARK FOR YOUNG FOOTBALLERS ACROSS THE COUNTRY

From a selection of almost 1,200 Academy players, the 18-year-old was the standout candidate to receive the distinguished LFE Apprentice of the Year award, being honoured for his exceptional efforts as a player, a student and a person.

He told LFE: "I couldn't have wished for much more. All I can do is thank everyone at the club, players and staff from the Under-18s through to the Under-23s and the first-team.

"It's a proud moment for me to join some big names on the list of winners and as long as I follow their footsteps and keep improving, that's all I can hope for."

The signs that Bird would be a high achiever were evident from the very start of his apprenticeship in July 2017.

Within four months, the talented midfielder had earned his first-team bow in the Carabao Cup, penned a three-year professional contract and been named in LFE's 'The 11' having immediately struck a healthy balance between his football and academic responsibilities.

"Most lads probably don't particularly enjoy the college part, but I think it's good for us," said Bird. "It keeps your brain working in a different way and it's important to have additional interests so that your mind isn't constantly on football.

"It widens your range of knowledge. Football is a very physical activity, but it's also mentally demanding at times and you need to have other interests away from the game to deal with that.

"When you're at home, you're not thinking about football all the time. You have to have a certain level of motivation and drive to be the best you can be but you need interests outside of the game to keep you mentally right."

Due to his commitments with the Under-23s and the first-team, Bird decided against studying the Extended Diploma, but has already organised arrangements to continue his studies next season in order to achieve the extra units.

The Rams starlet has also benefited from the club's substantial Life Skills programme, designed by Head of Education & Welfare Simon Ord, which has covered a range of topics such as addiction, driving awareness, financial advice and emotional well-being.

He continued: "The college work and the sessions we do with Simon are very important. Simon's a big part in me winning the Apprentice of the Year award because it's not just on the pitch, it's off the pitch as well.

"We've done sessions on Friday mornings looking at life skills, how to manage different things and also more team-bonding activities. There are plenty of stories out there of footballers suffering with gambling or addiction as well.

"We have had former players coming in and speaking to us about how to prevent yourself from being involved with that sort of thing. As a footballer, you can have all the money in the world but you can lose it with the click of a finger if you're silly with it.



## MAX BIRD

 Derby County FC

"When you come into the Academy you start getting paid and ex-professionals have spoken to us saying that they gambled away their first pay cheques, so it's important we hear about this at a young age because we can learn to take care of our money and identify the consequences of addiction."

Bird has also immersed himself with community and charity work, contributing to the club's Shoe Aid project and using his FA Level 2 Coaching badge to deliver sessions with local primary school children.

This leadership in the classroom and in the community has seen the second-year apprentice transfer those skills onto the pitch, where he was given the Under-23s captaincy despite being one of the youngest in the group.

"The primary school came in and we created a sports day theme," he said. "We split them up into little groups and had different stations of dodgeball, throwing and catching and various football games."



"The kids seemed to enjoy it and it's good for us as apprentices to be able to use our coaching skills that we learned from the qualification and also to become role models to them, to inspire them and make them smile."

"You're not just here as a footballer, you're here to become a better person. You're here to learn off the pitch as well as on it. We're very fortunate to come in here and have your kit laid out, boots cleaned, food provided for you and all that, so it's important that you give something back to the community and those less fortunate."

"The first-team go to different events and we can learn from them and start early. You learn how to talk to people. You learn that punctuality and humility are vital. The transition into higher age groups is harder for some players than others and it's important that you learn from people who have done it before and evaluate how you can approach it in the best way."

Bird is not the only player to improve as a result of Derby's focus on personal development. The Under-18s topped the Premier League North division, seeing off the likes of Manchester United, Manchester City and Liverpool, before beating Arsenal to become National Champions. Meanwhile, the Under-23 side reached the quarter-finals of the Premier League Cup.

"It sort of links to what happens on the pitch. You become a really tight unit as a team and you build a common competitiveness and togetherness that is taken out onto the pitch," he added.

"In previous years I think we've seen groups gel slowly over the course of a season, whereas this year, with all the different sessions and meetings that we've had, it's sped up that process and helped the team a lot in improving results."

That team unity was in full display recently when Bird's father sadly passed away at the age of just 45 after a short illness, with the highly-rated teenager showing his tremendous strength of character and receiving the utmost support from his peers.

And in the weeks that have followed, Bird was handed his full EFL debut away to Aston Villa and signed an improved deal to keep him at Pride Park until 2022 before collecting the Sky Bet Championship and Overall Apprentice of the Year awards.

He said: "The support that I've had around the whole football club has been unbelievable - from the coaches and players from every age group - they've been brilliant with me."

"It's been a tough time and it came as a shock, so to have all the support and be able to keep pushing to be a better player and break into the first-team has been amazing."

"I do my college work or I go in the gym and it's just a great place to be, being surrounded by your mates. It keeps me going and I love coming in. It's not something you can take your mind off but the environment I'm surrounded by here gives me a chance to enjoy myself and do what I love."

"I'm glad that I could pick up the award to do my dad proud and make him happy, but also make my family happy - my mum and my brother as well - but especially my dad, who hopefully will be looking down and be proud of me and all I need to do is continue to do that."

Manager Frank Lampard has also been a major influence on the impressive youngster since his arrival last summer.

Bird said: "I have to pinch myself because of what he's done for me and the times we stay out after training. I can only thank him for what he's done and the impact he's had on me. The drive that he's given to me and the motivation... he's a role model to me."

"Having watched him when I was a young kid and seeing him playing the way he did and then for him to be managing me, it's a dream come true. There's no better person to learn from than Frank Lampard."

"I want to be learning from him all the time, whether that's staying behind after training or asking him questions about the position you play, what you need to do to improve."

Meanwhile, Lampard hailed the attitude of his young prodigy and admitted he has high hopes for Bird to follow in the footsteps of recent Academy graduate Jayden Bogle in establishing himself as a first-team regular.

The Chelsea legend said: "Max is a really good young man and an excellent young professional here at Derby County. He wants to learn and take in information and, ever since the first time I called him up to train with the first-team, he has been impressive."

"The attitude of a player is always critical, but even more so as a young player at such an important stage of their development as they try to make the jump from the youth ranks to the first-team. That's why the attitude of a player is just as important as the quality we see on the pitch."

"Max has made that jump this year and handled it really well. You have to have the right character and humility to make that step up and a real desire to work hard and it's clear to see he has that. With the ability Max has got and how he goes about his work, it's only a matter of time until we see more of him in the first-team."



**YOU'RE NOT JUST HERE AS A FOOTBALLER, YOU'RE HERE TO BECOME A BETTER PERSON. YOU'RE HERE TO LEARN OFF THE PITCH AS WELL AS ON IT.**





## DAN ADSHEAD



Rochdale AFC

First-year apprentice Dan Adshead established himself as a member of the Rochdale first-team prior to even starting the apprenticeship, featuring nine times during the 2017-18 season, including a 15-minute cameo against Tottenham Hotspur at Wembley in an FA Cup fifth round replay.

Since becoming an apprentice, the highly-rated midfielder has continued to develop as a player. He captained Dale's first-team in the Checktrade Trophy against Leicester City Under-21s in November and also received his first England Under-18s call-up, scoring on his international debut against the Netherlands.

"It's a massive honour for me, I'm really proud," Adshead told LFE. "There are so many people I could thank - my parents of course, which goes without saying."



"They took me everywhere and still continue to do so, so without them I definitely wouldn't have got this award. Also, the managers and players at Rochdale have been amazing."

Adshead - who was named in LFE's 'The 11' in December - penned a three-year professional contract just days after turning 17 in September, and yet has maintained motivation to stay on target with his education by using his spare time to catch up on work missed as a result of first-team duties.

"It's all about the balance," he continued. "We put a plan in place to fit my education around being with the first-team and we've done well so far. Of course, I love being out on the pitch, but the education side of it is important to me as well."

"Being in that environment at college keeps you grounded and I have learned a lot about leadership in the classroom that I have then been able to take onto the pitch."

Tony Ellis, Academy manager, said: "Dan has been an exemplary apprentice. As a club, his potential was identified very early and he was in the manager's eye from the age of 14. Dan is a credit to himself, his family and to the ethos of Rochdale AFC Academy."

"He exemplifies everything that Rochdale AFC is striving to achieve. He is a product of the Academy's vision and philosophy. Without Dan's talent, character and willingness to learn and improve, he would not be where he is today. He is a model apprentice and a fine young man with the potential of a great future in the game."

Meanwhile, Rochdale Academy graduate Joe Thompson, who won the League Two Apprentice of the Year award back in 2007, told LFE: "Rochdale's work that they've been doing around the Academy and with the young ones is great. I'm sure Dan's going to have an unbelievable career, much better than mine."

"He's already got that recognition of playing for England Under-18s and he's got the right temperament, which is key to staying within the professional game. It's his mentality - he's very head-strong, he knows what he wants to do, he's assured about his ability and he also does the right things off the pitch as well."



## ARTHUR IONNTON



Stevenage FC

A year after Ben Wilmot claimed the League Two prize, Stevenage boast another winner in the form of Arthur Ionnton, who has combined studying the Extended Diploma with consistent first-team action during his second year.

The Under-18s captain suffered a long-term injury last season, but handled the setback admirably before forcing his way into the senior side for the final two fixtures against Exeter City and Wycombe Wanderers, while he has enjoyed plenty of opportunities this term with 21 outings in total having signed a professional deal in July.

Despite being based full-time with the first-team and representing the club at various community events, the 18-year-old has hardly missed a session at college and has remained ahead of schedule with his coursework, working towards at least a triple Distinction standard.



Ionnton's success on and off the pitch encouraged Regional Officer Gavin Willacy to nominate him for LFE's 'The 11' in October, referring to the fact that the midfielder has set an 'excellent example to all other apprentices with his attitude and behaviour'.

"I'm very proud and honoured to have won it and very grateful for the opportunity that Stevenage have given me," the teenager told LFE. "The gaffer and the chairman have put their trust in me, which I'm very grateful for. I've been able to get over 20 games this season, which is a fantastic achievement and one I'm very proud of."

"You can never take anything for granted in football. That's why I've always made sure that my education is up to scratch. You need education because it helps you understand things - I'm learning about sports injuries and that can definitely help me in my career."

Stevenage manager Dino Maamria said: "Arthur is now a fully established first-team member. Since I joined last March, Arthur was spoken of highly by the Academy. I gave him his league debut at the end of last year and his performance over pre-season left myself and the club no choice but to secure his services long term."

Academy manager Robbie O'Keefe added: "Simply a pleasure to work with. Arthur has always been a talented young footballer but his grounded background never allowed him to get too high or too low. Arthur fully deserved to be recognised for his achievement."

"Arthur is the complete role model for anyone who has ambitions to be a footballer. He gives everything and always will. I honestly believe, having known Arthur since he joined the club as an Under-10, that because of his ability and application to his job, he will succeed in the long term."

