

# Touchline

PLUS



## ASSESSMENT TRIALS

LFE's Assessment Trials took place at the end of June, featuring players from EFL, Premier League and National League clubs who were released in 2020 and 2021.

Full highlights from all nine matches at three regional venues can be viewed on LFE's Trials YouTube page. Visit [www.youtube.com/c/lfetrialstv](http://www.youtube.com/c/lfetrialstv)

Individual player highlight packages are available to players free of charge via LFE's Hudl Recruitment page. More information can be found at [lfe.org.uk/careers/hudl](http://lfe.org.uk/careers/hudl)



### Careers

LFE learners can take advantage of employment opportunities thanks to LFE's partnerships with a variety of different organisations.

Browse the range of exciting pathways at [lfe.org.uk/careers](http://lfe.org.uk/careers)

### LFE Transition Officer

Academy players can seek information, advice and guidance regarding alternative options at any time from LFE's Transition Officer, Anthony Cato.

Contact him at [acato@lfe.org.uk](mailto:acato@lfe.org.uk)

### Higher Education

All LFE apprentices can pursue a route to university in the UK or abroad if they achieve the required academic qualifications.

Download our informative guides to Higher Education or USA Scholarships at [lfe.org.uk/touchline-downloads](http://lfe.org.uk/touchline-downloads)



## THE ALUMNI PLAYER VOICE

LFE has introduced an Alumni Player Voice initiative, offering a safe space for past apprentices to talk about their experiences, best practice and areas for improvement in regard to transition support provided by clubs and wider organisations.

If you would like to contribute, contact Kelly Butterworth, Projects Officer ([kbutterworth@lfe.org.uk](mailto:kbutterworth@lfe.org.uk)) or LFE Communications ([communications@lfe.org.uk](mailto:communications@lfe.org.uk)).



The PFA's Education Team provide guidance and funding for educational and vocational courses that support personal development and transition towards a second career.

PFA members can also receive support in attaining FA and UEFA qualifications, which are often mandatory requirements when applying for jobs in coaching and management within professional football.

For more information, visit [thepfa.com/players/education](http://thepfa.com/players/education)

# The 11

A total of 33 apprentices received recognition for their outstanding efforts on and off the pitch last season by being named in LFE's 'The 11'.



**Warren Sung**  
Accrington Stanley

**Liam Ravenhill**  
Doncaster Rovers

**Matthew Cox**  
AFC Wimbledon

**Fraser Alexander**  
Ipswich Town

**Charlie Wood**  
Bradford City

**Henry Popple**  
Middlesbrough

**Charlie Barker**  
Charlton Athletic

**Mason McLean**  
Queens Park Rangers

**Harrison Nee**  
Coventry City

**Nigel Aris**  
Shrewsbury Town

**Alex Matthews**  
Derby County



**Dylan Adjei-Hersey**  
AFC Wimbledon

**Ollie Bate**  
Millwall

**Rob Apter**  
Blackpool

**Bryan Ly**  
Morecambe

**Olivier Sukinniecki**  
Bradford City

**Flynn Clarke**  
Peterborough United

**Louis Chadwick**  
Cambridge United

**Luke Chambers**  
Port Vale

**Nohan Kenneh**  
Leeds United

**Jacob Holland-Wilkinson**  
Preston North End

**Josh Scott**  
Mansfield Town



**Saleem Akanbi**  
Cambridge United

**Antony Papadopoulos**  
Leyton Orient

**James Beadle**  
Charlton Athletic

**Casey Pettit**  
Luton Town

**Connor O'Riordan**  
Crewe Alexandra

**Josh Coburn**  
Middlesbrough

**Evan Khouri**  
Grimsby Town

**Andre da Silva Mendes**  
Morecambe

**Nicholas Bilokapic**  
Huddersfield Town

**Eddie Breary**  
Oxford United

**Louis Beckett**  
Hull City

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# GOAL OF THE SEASON 2020/21

Almost 45,000 votes were cast across nine LFE Goal of the Month competitions during the 2020/21 campaign. The winners, along with a 'best runner-up' selected by LFE, qualified for Goal of the Season, with nearly 7,500 votes being recorded.