"It's an absolute joy to see him come all the way through. Arthur has always been a polite and well-mannered young man. He is now full-time with the first-team and I see no reason why he won't go on to make many more appearances for this football club."

# MAX AARONS

**This time last year, Max Aarons was approaching the completion of his apprenticeship, had yet to sign his first professional contract and was still without a first-team appearance.**

Twelve months on, the Norwich City starlet scooped the EA Sports Young Player of the Season award and was named in the EFL Team of the Season following a sensational breakthrough campaign for the Premier League-bound Canaries.

The highly-rated right-back rose to prominence in August after starring in the Carabao Cup, making his senior bow against Stevenage before scoring in a 3-1 victory at top-flight Cardiff City.

Aarons was then thrust into Sky Bet Championship action at the start of September, featuring against bitter rivals Ipswich Town before becoming almost ever-present in Daniel Farke's high-flying line-up, while he has also earned international recognition with four caps for England Under-19s.

"It's a great feeling, I couldn't have expected this year," he told LFE. "I've loved every minute of it and to get these accolades is brilliant.

"At this time last year I was still doing my education. To jump forward a year and be in this position is great. I couldn't have pictured it 12 months ago, so that makes it an even better feeling."

Despite only establishing himself at senior level as a first-year professional, the 19-year-old believes aspects of the apprenticeship, both on and off the pitch, have contributed to his success.

In addition to the variety of Life Skills sessions organised by LFE, Norwich also provide an extensive personal development programme for their Academy players, including hospital and school visits, cooking lessons, serving and cleaning at community lunches at the local 'SOUL Church' and more.

"The way we're taught from the younger age groups just sets you up for coming into the first-team," Aarons said. "Doing some Life Skills classes and different workshops that were put on for us was a massive help.

"It all adds to you as an individual, it makes you more of a well-rounded person. Doing the community stuff and working on the education side of things, it makes the aim not just about football and shows you can do something else, so I'd definitely say it's helped me massively as a person.

"Helping the community is the pinnacle of what you can do as a footballer because you're in a position where you can do that and affect people's lives, so I think that has helped me as well.

"Doing more media duties and stuff like that gets you prepared for different situations. It's what builds you up to being in this position and being able to deal with it. I'm thankful for being given that opportunity while I was an apprentice."



# JOE THOMPSON

**Twelve years after being named LFE League Two Apprentice of the Year, Joe Thompson returned to the EFL Awards stage to collect the prestigious Sir Tom Finney Award.**

Back in 2007, the Rochdale AFC Academy graduate set the standard for all apprentices to follow, breaking into the first-team while also maintaining a great work ethic in the classroom.

Thompson continued to be an inspiration throughout his career, but despite his impressive tally of over 250 competitive appearances, it is the strength and bravery he displayed off the pitch that will define his legacy.

The 30-year-old was first diagnosed with Hodgkin Lymphoma - a rare form of cancer - in 2013 and then relapsed in 2017. Thompson battled back on both occasions and completed his fairytale comeback with the winning goal against Charlton Athletic on the last day of the 2017-18 season to keep Dale in Sky Bet League One.

"For me to receive the recognition for the Sir Tom Finney Award is amazing," Thompson told LFE. "I'm truly blessed and to win it in front of so many of my peers and so many of the guys from Rochdale, as well as my wife, it's a moment I will always savour.

"It doesn't really differ to the Apprentice award. You've got to make sure you're doing everything right off the field. Back then that was education, but you're still a role model and responsibilities come with that.

"Being identified as 'the footballer' follows you around as a young person in an Academy and so it's healthy to have another string to your bow. I'm living proof that showing dedication to the academic side of things doesn't mean that you are limiting your chances in gaining a professional contract.

"I know my mum was ever so proud of that Apprenticeship award and now winning the Sir Tom Finney, she's proud again because to be recognised for football is brilliant, but for me to be recognised as a good person, first and foremost, is what life's all about."

After 13 years as a professional footballer, Thompson called time on his playing days in February, but is already prepared for the next phase of his life and is committed to sustaining his status as a role model for youngsters to admire.

He said: "Football is all I've really been good at and that comes natural to me, so to take myself out of my comfort zone and try to inspire and do as much work within the community as possible and pass down my knowledge that I've experienced through life and football to the young generation, I think that's what it's all about.

"Anything that I can pass down to the younger ones, whether it's to do with off the field matters or actually playing and training, I'll do my best.

"I've gone into motivational speaking, I've gone into working in the media and stuff like that and I see the inspiration that the young ones get and for me that's where I get my satisfaction now, knowing I'm always helping the younger ones in a positive way."



# DEBUTANTS

## A round-up of talented apprentices who recently made their senior debuts



**Jacob Ramsey**  
Aston Villa

**1** Highly-rated midfielder Jacob Ramsey rose to prominence during Aston Villa's FA Youth Cup run this season, with four goals in two games against Swansea City and Reading.

Having signed his first professional contract in January, the second-year apprentice was included on the first-team bench against West Bromwich Albion a month later before being introduced for the final half an hour of a 2-0 defeat at Villa Park.



**Antonis Vasiliou**  
Barnet

**2** After an impressive work experience loan spell with Evo-Stik League South side Berkhamsted FC, Antonis Vasiliou forced his way into first-team reckoning upon his return in March.

The 17-year-old was part of the matchday squad that travelled to Maidstone and was handed a seven-minute cameo during a 2-1 loss in the National League by manager Darren Currie.



**Luca Connell**  
Bolton Wanderers

**3** Republic of Ireland Under-19 international Luca Connell has made significant progress this season, starting the campaign by winning LFE's Goal of the Month in August before forcing his way into the first-team at the turn of the year.

Having appeared as a late substitute in the FA Cup against Walsall, Connell then earned his first start, taking just six minutes to record an assist at Bristol City, while he has now become a regular in Phil Parkinson's line-up in the Sky Bet Championship.



**Noah Chilvers**  
Colchester United

**4** Attacking midfielder Noah Chilvers has progressed from the Under-9s all the way up to the first-team at Colchester United. He was called up to the senior squad for the first time in November, featuring as an unused substitute in the FA Cup against Accrington Stanley.

The second-year apprentice has been a mainstay on the first-team bench since the start of March and was handed his first runout as an 89th-minute substitute during a 3-0 victory over Newport County.



**Rieves Boocock**  
Doncaster Rovers

**5** Rieves Boocock has been prolific in front of goal in the Doncaster Rovers Under-18 team, finding the net over 20 times for the EFL Youth Alliance North East runners-up.

His impressive form led to a call-up to the first-team, coming off the bench during a 3-1 away win at Gillingham in Sky Bet League One before appearing late on in the fifth round of the FA Cup against Crystal Palace.



**James Dodd**  
Exeter City

**6** Second-year apprentice James Dodd penned his first professional contract in April 2018, but had to wait another five months for his first-team bow, which came in the Checktrade Trophy.

The attacking midfielder was introduced off the bench after an hour and contributed to the Grecians' 2-0 win against West Ham United Under-21s alongside fellow apprentices Will Dean and Jack Sparkes, while Jordan Dyer remained an unused substitute.



**Ryan Rydel**  
Fleetwood Town

**7** Eighteen-year-old Ryan Rydel earned his first taste of senior football in September, playing the second 45 minutes of a Sky Bet League One loss at Southend United.

Since then, the left-sided youngster has signed two professional contracts and recently established himself as a first-team regular, helping Fleetwood Town keep clean sheets in his first two starts against Plymouth Argyle and Accrington Stanley.



**Mattie Pollock, Rumarn Burrell & Brandon Buckley**  
Grimsby Town

**8/9/10** Grimsby Town have displayed their commitment to bringing through their youngsters by involving three current apprentices this season. Brandon Buckley was the first to experience competitive action, appearing as an 86th-minute substitute at Doncaster Rovers in the Checktrade Trophy.

Striker Rumarn Burrell, recently signed by Middlesbrough, forced his way into manager Michael Jolley's plans after a prolific goalscoring record at youth level, with the 18-year-old featuring for the latter stages of a Sky Bet League Two defeat to Stevenage in April.

Elsewhere, first-year defender Mattie Pollock, who was included in LFE's 'The 11' shortly after signing his first professional contract in February, made his senior bow four days after Christmas, playing the final 40 minutes of a 2-1 win away to Exeter City.







**Jake Peck**  
Luton Town

**11** Former Luton Town manager Nathan Jones was renowned for giving Academy players first-team opportunities at Kenilworth Road, with Jake Peck becoming the 14th and final debutant during his three-year tenure.

The 18-year-old midfielder was handed his first competitive appearance in the Checktrade Trophy against Milton Keynes Dons, featuring for the dying moments of a 3-0 victory.



**Scott Pollock & Camron McWilliams**  
Northampton Town

**12/13** First-year apprentice Scott Pollock made a rapid jump into the first-team after an impressive start to the season for the Under-18s. Having first been on the bench at Mansfield Town in September, the highly-rated central midfielder made his professional debut in Sky Bet League Two with 45 minutes against Cambridge United.

Pollock then earned his first start three months later, picking up the man-of-the-match award after registering an assist during a 1-1 draw with Mansfield. Meanwhile, 17-year-old Camron McWilliams received his first senior outing in the Checktrade Trophy as a half-time substitute during a 2-0 victory over Fulham Under-21s.



**Harry Robinson**  
Oldham Athletic

**14** Left-footed midfielder Harry Robinson has received plenty of international recognition as an apprentice, representing Northern Ireland at Under-19 level.

The 18-year-old started 2019 with a first-team debut for Oldham Athletic, coming off the bench in the 89th-minute of a 2-0 Sky Bet League Two win against Notts County on New Year's Day, while he has been included in numerous other matchday squads alongside Academy compatriots Ewan McFarlane, Max Norman and Javid Swaby-Neavin.



**Michael Peck & Adam Randell**  
Plymouth Argyle

**15/16** Plymouth Argyle manager Derek Adams used the final Checktrade Trophy group match in November to hand out senior debuts to second-year apprentices Michael Peck and Adam Randell.

With Peck lining up at centre-back and Randell in midfield, the Pilgrims duo both played the full 90 minutes of a 2-0 defeat to Newport County. Elsewhere, Aaron Goulty, Rio Garside, Tom Purrington and Klaidi Lolos were all on the bench, but failed to get on the pitch.



**Tom Pugh**  
Scunthorpe United

**17** Second-year midfielder Tom Pugh was included in Scunthorpe United's pre-season tour to Austria last summer and was then given a competitive debut in the Checktrade Trophy.

Having been left on the bench against Lincoln City, Pugh was handed a brief cameo in a 3-2 defeat to Mansfield Town in October, while he has since been named in LFE's 'The 11' and signed his first professional contract.



**Charlie Kelman**  
Southend United

**18** Striker Charlie Kelman was introduced for the final five minutes of a Checktrade Trophy clash with Southampton Under-21s in November, but it was his Sky Bet League One debut where he truly announced himself on the professional stage.

The first-year apprentice scored with an audacious effort from inside his own half during a 3-2 defeat to Plymouth Argyle. Kelman signed his first pro deal just days later and has gone on to reach double figures in terms of appearances, including two starts at Blackpool and Peterborough United.



**Jacob Bancroft**  
Swindon Town

**19** Powerful forward Jacob Bancroft caught the eye of Swindon Town manager Richie Wellens after a series of impressive displays in the youth team and progressed to the first-team set-up alongside Academy goalkeeper Archie Matthews.

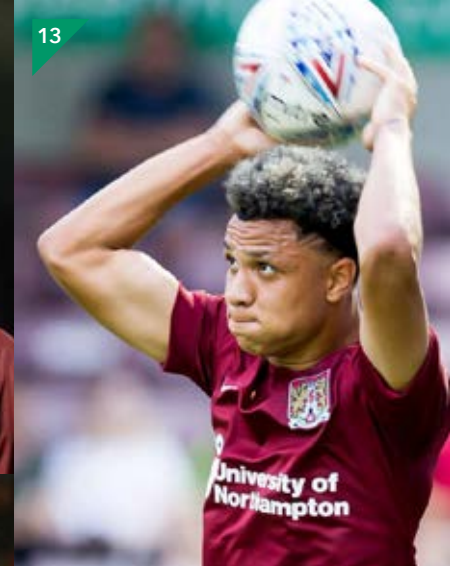
Having been unused against Grimsby Town at the end of February, second-year apprentice Bancroft was rewarded with a senior bow a week later as the Robins beat Colchester United 3-0 in Sky Bet League Two.



**Alfie Bates**  
Walsall

**20** Alfie Bates made the step up to first-team training this season after establishing himself as a leading performer in Walsall's Under-18s side and earned a professional debut in October, playing the full 90 minutes of a 3-1 Checktrade Trophy victory over Middlesbrough Under-21s.

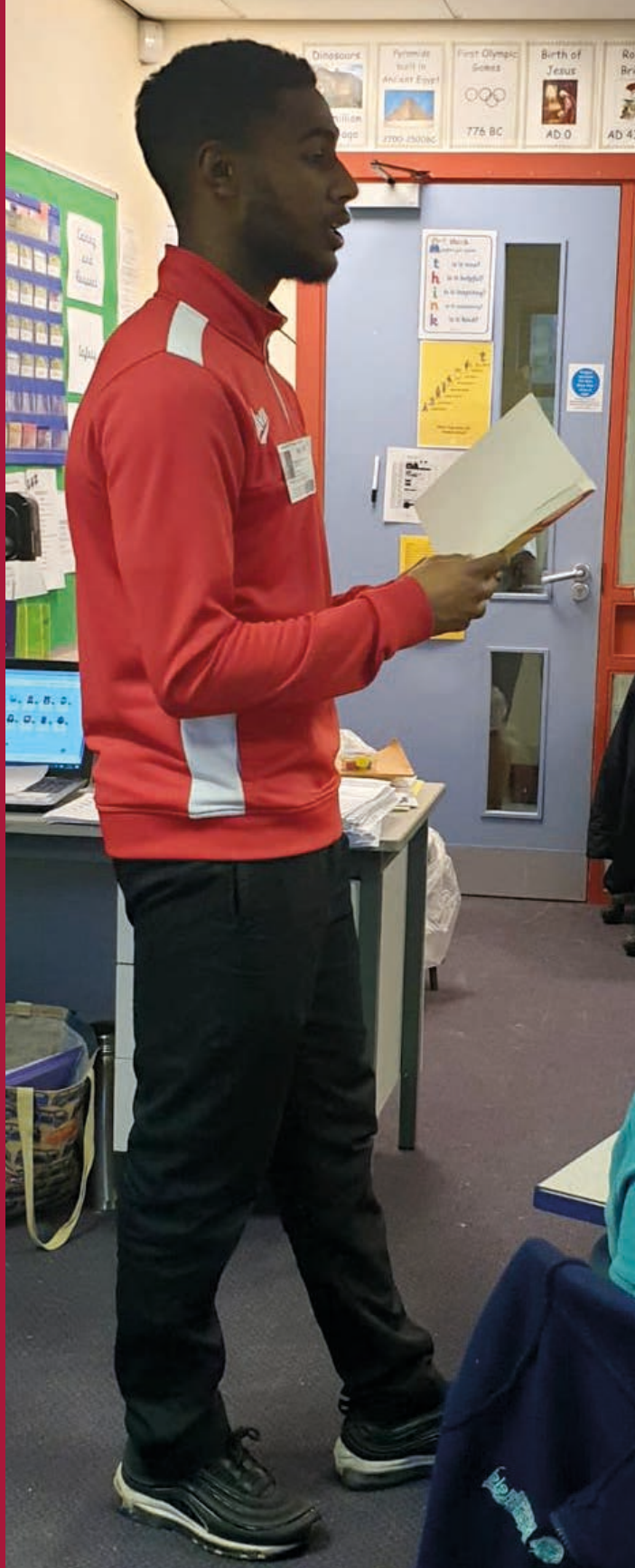
The technical midfielder added another start to his tally in the same competition against Port Vale the following month, with first-year apprentice Alex McSkeane remaining an unused substitute in both games.



# READ ALL ABOUT IT

It has been a season to forget for Bradford City, who lost their Sky Bet League One status after sacking two managers and being rooted to the bottom of the table.

However, second-year apprentice Raeece Ellington has provided an air of positivity by visiting primary schools across the local area to read to young students as part of a scheme led by the National Literacy Trust, a charity working to improve literacy through various community projects.



The 17-year-old volunteered to become a youth ambassador and has used his spare time to read 'Roy of the Rovers' stories, as well as teaching valuable life skills.

"When I was younger, I regularly worked with kids doing coaching and things like that and I really enjoyed it," Ellington told LFE. "When the opportunity came up to read to kids, I thought they could really benefit from it and it can encourage the kids in those areas to stay out of trouble, as well as helping with their literacy. If it can help them and also benefit me, then it's a great thing to do.

"I think it develops maturity when you take on different tasks and become more independent and show that you can handle it. I've become more confident and it puts me in an uncomfortable position to become better as a person.

"Roy is in school and he plays with an Under-16 team and it just discusses his journey. I can link it to my own experience because it contains all the key aspects, from playing in Sunday League to playing in youth teams to getting signed.

"The kids really like the journey that they go on and I show them how being in school benefits them. We talk a lot about resilience and discipline. I ask them for examples of how they'd use resilience for their primary school work, so that's things like answering a question wrong and being able to handle that and work towards the correct answer.

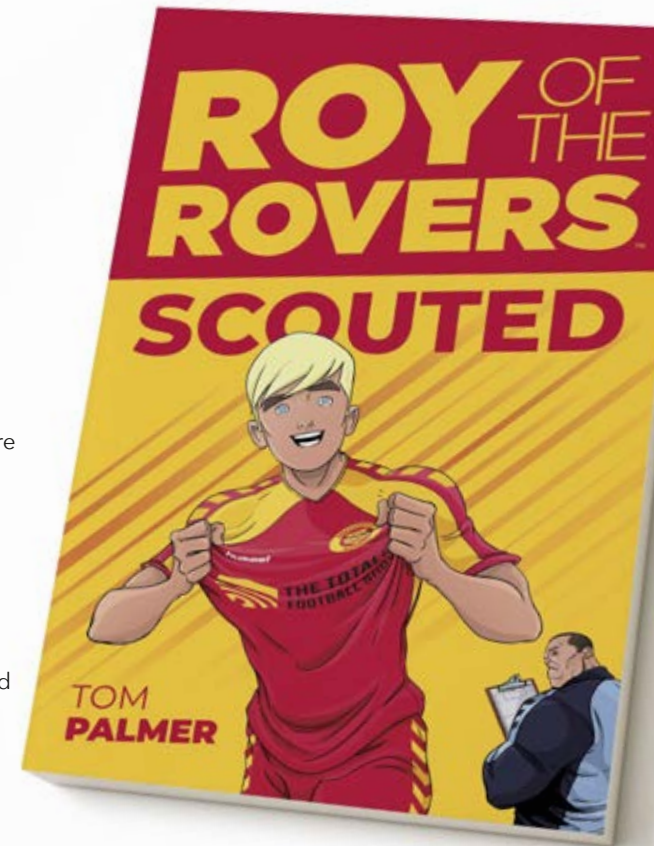
"Then I relate it to football, so if I'm not resilient then I can't overcome challenges like getting better at my technique or recovering from an injury. I really try to instil those key words into their thinking."

The Bantams teenager has enjoyed a successful apprenticeship, achieving the Extended Diploma and progressing into the first-team having earned a senior debut in the Checkatrade Trophy against Oldham Athletic in October.

Ellington believes his community work has been a major factor in inspiring him to develop on and off the pitch.

"It really motivates me because if I do well in football then the children will be able to say 'he used to read books to us', so it pushes me to want to do better and be somebody," he said.

"As footballers, children look up to you and want to be like you. In my talks, I mention Muhammad Ali and how much of a character he was and that being a role model isn't just based on your ability as a footballer or a boxer or a singer, it's also the traits they have as a person and how they come across as a character.



"A lot of the kids are from the local area and support Bradford, so when I come in their eyes are beaming and some of them remember my name from past sessions, so it's great that they seem to really enjoy it and engage with it.

"It also presents the club in more of a positive light. Obviously, the first-team haven't been getting the best results this season, so me representing the club by doing this sort of thing can focus on the positive things that the club are offering.

"After the sessions I get a bit of feedback and I ask the kids whether they're going to read their books and whether they're going to take on board my messages and a few of them have responded saying 'you're my new role model Raeece'.

"To be able to give them advice and give a bit of an insight of what it takes, it feels like I've got a responsibility to help and pass on the knowledge I've gained so far."

A knee meniscus injury has sidelined Ellington for the final few months of the season, but he insists he has maintained a healthy mental state due to his primary school commitments.

## "THE KIDS REALLY LIKE THE JOURNEY THAT THEY GO ON AND I SHOW THEM HOW BEING IN SCHOOL BENEFITS THEM. WE TALK A LOT ABOUT RESILIENCE AND DISCIPLINE."

"Players when they're injured can feel quite lonely, especially if it's a long-term injury," he added. "Having this each week has given me a purpose while I've not been able to get out on the pitch. The injury has actually helped my speeches really because it shows that anything can happen and you have to be resilient in order to bounce back from setbacks."

"I sit at home and think about the reaction of the children and some of the things they say to me and it feels great to think that I'm having a positive influence on them. I can take that into my football, being confident enough to express myself and have a conversation with the manager, and also moving into another job in the future, whenever that will be."