**1ST**

**Hassan Ayari**  
Sheffield United  
September Winner

**2ND**

**Liam Thomas**  
Shrewsbury Town  
October Winner

**3RD**

**Jamal Salawu**  
Plymouth Argyle  
May Winner

**4TH**

**Rob Apter**  
Blackpool  
January Winner

**5TH**

**Elijah Coe**  
Oxford United  
November Winner

**6TH**

**Haroon Salah**  
Rotherham United  
December Winner

**7TH**

**Max McMillan**  
Leeds United  
March Winner

**8TH**

**Matt Reed**  
Bristol Rovers  
LFE 'Best Runner-up'

**9TH**

**Daniel Jebbison**  
Sheffield United  
April Winner

**10TH**

**Ollie Bate**  
Millwall  
February Winner

[Click here to view all of this season's goals on LFETV](#)



Several current and former LFE apprentices were recognised in this year's EFL Awards, across a variety of categories.

**LFE Championship Apprentice of the Season**  
Will Trueman | Sheffield Wednesday

**LFE League One Apprentice of the Season**  
Lewis Johnson | Milton Keynes Dons

**LFE League Two Apprentice of the Season**  
Felix Miles | Cheltenham Town

**Sky Bet League One Player of the Season**  
Jonson Clarke-Harris | Coventry City - now Peterborough United

**PFA Player in the Community**  
Will Vaulks | Tranmere Rovers - now Cardiff City

**Sky Bet Championship Team of the Year**  
Max Aarons | Norwich City  
Sean Morrison | Swindon Town - now Cardiff City  
Alex Mowatt | Leeds United - now Barnsley  
Ivan Toney | Northampton Town - now Brentford

**Sky Bet League One Team of the Year**  
Mark Beevers | Sheffield Wednesday - now Peterborough United  
Lee Burge | Coventry City - now Sunderland  
Jonson Clarke-Harris | Coventry City - now Peterborough United  
Luke O'Nien | Watford - now Sunderland  
Charlie Wyke | Middlesbrough - now Sunderland

**Sky Bet League Two Team of the Year**  
Will Boyle | Huddersfield Town - now Cheltenham Town  
Matt Jay | Exeter City  
David Worrall | Bury - now Port Vale



# ACADEMY LEAGUES Winners 2020/21

EFL Youth Alliance North West  
Fleetwood Town

EFL Youth Alliance North East  
Notts County

EFL Youth Alliance South West  
Peterborough United

EFL Youth Alliance South East  
Oxford United

EFL Youth Alliance Southern Merit League One  
Plymouth Argyle

EFL Youth Alliance Southern Merit League Two  
Southend United

EFL Youth Alliance Southern Merit League Three  
AFC Bournemouth

EFL Youth Alliance Cup  
Rochdale AFC

U18 Professional Development League North  
Wigan Athletic

U18 Professional Development League South  
Charlton Athletic

U18 Professional Development League National Play-offs  
Wigan Athletic

U18 Premier League North  
Manchester City

U18 Premier League South  
Fulham

U18 Premier League National Play-offs  
Manchester City

U18 Premier League Cup  
Manchester City

FA Youth Cup  
Aston Villa



If football has taught Bobby Copping anything, it is resilience.

# BOUNCING BACK

As a 16-year-old, he was released by his boyhood club, Norwich City, and moved over 200 miles up north to sign as an apprentice at Bury.

Following a promising first season, his time at Gigg Lane was brought to an abrupt end when the club's financial difficulties led to expulsion from the EFL.

And the cruellest test of all came in February, when Copping made the heartbreaking decision to retire from playing after suffering a recurring head injury that left him with impaired vision and numbness on the left side of his body. ▶

"I've had to deal with quite a lot of hardship over the past few years and I could've gone down a really dark path," he told LFE. "You hear stories of people that drift towards drugs, alcohol, crime and that could've been me.

"Having to retire from something I love and something I've worked for my whole life has been incredibly tough. After I'd made the decision, I sat in my room with the curtains closed, I turned my phone off and didn't message anyone for about two weeks.

"I was ordering takeaway after takeaway. Anyone that knows me is aware that I love going to the gym, but I lost all motivation, even though I had equipment in my living room. I look back now and feel grateful that I had a lot of support and was able to find a way out of the darkness."

Six months on from his premature retirement, the 19-year-old is using his experience to help others via the Bobby Copping Foundation, which aims to provide emotional support and guidance to players, their families and staff involved in elite sport.

"One thing I've learned is that you're going to encounter adversity at various points in time, whether it's in football or everyday life, and you've got to maintain a positive outlook to overcome it," said Copping.

"Having struggled mentally, I wanted to share my story to people who might be in a similar position to where I've been, so over the past few months, I've been up and down the country delivering talks to clubs and schools.

"I talk about the highs and lows of my career and the strategies I used to overcome the obstacles.

"I received one message from a kid who said that he had been suicidal, but after listening to how I'd dealt with my situation, it gave him a different perspective and basically saved his life.

"To read that and know I've already been able to make an impact on someone is absolutely brilliant.

"All I want to do is help people and show that it's possible to use a negative situation to gain a positive outcome."

Copping had spent nine years in Norwich's academy before being released, but brushed off the rejection quickly, turning down interest from Luton Town in favour of a move to Bury.

"It was a great club; Bury was like a family," he said. "The Under-18s were doing so well, reaching the quarter finals of the Youth Cup and only losing to Liverpool.

**"ALL I WANT TO DO IS HELP PEOPLE AND SHOW THAT IT'S POSSIBLE TO USE A NEGATIVE SITUATION TO GAIN A POSITIVE OUTCOME."**



"To go from that to not getting paid and not knowing if we'd still have a job was extremely tough.

"I remember on the last day, we were sitting in the canteen waiting for news of a new chairman. It got to the evening and there were still no developments. For the first-team players that had families and mortgages to pay, it must've been even worse, but for us younger lads, we'd lost our club and there was a chance we'd lost our careers."

As a Category Three academy, the Shakers were punching above their weight.

Aaron Skinner moved on to Tottenham Hotspur, Callum Hulme signed for Leicester City, Saul Shotton found a home at West Bromwich Albion, Joe Adams departed for Brentford and Femi Seriki earned a deal at

Sheffield United, to name just a few.

Defender Copping was also handed a lifeline at a higher level, bouncing back from his second significant setback in 18 months.

He said: "I had offers from Sunderland and Peterborough United, and then I'd also been on trial for a week at Brighton, although unfortunately I didn't get offered anything from them.

"I did consider Sunderland as a good option, but Peterborough just made me feel wanted. The gaffer, Darren Ferguson, pulled me in for a chat and went through clips of me, saying what I do well and what he wanted me to improve on. As a 17-year-old kid at the time, for the first-team manager to be explaining exactly why he wanted to sign me, I couldn't go anywhere else."

The young centre-back wasted no time in making an impression at his new club, earning a senior debut in the EFL Trophy just a month after penning his professional contract, while he was an unused substitute in Sky Bet League One before the 2019/20 campaign was brought to a halt due to the Covid-19 outbreak.

"Just before the pandemic hit, I was playing really well and knocking on the door of the first team," Copping continued.

"I was probably talking to the manager a couple of times a week, asking him how I could make that next step.

"During lockdown, I made a commitment to take my fitness to the next level. I gained 14kg of muscle and I returned to training in the best shape of my life." ▶

However, Copping's career took an unexpected turn when a routine header caused a loss of sight, which proved to be the start of a torrid journey.

"It was a hot day and I thought I might be dehydrated, so I just said to the coach that I needed a drink and then I'd be alright," he said. "I completed the session with probably 10% of my vision.

"Afterwards, I walked into the physio room and that's when the left side of my body started to go numb. I went to hospital and they thought it was a concussion. It took me five months to gradually build back up to a point where I was ready to play my first 90 minutes against Luton Under-23s.

"But in the warm-up before that game, the exact same thing happened, where I went up for a header, landed and couldn't see. This time was much worse, and I had to be carried off the pitch.

"I was in hospital having all sorts of different procedures and they thought I might've had a mini stroke. It was a scary time and I remember being stood outside the hospital crying my eyes out, because I'd been told I couldn't play football again."

Copping was sent to see a specialist, but after failed attempts to find a suitable medication, the decision was made to protect his long-term health and avoid any more trauma triggering episodes.

The youngster credits Peterborough for supporting him throughout the tough times, allowing an extended leave before designing a plan for him to remain at the club in various different capacities.



"The club have been amazing to me," he added. "The gaffer let me go home for as long as I needed and then I messaged the Academy Manager, Kieran Scarff, asking what they could offer me. He came back with multiple suggestions, so they'd taken the time to think about where I could fit in.

"I spoke about what direction I felt I wanted to go and they actually created a new Business Operations position for me to take on. I'm now doing four roles, with the club giving me all these different responsibilities to gain experience.

"The plan is that in a year or two, I can make an informed decision on what route I want to pursue full-time. They've given me the platform to learn exactly what

I want to do with my future career."

Having identified business and coaching as his two preferred pathways, Copping juggles his time as Head of Schools Initiatives, Operations Manager of the women's team, Under-14s Assistant Manager and Head of Affiliations.