"I live just with my mum, so we don't have as much as some families. I've always wanted to give back to my family and also help other families in places that are less privileged. Charity is an important thing in my religion as well, so I think it's something that I can do to help people and maybe I can be that person for them where they think 'he's done it, so I can do it too'."

Ellington's faith is another important aspect to his life away from the game, which also offers transferable skills that can aid his footballing ability.

He said: "I put a lot of time into my religion. I pray five times a day. Maybe a few years ago it wouldn't have been so easy, but nowadays there are more Muslim footballers and clubs have more of a modern culture, so I'm able to fit in the time around my schedule to practice my faith."

"Religion definitely teaches me discipline - staying strict with my time and sticking to a routine and also putting the right nutrients in my body. These sort of skills will hopefully help to take me where I want to be."

"We've had talks at the club about finances and been given warnings about how easy it can be to get caught up in destructive things. Being a Muslim, it teaches you to stay away from gambling

and alcohol, so that's another area where the discipline involved in my religion has helped to prepare me for a future in this sport."

"We've had equality and diversity sessions and they're really helpful. If people are educated then they have a better understanding of things and are more likely to think about their actions and the words that they speak. The more it's instilled into the younger players then the quicker it's going to be eradicated and it's good to come through in a culture that's willing to tackle these issues."

Despite his achievements as a player and student, Ellington did not receive a professional deal at the completion of his apprenticeship. Although he is unwilling to give up on his dream just yet, the talented youngster already has additional options in mind.

"I like having other interests and learning about things instead of just concentrating on football all the time," he continued. "I'm looking to do an English degree in Language. I've also been looking at a Sport Psychology course at Manchester University, so I'm just keeping my options open between either being a full-time student or learning alongside being a player."

"Although football is important, it's not your life. Having other things and taking them seriously will help you stay more relaxed and actually helps my focus on football because I have that time to switch off so that I can recharge mentally."

"We've had people come in and stress the importance of education, not just as a backup but to go alongside football. You can use it after football or use it to gain two separate incomes during your football career, so it's become more important over the two years as I've become more aware of the benefits."

"I have ambitions to own a business in the future and you can't achieve that without having qualifications and having a thirst for learning. You need the confidence to put yourself out there and earn opportunities to build experience."





# MY FUTURE TODAY

**LFE's My Future Today workshop is delivered to football clubs across the country, highlighting the importance of personal development, identity and transferable skills for success on and off the pitch.**

Apprentices at Cambridge United, Norwich City and Peterborough United experienced the session, which was led by former England international basketball player Dru Spinks and ex-professional footballer Mark Roberts, while actors also perform throughout the day to present the ideas from the perspective of an apprentice.

Club staff are encouraged to attend, with various Heads of Education, Academy managers and coaches being present at the ABAX Stadium event, including former Premier League stars and current Peterborough Academy coaches Matthew Etherington and Simon Davies.

"It's an interactive day of four workshops, with the content based around gathering research evidence from former professionals and apprentices," Spinks told LFE. "We're exploring things like identity, personal development, how that relates to them as an individual, how that relates to their aspirations and their journeys of an aspiring professional athlete.

"We also look at skillsets, characteristic skills, how they can build themselves through doing activities outside of the game. We're not going to change somebody's viewpoint completely, but hopefully we raise awareness to a different way of thinking and they can leave here and potentially start bringing things to life by taking some action that they might not have ordinarily done.

"With more technical and tactical coaches from the clubs in attendance, the boys look at the day in a different light. It shows that there's a bit more validity to the importance of these events and this way of thinking."

The MFT session, delivered in partnership with AFTA Thought and the Dame Kelly Holmes Trust, involves the apprentices splitting into small groups after some initial energiser activities.

The morning section starts with a table-building exercise that encourages teamwork, problem-solving and reveals an underlying message relating to identity, while they then move on to a jigsaw puzzle that includes matching up a selection of elite footballers with their range of interests.

Spinks continued: "We explore identity and we relate that to the metaphor of a table, based on identity being the amount of table legs you had beneath your table surface. The more table legs you have, the more stable you are as an individual and as a young man. That also has positive outcomes in regards to performance.

"We then look at what other professionals are doing, like other activities and interests that elite athletes have. How are they investing their time away from the pitch, what things are they doing and how does that help them in the game?"

"If we open their eyes to these different things that professional athletes and footballers are doing, they might think 'if these guys are doing it and it's good enough for them, then it's good enough for me.'"

After gaining an insight into the additional interests of players like Trent Alexander-Arnold, Fabian Delph and Tyrone Mings, the Academy players spend the afternoon considering transferable skills before working on a 30-second pitch to describe themselves outside of simply being a footballer.

**"We're not going to change somebody's viewpoint completely, but hopefully we raise awareness to a different way of thinking."**

"We finish the day by stretching them a little bit. The content explored from workshops one to three, we basically ask them to verbalise that," said Spinks. "We believe that sometimes putting it into words, promoting yourself and creating a verbal contract with yourself actually increases the chances of some action being taken as a result.

"They spend a lot of time thinking about performance elements linked directly to football. If we can expand their outlook, encourage them to start doing other things and investing in themselves with other activities and other interests, then they can gain valuable skills that can help them with their nutrition, time management, ambition, enthusiasm, recovery from injury and dealing with adversity.

"As young athletes, if they've not already faced a few dark times, there could be some on the horizon, so the more well-rounded they are and the more skills they have, then the more equipped they'll be to deal with such occurrences.

"One of the things we like to explain to the lads is that exploring personal development and identity isn't an alternative to football, it's an addition to football. It's a big stigma and a huge misconception that people feel that they have to be mutually exclusive and you can't do both.

"It's not a sign of weakness to focus on other things, it doesn't mean you're not 100 per cent focused on football, it's actually a sign of strength and strategic intelligence that you're doing everything you can to be the best that you can.

"They don't have to openly admit it to their peers and team-mates, but individually recognising that it's going to help them within the game as an athlete and making themselves broader as individuals is a great thing to do. There is more to them than just being a footballer."



**Will Blackmore**  
**Peterborough United**  
**First-year apprentice**

I thought it was a brilliant session. The stuff they talked about is so relevant to us and the way it's presented with the actors gave us the angle from our perspective. With all the banter that goes around and the scenarios that they gave, it shows us how we could deal with those situations. We shouldn't be afraid to talk about stuff or be ashamed of any interests we have.

My personal favourite task was making the table. I was mixed in with a few different lads, so getting to know them was really nice. Every group had a set amount of material - we had some newspapers, scissors and cello tape - so you had to think outside the box. Ultimately, it showed us that the more legs you have the sturdier the table is, which relates to us that the more activities we do, the steadier and more stable we'll be, whether that's physically or mentally.

I'm a really confident lad, so I had no problem in getting up to do the pitch at the end. I know there are quite a few lads who are pretty shy, so the task of interviews and pitching yourself in 30 seconds for a job was brilliant, especially when taking it away from football and concentrating on stuff away from the game.

I want my confidence to rub off onto the other lads, whether that's Peterborough, Cambridge or Norwich. I wanted to show them that it's alright to step outside of your comfort zone and do things that maybe you're not comfortable with.

I've started to study for my flying licence, which means I get loads of banter from all the boys and even the coaches, but I love it. I'm so passionate about it, my dad's a pilot so it's probably a common interest.

I've wanted to be a pilot ever since I was four-years-old. I can get most of the work that I'm set by college done and then I can do more studies on the side. I'm a goalkeeper, so if you're really lucky you can get to 36 or 37, then as a pilot you have to retire at 65, so there's plenty of time to go and do it.

You don't want to be engrossed in football all the time, you have to have breaks. I absolutely love football but it's vital to have something else and for me it's flying that I'm really passionate about. It's by no means easy but it's something that I really think I can achieve.

You can't be reliant on one thing because if that starts to crumble then you need something else to take the fall. You've got to be interested in other things and make sure you're a well-rounded person. Make sure you do everything to the best of your ability because you never know what can happen.



**Charlie Johnson**  
**Cambridge United**  
**Second-year apprentice**

It makes you think about stuff that you normally wouldn't. You could think that focusing on things away from the game is a distraction, but there's a different angle to look at it.

Mark Roberts said that he had the most successful years of his career when he started doing other things, so it shows that sometimes you need different interests to take your mind off the game. It made me think about what I do and maybe instead of ignoring it and pushing it away, I should embrace it to help me on the pitch.

We tried to build the tables, which seemed like a bit of fun but obviously it also represents something that is quite important, with the different legs and adding more to make it more stable. The workshop at the end made us speak to people from different clubs, which is a situation I've not really been in before in terms of speaking to a random person and talking to them about yourself, thinking about how you can represent yourself well.

You have to be confident and talk about how you feel and how you want to work on things that you're not so good at. If one of those things is confidence then you're really working on it there and then, so it's a great opportunity.

I've got a good backing and support from my family, so when I'm struggling or I need a bit of advice there's a lot of different people I can go and speak to. I think I could explore more different interests personally, so when football isn't going too well I can close that off and do something else, so I definitely think more hobbies can be some legs that I add to my 'table'.

We can't play football forever, so if you don't have other interests then you're going to be stuck. But as well as thinking about after football, you also need something that can take you away from the game while you're playing because it's quite easy to get caught up in the bubble and constantly think about football, so to take the pressure away by having other interests to focus on is important.

**Connor Parsons**  
**Norwich City**  
**Second-year apprentice**

I thought it was a really good session. One of the main focuses was how we can develop ourselves as a person, not just football because a lot of people in and around an Academy just think of themselves as a footballer.

At Norwich, we do a lot of community work. We go to SOUL Church to help the homeless people that go there for food, so that's a good way to develop our social skills - being socially aware of how other people are and having an insight into another way of life. We also do cooking classes and sometimes we work in Delia Smith's restaurant.

I had surgery on my knee on the first Saturday of pre-season, so I've been wiped out for the whole season. After about six weeks I started thinking about how I could show other people, because I get a lot of questions about what it's like, so I thought I'd create a YouTube channel.

I started documenting everything and it's been going really well. The views have been going up and up and I'm still getting questions. It's just an insight for others and even people who have had the same injury as me, but aren't in a football environment and want to learn the sort of stuff we do.

I've always liked editing and I like seeing the end product, so once you've put it all together it's like a little movie and that's always an interest I've had. Off the pitch and living in digs, we have a lot of time on our hands, so I just fill that time video editing and it's another opportunity that I can create for myself.

The main thing I took is to not just focus on football. Focus on other interests because if it wasn't for football, what really am I? If I took football away, what other things can I say about myself? I enjoy cooking with the club and I love video editing in my own time, so they're probably the main things for now but I'm definitely looking to find and work on other things too.

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# Life Skills

Charlton Athletic have piloted a pioneering approach to personal development after designing a two-year programme alongside League Football Education.

The Addicks have delivered 90-minute workshops twice a week, with Steve Daniels and former professional footballer Bradley Pritchard leading sessions for the club's Under-18s players, while Elite Performance & Productivity Coach Gareth Morgan has worked with the Under-23s squad.

Joe Francis, Head of Academy Education & Welfare, said: "We're always talking to the boys about trying to develop a conversation in your head when you're playing that allows you to get over mistakes quickly."



"Yes, we're approaching it slightly differently with these sessions, because the boys in their day-to-day training will be stretched and tested. But that's on the pitch, and that's in training. With what we do, we step outside of the white lines, and try to engage with it from a different angle."

"A young player's journey to becoming a professional is never not a roller-coaster. There are peaks and troughs. We're just trying to find ways of putting them in a trough, and see how they cope."

"It's been a vision of mine, to offer some sort of personal development programme for the young players of the club. We feel as though, as part of their working week, we can build in some sort of personal growth workshops. We feel this could benefit their performance both in training and in their day-to-day lives."

Throughout the season, the young players have delved into numerous topics, including accountability, communication, confidence, identity, reputation and resilience, with sessions being presented in many different ways.

While most have involved group discussions, there have also been outings away from the classroom, such as a visit to Middle Park Primary School in which the Under-18 apprentices shared their journeys so far to Year 4 pupils.

Former Premier League striker and current Under-23s Coach Jason Euell said: "This programme is giving me a reference point to use key words when motivating the players and reminding them about the culture and environment we need to create together."

"It's always been a problem with young players in how they communicate. If they're not speaking, how are they going to motivate themselves and the people next to them?"

"The communication has gradually improved, in terms of how they speak to each other in the room, away from the club and on the pitch as well. I think it's been a case of them realising what they actually want. We all know that they're here because they want to be footballers, but it's breaking that down to how are you going to do that?"

Other activities have included cooking, boxing and rock climbing, with the aim of testing the youngsters in a different environment and seeing if they are able to react positively and overcome different situations away from the football pitch.

Francis added: "The primary objective is to test the players' resilience by putting them in unfamiliar and uncomfortable situations where there is some risk and see how they respond."

This unique and ground-breaking work was even recognised by former Deputy Chairman of the Conservative Party James Cleverly, who oversaw a Player Care session in April.

And the development off the pitch has been matched by performances on it, with Lee Bowyer's first-team earning promotion to the Sky Bet Championship via the Play-Offs following a 2-1 victory over Sunderland.

**"A young player's journey to becoming a professional is never not a roller-coaster. There are peaks and troughs. We're just trying to find ways of putting them in a trough, and see how they cope."**





Six Academy graduates were involved in the successful league campaign, including first-year professional Albie Morgan, who emerged as an important contributor towards the 'business end' of the season and started both legs of the Play-Off semi-finals against Doncaster Rovers.

He said: "The longer the sessions went on, I came to the realisation that it really can help, more so as a person than a footballer. I was looking at the different aspects of the topics that we've covered and then taken that into my personal life.

"We had one session where people spoke about things that have happened in their lives. That really made me look at people differently and helped me to realise that I shouldn't take anything for granted."

Midfielder George Lapslie is another former Academy player to feature prominently this season having made 32 appearances in all competitions. In addition to his first-team commitments and player care sessions, the 21-year-old has also been studying a Coaching for Performance in Football degree.

He told LFE: "It's helping us with mental strength and really taking responsibility for who we are and the actions we make. When you start sorting things out in your personal life then it's easier to be focused on football because you're not distracted by external things.

"I'm doing a course with Anglia Ruskin University online. I'm currently in my third year. I've got quite a lot of spare time, so I can balance between a bit of gaming and knuckling down with my uni work - I'm just on my dissertation now.

"I find it easy to apply it to myself as a footballer. The last subject I did was based on diet and some of the things I was learning I've never heard of before, so I'm really improving myself.

"A few of the lads said they don't want to start studying a degree because they want to focus on football, but the work doesn't take any focus off football for me. When you go home, you have a choice to make. You can learn about yourself and how you can better yourself whilst gaining a qualification, or you can play Fortnite.

"Gareth said that a lot of the boys have a procrastination attitude, where they put things off and not just with education, even with stuff like gym. I think I had that when I started my degree, but because I've had to keep on top of the work I've had to come up with a method that works for me. Now I can focus much better and I've taken that into aspects of my football, as well as the degree."

Elsewhere, ex-Barnsley apprentice Wilberforce Ocran believes the workshops have helped to speed up the process of him integrating with the rest of the team, having joined last summer following his release from Oakwell.

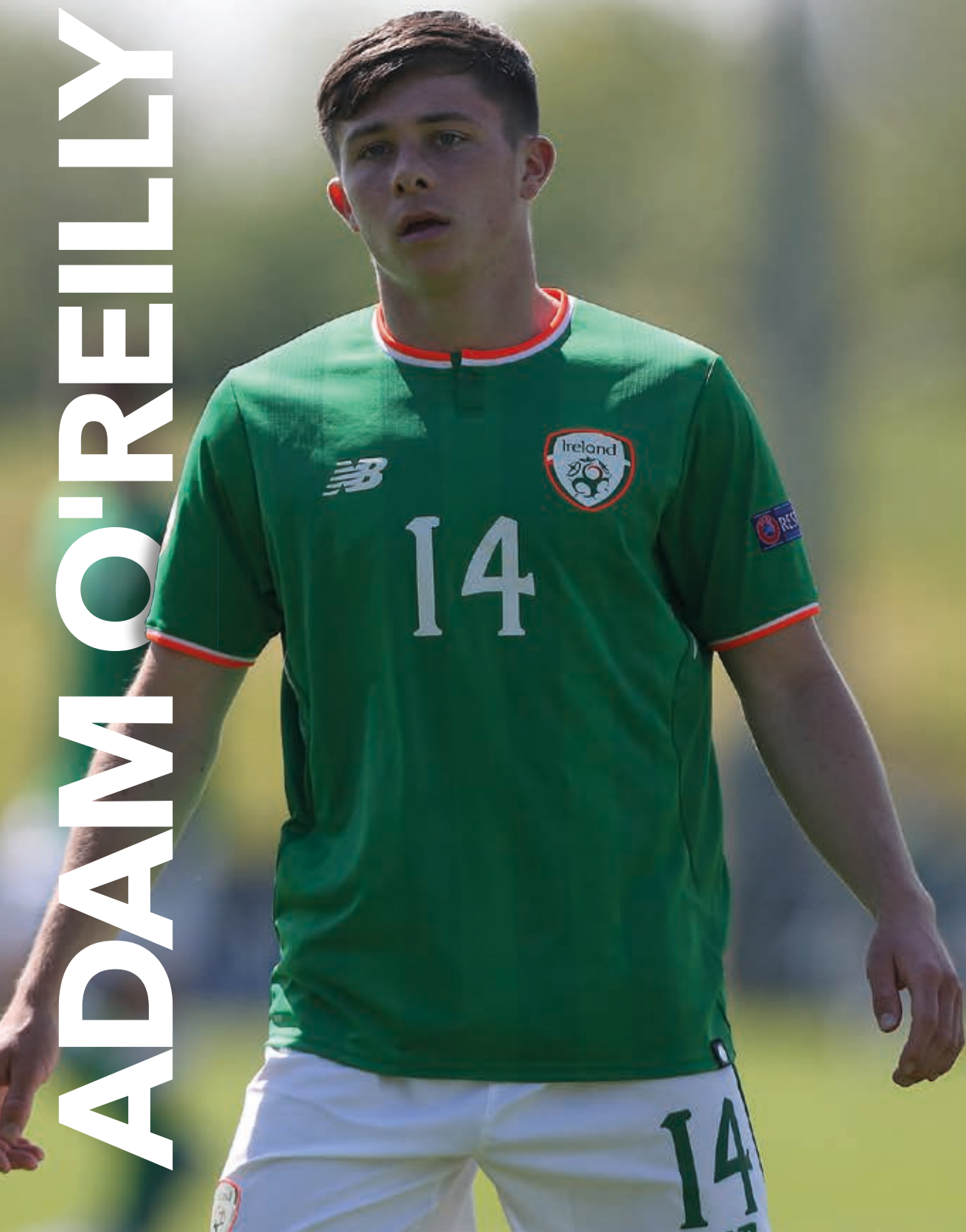
"I was able to speak in front of the whole group and say stuff that's happened in my background and in my past and everyone listened and understood the things I've been through," he said. "I'm not used to speaking out loud in front of the team, I'm used to being the guy in the corner by himself analysing things.

"It's really helped because I've opened up to everyone and it's given me more of a confidence boost to speak again."





# ADAM O'REILLY



## Adam O'Reilly has achieved considerable success as an apprentice.

The Preston North End starlet signed his first professional contract in January, just weeks after making his first-team debut. He has also won two LFE Goal of the Month trophies, represented the Republic of Ireland at Under-17 level and has previously been selected in LFE's 'The 11'.

O'Reilly joined the Lilywhites in December 2016, leaving behind his family in Cork. Although it has not always been plain-sailing, the 18-year-old believes the apprenticeship programme has benefited him as a player and a person.

"Since I came over from Ireland, it's been a big step for me," he told LFE. "It's brought me out of my comfort zone a lot. My parents weren't sure about sending me here because they didn't know if I was ready yet and I was very young, but the boys have all welcomed me into the group and it's really worked out.

"As a footballer, you've got to be confident. I was struggling to start with because I didn't know many of the boys and I used to be quite shy. Coming over here has really developed me as a person and helped me come out of my shell. That's helped me integrate with the group, while I've also had to become more independent in other ways considering I'm living away from home.

"Sometimes you're going to get homesick, but you've just got to keep your head. One of the big things is to get out more. If you sit in digs and you're on your own at weekends, it can be hard because you end up just thinking about home. You need to keep your mind occupied and you can turn it into an advantage by using all the free time in a positive way.

"We go to the gym and do extra work on the training ground, sometimes we just chill out and go bowling and build that bond between team-mates, other times we just grab a coffee. Then obviously there's the education side of things to focus on. It's about getting that balance right."

Having developed his personal skills off the pitch, the teenager has thrived on it, winning North End's Scholar of the Year award for two successive seasons. O'Reilly captained the youth team to a successful campaign this term, while he earned his Sky Bet Championship bow at Aston Villa during the Christmas period.

"My highlight has got to be my debut," said O'Reilly. "From when I first started playing football, that's what I've been working towards. Hopefully there's more to come.

"Having been in the first-team, I've started to look at my game more and do a lot of analysis and it's things like that off the pitch that will help you on the pitch because I feel more aware of my game, which definitely helps when you make the step up.

"To have the other Irish lads here is a massive benefit as well because they've gone through the same situation in terms of leaving home and settling into a new environment.

"I always try to be a leader and set an example, I think it's just a personality trait that I have. But also, I think the fact that I've received help from those guys in the first-team and know how important advice and support can be, that's what makes me want to help others as well."