Additionally, he is using his spare time to achieve several qualifications, completing scouting courses with S4 Scouting, becoming a fully qualified Personal Trainer via The Fitness Circle and being accepted onto the UEFA B Coaching course, while he is also starting a Masters in Sports Business Management with the Sports Institute of Barcelona in the autumn.

"I'm really busy, but it's exciting," the Essex-born teenager said.

"I've got two main goals at the moment, which are to either become a first-team manager or a sporting director, so to have the chance to gain experience and qualifications in both areas is amazing.

"It's been five or six months since I retired, so to be in the position I'm in already in such a short space of time is fantastic and I couldn't have done any of it without all the help I've had."

He also received an outpouring of support from the general public after his injury woes were revealed, with people's kindness encouraging Copping to create his own charity, alongside Peterborough's Player Care Manager Kayleigh Stent.

Generous contributions have allowed the initiative to grow, including donations from Chelsea and England legend John Terry, who auctioned a range of souvenirs and items which raised over £7,000.

"I received messages from all over the world," he said. "I had hundreds of requests on Instagram, I was getting loads of emails and I had letters being sent to Peterborough's training ground.

"That response gave me the motivation to give something back, so I decided to run 18km every day in April in support of Mind, after seeing a statistic that on average there are 18 deaths due to suicide per day. I raised over £1,000.

"After that, Kayleigh and I discussed the idea of the foundation. She recently became a fully qualified counsellor and one of our ambitions is to offer a free of charge counselling service for people in need.

"There are some really nice people in the world and every donation we've received has helped us to progress, whether it's been used to buy equipment for talks, organising the counselling service or put

towards the setting up costs that are involved with trying to register a charity."

Copping's determined mindset has enabled him to quickly establish a new route to success off the pitch, while he is also self-aware of his emotional well-being.

"It's been a crazy few months, dealing with being in the public eye and handling all the attention," the Mintridge Foundation ambassador said.

"I'm making great strides in my career, but I've also made sure that I've given myself time to look after my mental health.

"It's common for people to go through something traumatic and do so much stuff to keep it off their mind, then later down the line it suddenly hits them. I've tried to be open and honest about my feelings and doing my talks has helped me to do that.

"Sometimes you might feel down, you might have a cry, but that's part of the process of dealing with it. I'm effectively grieving for the loss of my career. Some people are quite scared to talk to me about it, but I try to make it a normal topic of conversation. Everything happens for a reason and I'm moving forward on the path that I'm meant to be on." ■





# DEBUTANTS

LFE APPRENTICES WERE GIVEN PLENTY OF FIRST-TEAM OPPORTUNITIES DURING THE 2020/21 SEASON

<b>3</b> Players	<b>6</b> Appearances	<b>1</b> Player	<b>1</b> Appearance
<b>5</b> Players	<b>16</b> Appearances	<b>74</b> Players	<b>123</b> Appearances
<b>20</b> Players	<b>83</b> Appearances	<b>10</b> Players	<b>12</b> Appearances
<b>16</b> Players	<b>43</b> Appearances	<b>20</b> Players	<b>20</b> Appearances

**111** apprentices featured for their club's first team.

Most Apprentices Used **8**

**94** of those players were senior debutants.

Most Apprentice Debutants **7**

**22** first years **89** second years

Most Apprentice Appearances **45**

**42** clubs gave apprentices first-team action.

Most Individual Appearances

**304** total appearances across eight competitions.

Kwadwo Baah (ROCHDALE) **34**

**277** appearances in EFL competitions.



# THE

In the UK, suicide is the single biggest killer of young people under the age of 25, with men statistically being three times more likely to take their own lives than women.

**Harry O'Brien** knows he could have been part of that statistic, after his mental health struggles came to a head in January 2019.

# WALK

Over the course of a couple of months, the Morecambe academy graduate became overwhelmed by exam pressure, was uncertain about his future in football having been released by Preston North End, and then spent Christmas Eve mourning the untimely death of his grandmother.

Now 18, O'Brien recently shared his mental health story in a video called 'The Walk', in which he reveals how he experienced and overcame the most difficult day of his life.

"I went through a very bad stage with my mental health in Year 11, where every day I woke up thinking that I didn't want to wake up," he told LFE. "The Walk focuses on one of the main stages of my journey, when I left my house with the intention of never coming back.

"As sad as it sounds, that's what I was feeling and what I wanted to do. I'd describe it as a civil war in my own head, between my good and bad thoughts, where the bad thoughts were winning. A lot of things that were bothering me suddenly added up and I didn't talk to anyone about it, so it all just built up into one big fireball.