Having also experienced a loan spell at Hyde United this season, it has been a busy schedule for O'Reilly during his two-year apprenticeship, combining first-team and international commitments with studying the Extended Diploma, while he has also been involved in some community activity in recent weeks.

The young Irishman said: "My parents have always told me to concentrate on my education because anything can happen in football. You could get an injury or just not perform and fall out of favour, so you need to have a good education to put your mind at ease that there is another path for you.

"I've also been looking at stuff outside of football once I've finished the college work, just to keep my mind ticking over. I've thought about doing a computer course or something related to technology because that seems to be a strong industry and it's something that I could move into after football.

"Getting involved in the community is a different experience but I really enjoyed getting to meet over 100 kids at St Stephen's Primary School. Being a role model at this age is hard to get used to and it hasn't really hit me yet that what I'm doing can affect other people, especially the younger kids.

"I just want to show what I've done to get to the stage I'm at now and hopefully be a positive influence for them to take note of and use as inspiration.

"All these experiences away from the game are so important. When you go out on loan or move into the first-team, you need to come out of your shell and speak to the players because if you don't, it'll affect your experience on the pitch. You need to be vocal so that you can fit into the group and get on the ball. You develop these skills through experiences off the pitch."

# LFE Coaches Trip

A group of coaches were handed the opportunity to experience new ideas and methods of developing young players with a trip to Spain in February, organised by League Football Education and fully subsidised by the Erasmus+ fund.



## Coaches

Tom Harban / Barnsley  
 Tony Carss / Blackburn Rovers  
 Hannah Dingley / Burton Albion  
 Peter Haynes / Cheltenham Town  
 Adem Atay / Ipswich Town  
 Ian King / LFE & Northampton Town

Lee Garlick / Northampton Town  
 David Wright / Norwich City  
 Gareth Holmes / Nottingham Forest  
 Mark Jules / PFA  
 Travis Binnion / Sheffield United  
 Graham Biggs / Walsall



### Day 1

Check-in to Spanish FA in Madrid  
 Observed Rayo Majadahonda vs Malaga

### Day 2

Observed Rayo Vallecano first-team & B-team Training  
 Observed Real Madrid Goalkeeper Masterclass training session with Roberto Vazquez

### Day 3

Sharing Best Practice Event including Spanish FA, Atletico Madrid, Sporting Gijon, Sevilla, Rayo Majadahonda, Sheffield United, Blackburn Rovers and Nottingham Forest

### Day 4

Sharing Best Practice Event including LFE, Barcelona, Real Madrid and Manchester United

### Day 5

Spanish FA (National Youth Teams) Presentation  
 National Museum Tour  
 Observed Atletico Madrid Youth Training

### Day 6

Real Madrid facilities Tour  
 Observed Real Madrid B Training  
 Madrid City Trip





### Peter Haynes

Cheltenham Town Lead PDP Coach

It's been brilliant in terms of trading knowledge between English and Spanish clubs. On the first day, we were fortunate enough to watch first-team training at Rayo Vallecano and then followed that up with two days of sharing best practice.

There has been a really good practical element, such as watching Roberto Vazquez deliver his goalkeeper session at Real Madrid. I've also been fortunate enough to watch two live games - Rayo Majadahonda v Malaga in the second division and Atletico Madrid against Juventus in the Champions League. Immersing ourselves in the culture of Spanish football has been fantastic.

The main theme I'm taking away is the importance of player care in terms of building them as good people as part of the overall structure of their football development. Sometimes it can be football and then Plan B, whether that's education or University. A lot of our conversations are, 'If you don't get a pro contract, what are you going to do?' I think we can take a more holistic approach - this is what you do, this is who you are, and this will help with your football and outside of here.

There are also differences around the coaching delivery. It is quite coach-driven compared to in England, which can at times encourage player ownership and guided discovery. There's a lot of detail around the methodology and it has been interesting to take on board that difference in style.

We had formal presentations from a range of Spanish and English clubs to see how they work, but it is the informal conversations throughout the trip that have been particularly invaluable. If we are asking our players to develop and get better then we as coaches have also got to invest time in ourselves to do that as well.



### Adem Atay

Ipswich Town Under-18s Manager

It's been a really good experience and something I've not done before. The guys that have come on the trip from England and the staff from the Spanish clubs have been really open and willing to share ideas and thoughts around the programmes that they run and it's been a really good week for everyone involved. We've seen how the different cultures compare and how they work within their own environments.

One of the key things for me has been the culture and how much more relaxed people seem here, which I think does transfer into the environments they work in. They all seem highly professional, they all have an excitement about playing football and a hunger to be there and do well.

One of my main aims was to try to build relationships and be better at networking with people out here and build some communication so that we could look into ways of exposing our players to these environments, like with work experience or coaches from here coming over to us and showcasing what they do within our environment.

Without LFE, I wouldn't have had this opportunity and the players wouldn't have the opportunity in the summer to go abroad and experience the different culture and environments that players in different countries are exposed to. I think it's a huge benefit to our programme, and our players in experiencing life outside of England, seeing how other countries and players work and how they go about their daily routine. It can only help the players' all-round development, not just on the pitch but off the pitch and developing human aspects of our programme as well.



### Tony Carrs

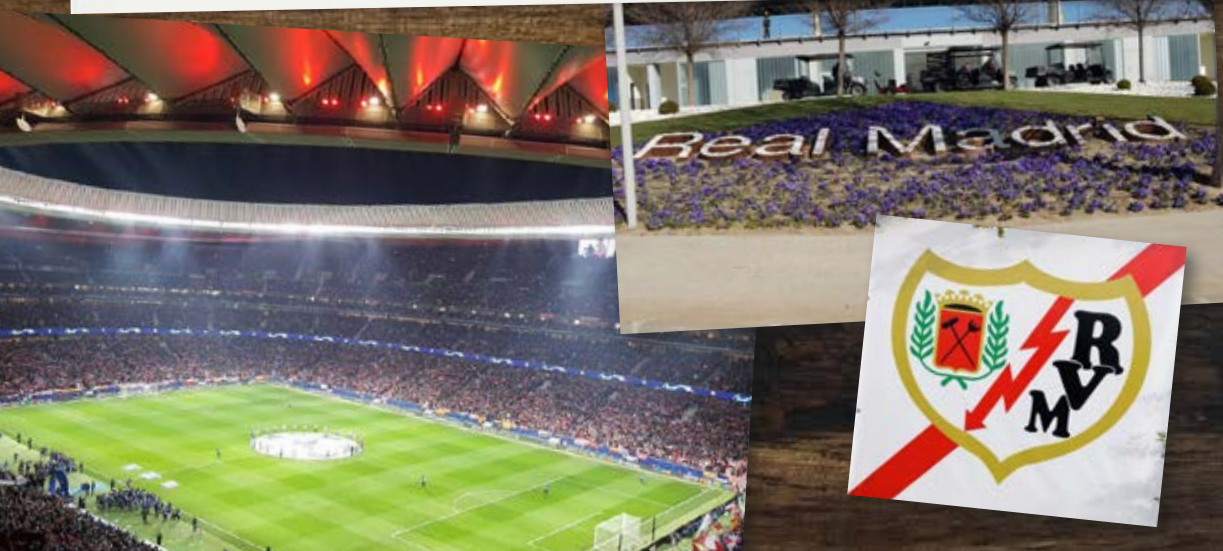
Blackburn Rovers Head of Academy Coaching

It's been a great opportunity to learn from top clubs in Spain. I was hoping to learn about different methodologies, what other clubs look for in players in terms of development and learning and potential, all things that we'd ask ourselves back home, and we've been given a real insight into that.

It was a good experience for me and a couple of the other coaches on the trip to express what we do at The Sharing Best Practice event and it was good to see that the Spanish coaches wanted to learn from us as well.

The big thing that I've taken from the likes of Real Madrid, Barcelona and Atletico Madrid is that they have a feeling of belonging. The club feels like home for the young players and for me there's a consideration of how do we replicate that family atmosphere back home at Blackburn.

The kids here feel part of something special, value what they've got in the environment and the pathway and the journey, so we will think about how we can make our players feel part of something special for however long they are with us.





# Life Skills

Derby County's Under-18s have enjoyed a remarkable season, qualifying for next year's UEFA Youth League after being crowned National Champions following a 5-2 victory over Arsenal.

LFE Apprentice of the Year Max Bird experienced first-team action in three competitions under Frank Lampard, while Tyree Wilson, Lee Buchanan and Jason Knight all featured on the bench in the Sky Bet Championship.

This all coincides with the introduction of a substantial Life Skills programme, formulated by Head of Education & Welfare Simon Ord, with topics including addiction, mental health, driving awareness, financial advice, media training and alternative careers.

Ord spoke to Touchline to outline his vision of developing the Rams youngsters on a personal level.



The Life Skills programme that we have is fundamental in making sure that the lads exist outside of the football bubble. Every Friday, we have a session on a particular topic or particular theme which I think is massively important.

Although they are great footballers, it's important to not let football define them and make sure they have a life that they understand and can engage with outside of the football club. They may be elite athletes but they're still 16, 17 or 18-year-old lads and they'll have the same issues as any other person of their age, so it's part of my job to help them with that.

They've got to be able to look at themselves and understand their character and personality. How do they rely on people, how do they speak to people, how do they work as a team, how do they succeed as individuals? We have a diverse mix of lads from all sorts of backgrounds and they've got to recognise each other's differences.

They come in and there's clean kit for them in the morning, their meals are provided, there's another clean set of kit after dinnertime and if you're not careful, they can take everything for granted. You have to have humility, patience, respect and ultimately treat people the way you want to be treated yourself.

We firmly believe that every part of their journey here is integral and has value in leading to an outcome, whether it's in the classroom or the gym or out on the pitch. It's a culture that's supported across all the Academy staff that they have to try to excel in every department that they work with here.

Darren Wassall has been here 10 years and this is my seventh year and we had a discussion about whether it's just a coincidence that the Under-18s have performed so well and we both agreed that we don't think it is.

Both the Under-18s and the Under-23s group, we know what characters they are, we know their mums and dads, we know their brothers and sisters and we make a conscious effort to get to know that side of their lives. Therefore, in a working week there's an element of trust and respect.

The two groups spend a lot of time with each other socially, they rely on each other. They're all after the same prize of a professional contract but they understand that their best chance of success is to support each other and grow as a team, rather than as individuals.

If you get to a position where you've got a contract either here or elsewhere, you still need to remember where you came from, be humble and help others. Even if it's just a photograph or getting involved with a charity, having a few more strings to the bow is important because they can't be footballers forever.

If we can instil that mentality into them now that they should invest in themselves, in education and in finding other aspects of your life, that will certainly help with their transition away from football and they can develop themselves while they're still playing.

I've often thought that you get all the pastoral care from 16 to 18 and there's a danger that when they get to the development squad we wave them goodbye. In actual fact, it's probably the time that they need the most care because contracts will improve, they'll probably live away from home and start to cook for themselves and pay bills, so they'll still need a lot of support.

At the end of last season I had a meeting with every Under-23 player and developed a personal action plan. They had three options. Firstly, a formal education pathway of distance learning degrees, which two of them have taken up. Option two was vocational studies, so that could be learning French or Spanish - three of them have just finished their Level 2 PT course. Option 3 was to undertake an Open University course.

They'll be finished training by 1 or 2 o'clock and there's only so much FIFA and Fortnite that you can play. If they can allocate two or three hours a few times a week to do something else like reading a book, learning a language or practising a musical instrument, it's just working on that personal development.

## FIRST-TEAM ACADEMY GRADUATES

**Mason Bennett**

**Max Bird**

**Jayden Bogle**

**Max Lowe**

**Jayden Mitchell-Lawson**

## NOTABLE RECENT FORMER APPRENTICES

**Mo Adams**  
Chicago Fire

**Callum Guy**  
Blackpool

**Jamie Hanson**  
Oxford United

**Farrend Rawson**  
Forest Green Rovers

**Offrande Zanzala**  
Accrington Stanley

## CURRENT APPRENTICE INTERNATIONALS

**Jason Knight**  
Republic of Ireland U21s

**Festy Ebosele**  
Republic of Ireland U19s

**Louie Sibley**  
England U18s

**Morgan Whittaker**  
England U18s

**Eiran Cashin**  
Republic of Ireland U18s

**Jaden Charles**  
Republic of Ireland U18s

**Harry Halwax**  
Republic of Ireland U18s




# Careers Day

**Aston Villa's Academy players gained vital job-searching experience after taking part in a club-led careers week, which included CV preparation, employer interviews and feedback.**

The initiative started with the second-year players each being provided with a job description and person specification, all of which were from people connected to the club, such as Managing Directors of sponsors or host families with businesses.

They were then tasked with writing CVs and covering letters for their assigned job, which the interviewers had access to in advance so that they could probe and research the apprentices.

The following day, the youngsters went to Villa Park dressed in suits and experienced the interviewing process, while the itinerary also incorporated a stadium tour and a slot for learning about the club's history before the young Villains were then given a debrief regarding their performance.

Eighteen-year-old Indiana Vassilev told LFE: "We're all ambitious and driven to be footballers. However, it's always good to be prepared because you could go into training and have a career-ending injury, so it's very important to have another pathway in mind. I think this will be very beneficial to many of us, no matter how long we play or high a level we get to."

ASTON VILLA FOOTBALL CLUB  
SEASON 2018/19

"All of us dressed up smartly, came into the stadium and had an interview with a company that would like to hire us, so it's touching on real life skills that we'd need to know. Afterwards, they gave us feedback on how the interview went so that we can learn from the experience and when the day comes where we have a real interview, we'll have the required skills."

"I went into it with an open mindset, so I was keen to learn as much as I could. There wasn't too much pressure on it because we know it's not a real interview, so I thought it was key to be open-minded and soak up the experience. The more often you encounter something, the calmer you feel when you're in that environment, so I think it's been very beneficial."

"It can also help us with our football careers because it would be quite easy to transfer these skills that we've learned to interviewing for a new club because they will want to know who you are as a person. You need to be good in the locker room, good with the fans and good with the staff, so I think this sort of experience and the skills we will learn from it would help for a scenario like that."

The teenagers were exposed to new career ideas and encouraged to consider alternative interests, with the

event being part of a wider package that also offers all apprentices work experience placements in industries outside of football.

"I have taken an interest in real estate because it's something I can do while I'm playing, so I'll definitely try to gain my credentials," the American starlet said. "Being a player at Villa, I obviously get money and I'm going to try to invest that money in real estate, so I can have a couple of different properties. I just want to expand my horizons."

"To succeed in real estate you need good communication skills. Having clear and concise information to pass on to your client is extremely important and I think that is similar to being here at Aston Villa. We come in and have to receive information, process it and then relate it to someone else."

"For example, if you're the captain you have to take information from the head coach and relay it to the rest of the team. Being a real estate agent, you have to communicate with people of different backgrounds and you have to be comfortable with being uncomfortable. At Villa, every day we're put in challenging positions and you have to adapt and get used to it."



# CREWE IN THE COMMUNITY

**Crewe Alexandra apprentices have connected with the community alongside studying for their Apprenticeship in Sporting Excellence by running introductory skills sessions for pupils at local primary schools.**

Arranged through Reaseheath College, the Academy players hosted 26 pupils from Millfields Primary School. They also ran a similar tournament-based event at Highfields Academy for Year 3 students.

Lauren Goff, Lecturer in Sports Performance, told LFE: "We run some practical units, such as coaching, rules and regulations and health and safety. Rather than just addressing these topics in the classroom, we like to give the apprentices some practical and social experiences.

"We've been working with a local primary school in Nantwich for the past couple of years. The Headmaster, Phil Whelan, is an ex-footballer. We approached him and he was more than happy to bring some of his primary school children in and be part of various sessions.

"The apprentices have also been involved in the planning of these events so we encouraged them to develop the whole session, assessing risks, planning the different drills and also putting a tournament together."

In addition to achieving the qualification and integrating with the local community, the initiative also provides the apprentices with the opportunity to develop themselves as people away from their football and classroom environments.

Goff said: "They've really adapted to these challenges with enthusiasm and professionalism. They have developed their communication skills from working with individuals they have not worked with before. It's a great experience and situation to develop their interpersonal skills and moreover life skills.

"Some of them will go on and have good football careers but they all need to consider alternatives. Some may want to stay within the game where there are career opportunities in coaching, sport science, etc. Others may wish to pursue completely different careers which need a different type of skill. This wider experience of the 'outside world' may help in that preparation."

Eighteen-year-old striker Malachi Linton said: "The schoolchildren really enjoyed it. Coming to our club and our environment was a great experience for them and you could tell they were really grateful for the opportunity.

"Coaching is something that a lot of footballers think about after their playing career is over, so having an early experience of it is fantastic. We were able to work on leadership, communication and there was also a psychological aspect to it.

"There was also some preparation involved, in addition to the practical element. We had to analyse health and safety procedures related to bringing the children in. This included checking the surfaces, checking the goal posts and the netting, making sure all the equipment is in good condition, just to assess the risks and ensure the children were in a safe environment."

First-year apprentice Andrew Walklate added: "I remember when I was six or seven and you look at an Academy player and you want to be in that position, so hopefully now I can inspire the kids and show it is possible to get to this level.

"I think I thrived in that environment because I'm quite good at talking to people, so when we did the officiating I was always vocal and helping the kids.

"There are a lot of things that you don't really consider to be a problem, but then you realise that certain things can be a hazard. You also learn a lot about the importance of communication and leadership that can then relate to being out on the pitch."

Collaboration with the primary schools has also incorporated former England Under-21 international Phil Whelan, now a headmaster attending these events and inspiring the apprentices to recognise the importance of education, as well as the need to be able to contemplate a career that may not involve top level football.

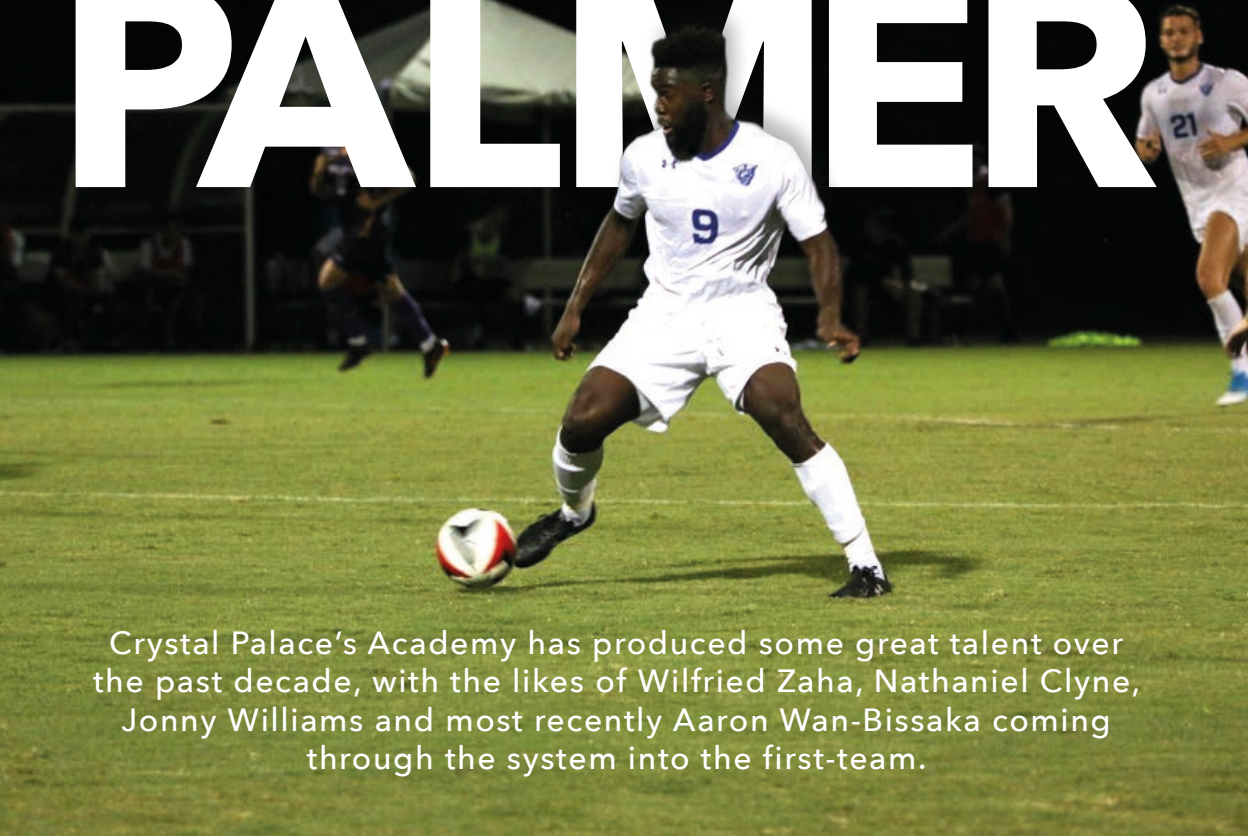
Effusive with his praise, Whelan said: "Our pupils loved the experience of visiting Reaseheath and sampling the atmosphere of a professional football club. The apprentices were excellent throughout the session.

"The coaching was delivered in a fun way, with a variety of drills and practices used to develop the children's skills. It was fantastic to see the level of maturity the Crewe apprentices displayed throughout our visit and Millfields would love a return visit at some point in the future."

Walklate continued: "You might not think that there could be that sort of pathway from being a footballer, but when you see people that have taken that journey and you talk to them about how they managed to do it, then it's really helpful because it shows that it is possible and encourages you to keep pushing during the tough times when it may seem like a dead-end."



# JAVEN PALMER



Crystal Palace's Academy has produced some great talent over the past decade, with the likes of Wilfried Zaha, Nathaniel Clyne, Jonny Williams and most recently Aaron Wan-Bissaka coming through the system into the first-team.

Javen Palmer is another successful former Eagles apprentice, although his journey has been a different one. Having been released in 2014, Palmer spent six months on trial at various clubs before deciding to take on the challenge of a Soccer Scholarship in the USA at Farleigh Dickinson University in New Jersey, before transferring to the renowned Georgia State University for his final two years.

"I had been at Palace from the age of 8, so I had never really faced any rejection before," he told LFE. "It was definitely a difficult time. I wasn't sure what was next but I felt that as one door closes another opens.

"A former coach of mine had mentioned America as a possibility. I didn't decide until around September, having recovered from a torn meniscus and been on a few trials at some lower league teams. The idea of going to the USA and playing full-time football, in addition to getting a degree, just made perfect sense to me."

The student-athlete lifestyle means there is a strong emphasis on education. Palmer has embraced his classroom responsibilities, earning a place on the Dean's List and twice on the President's List at Georgia State, which celebrate high academic performance.

"I'd say to any apprentice to make sure they are doing their best, even if it isn't what they necessarily want to focus on," said Palmer. "You need to put yourself in the best position and it is important to have good grades when you decide you are going to go to America.

"There is a lot of work to do, but once you get to grips with the time management aspect of it, it becomes easier to handle. Once you learn about how to format essays and how to answer test questions, it becomes second nature.

"My major is in Sports Administration, which encompasses the whole sports industry really. You learn about the business side and the coaching side. It covers contract laws, sports marketing, sports finance, event planning, event management and many other subjects.

"Some people may find it harder than others, but education is always in your control. You can control how much you study, how prepared you are for a test, or how much you research for an essay."

The 23-year-old has also been receptive to learning away from the classroom, using the frequent travel opportunities to explore new cultures and increase his knowledge of American history.

He added: "For the games, we do a lot of travelling and I have been to a lot of places on the East Coast. I've been to New York City, Philadelphia, Rhode Island, Connecticut, Alabama, Mississippi, New Orleans and more, so I have managed to see places that I would never have envisioned.

"New Orleans was definitely the best trip that I went on. I got to try the local food and got involved in the Mardi Gras celebration. Atlanta has a lot of history and Georgia as a state has great history with regards to the Civil Rights movement. Martin Luther King Jr's home is in Atlanta and they have a museum dedicated to him, which is really interesting.

"I am currently working at a non-profit organisation called Soccer in the Streets. We do great work for disadvantaged youth in Atlanta. I help to schedule tournaments, handle budgets, recruit corporate sponsors and handle community engagement efforts.

"Football in America is not accessible to everyone because the fees to play are expensive, so doing this work helps to give children the opportunity to play the game. It's also good for me as I get to interact with different people, learn some administrative skills and gain experience in a working environment."

Palmer admitted he has discovered the importance of developing on and off the field during his time in the States and advised current apprentices to be aware that they can have an identity outside of football.

"Four years have flown by," he said. "The opportunity to train everyday has definitely made me a better player. We basically live like professionals here. As a person, I'd say I have just become a lot more socially conscious and informed. I've definitely grown as an individual.

"Living in London can keep you inside a small bubble, so this was definitely an experience that I will look back on with fond memories. The experience has allowed me to make friends for life and enhance my skills and traits, while also working on my weaknesses.

"At the start of the process, all of my focus was on football and trying to become a professional. Now that I am on the other end of this four-year process, I now see that there is so much more to life after football, and maximising that part of life is going to be important.

"I think that some young pros do not realise that they have a lot of time on their hands. Training is actually a small window of your day. Focus on your football, do extra training on your own. But when that is all done, you can use your hours to better yourself in other ways.

"Learn about another industry, don't close yourself off to opportunities. Some lads don't realise they are more than just footballers. I didn't understand that until about two years ago. It took me to get to 21, and being out of full-time football for three years, to really understand that I am more than just a player. Lads should explore options that will better them as individuals."



# MI AMIGO MEMORIAL DAY



Sheffield United first-year apprentices Harrison Foulstone and Leo Gaxha represented the Blades alongside Club Historian John Garrett at the 75th annual 'Mi Amigo' Memorial service.

The teenage duo were part of a crowd that paid tribute to the young airmen who lost their lives when their American bomber aircraft crashed in the city during World War II in February 1944.

The plane was badly damaged after a bombing raid over Denmark and sought to land on Endcliffe Park with no form of radar equipment. However, the crew of 10 saw children playing football on the field when they broke cloud and selflessly decided to pull up to avoid hitting them before plummeting into trees at the other side of the river.

During the event, Foulstone and Gaxha were introduced to Tony Foulds, an elderly man who had been one of those children playing in the park that day and has since tended the memorial in tribute to the 'Mi Amigo' crew.

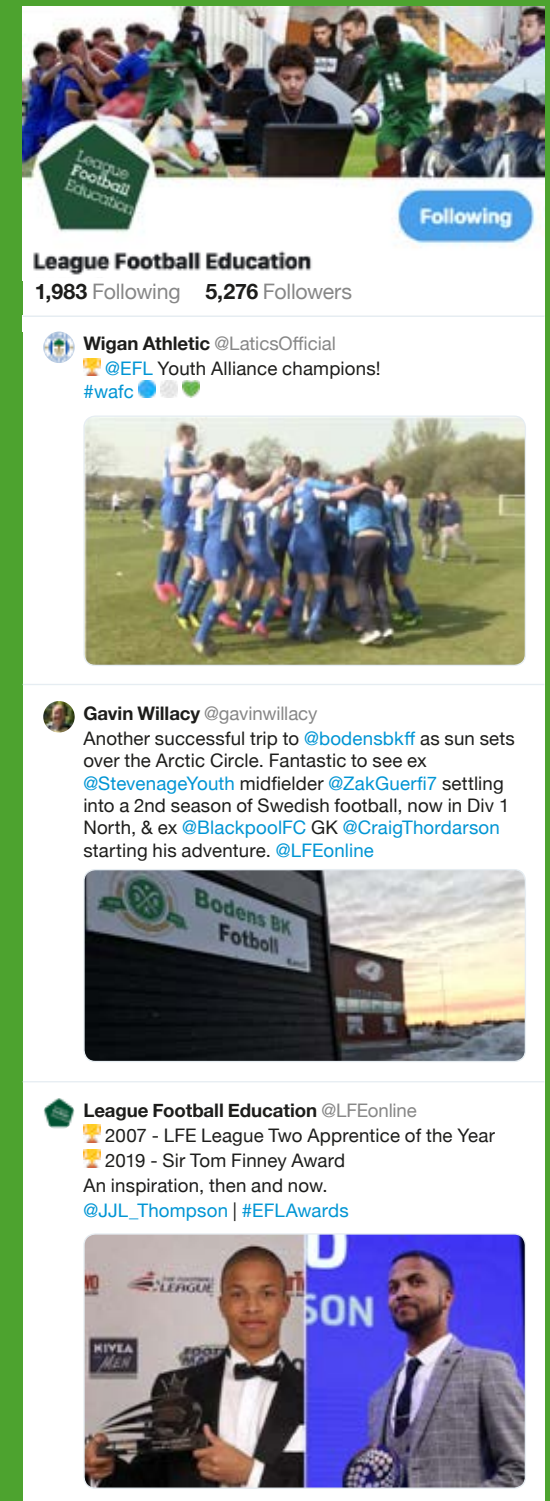
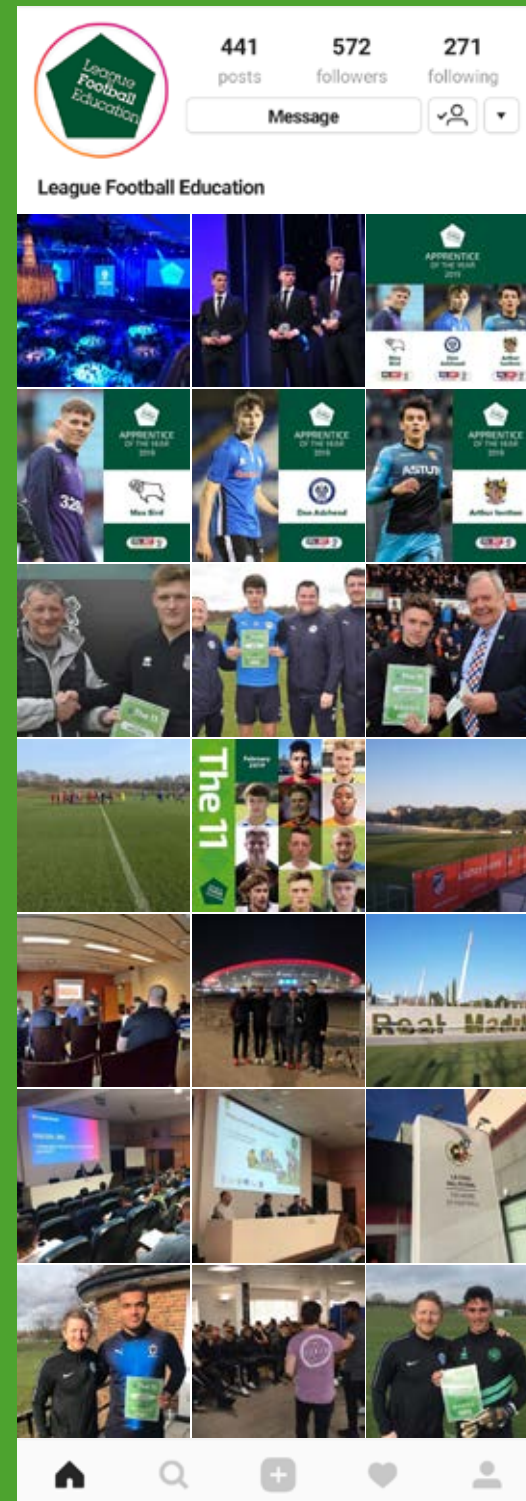
"Although it was a sad event, it was a good experience," Foulstone told LFE. "Meeting Tony and hearing about his story was very inspiring as he has dedicated his life to honouring the memory of those that died."

"I'm from Sheffield, so I've heard about it before and it's been on the news, but it was good to learn more about what happened and it is important to remember the sacrifices that were made during the war."

Sixteen-year-old Gaxha added: "Coming from Ireland, I've learned more about Sheffield since I've been living here and it's good to find out about the history of the place."



"Football clubs have a big influence within communities and we don't know how long we'll be part of it, so it's good to get involved now and push ourselves out of our comfort zone by representing the club away from the pitch."







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