"That day of the walk is where it all exploded and I was done with bottling up all the sadness. I went from my house towards a nearby field and a lot of emotions were going through my head at the time. It was a scary situation.

"I messaged a few of my friends to say sorry and goodbye, but fortunately they got in contact with my dad. I answered a call from him and burst out crying and ended up waiting for him to pick me up. I'm happy to have made it through the other side and it's made me a lot stronger as a person."

The poignant video, published in March, has gained nearly 70,000 views on O'Brien's Instagram page, receiving engagement from the likes of Little Mix star Perrie Edwards, Soccer AM host John 'Fenners' Fendley and Love Island contestants Kem Cetinay and Curtis Pritchard.

"When the video came out, I had a lovely response," he continued. "It was a bit overwhelming really. I had a lot of things on my mind for a long time in a negative way, so when my thoughts started to turn more positive, I wanted to spread that. ►



**“PEOPLE ARE GOING TO HELP YOU IF YOU OPEN UP, BECAUSE IT’S NORMAL.”**



[Click here to watch 'The Walk'](#)

“It was hard to open up and tell my story in that way, but it needs to be recognised that it’s normal to feel sad sometimes. That message is often promoted when it’s too late. I’m trying to be proactive about spreading awareness, so that it can hopefully stop someone before they spiral to a point of no return. I’ve already had messages from people saying that hearing my story has helped them.

“The worst thing I did was think that people would judge me. I used to feel that they’d think I’m weird or not normal because I was upset about something. That’s the biggest message I’d say to anyone – people are going to help you if you open up, because it’s normal.”

In the months that followed his darkest day, O’Brien developed a close bond with his school Chaplain and was also referred to CAMHS – an NHS service that assesses and treats young people with emotional or mental health difficulties.

However, it was during his time at the Shrimps when the teenage goalkeeper started to truly come to terms with his feelings, via support from The PFA.

“School were really supportive and I appreciate them a lot,” he added. “I had a specialist with CAMHS and counselling with school, but I wasn’t really ready to open up yet, so I didn’t get the most out of it.

“When I joined Morecambe, I still wasn’t okay. One day, I was in the gym and I just broke down crying. I spoke to my coach, Neil Wainwright, and told him that I needed help.

“Within a few days, we’d been in touch with The PFA and they’d set me up with a counsellor. I met with someone once a week for a couple of months to have a chat, usually having a walk along the beach at Morecambe Bay, and it was really refreshing.

“Being able to talk things through with a professional helped me start to feel like myself again. You sometimes hear bad things about football and that there can be a lack of support, but it’s definitely available if you ask for it. Even my grandad, who’s in his 80s, is still a PFA member and is currently receiving support with his healthcare.”

The resilient youngster is hoping that the progress he has made since unloading his emotional stresses can inspire others in a similar mental state to seek support.

Determined to make a difference, he has appeared as a guest on a handful of mental health podcasts, raised money for suicide prevention charity PAPYRUS and recently returned to St. Mary’s Catholic High School to share his story with current pupils.

“People are always going to suffer with mental health because life can be challenging at times, whether you’re involved in football or not,” said O’Brien. “The target is for more people to be aware of how to handle it, or see signs to notice in others, by making it more commonly spoken about in general conversations.

“There has been a stigma attached to men struggling with their emotions and historically they’ve been told to ‘man up’. It’s time to normalise opening up and the fact that it doesn’t make you weak, it makes you strong to have the courage to admit your struggles.

“I was walking to school with my head down and my hood up, with the mindset that if I can’t see people, then they can’t see me. I got kicked out of a GCSE mock exam for falling asleep, because I was so exhausted from not being able to sleep and just crying for hours the previous night.

“It got to the point where I risked my own life instead of speaking out. Things could’ve panned out differently for me and it doesn’t need to get to that stage for someone to start making improvements to their mental health. That’s why I’m determined to spread my story.”



Having tackled his mental health demons and found a way to move forward, O’Brien’s future is looking bright. Despite completing his two years at Sky Bet League One newcomers Morecambe without a professional contract, he is ready to embark on the next phase of his life after earning a soccer scholarship at Jefferson College in Missouri, USA.

“It’s an exciting opportunity for me to improve as a person and a player by experiencing a new country and getting a degree while playing full-time football,” he said. “I’m going to a junior college, so I’ll be there for two years and then I’ll transfer to a larger university after that.

“I was planning it around Christmas time and then I was all sorted by March. Working out my next step early helped me to enjoy my final few months at Morecambe. It felt like there was less pressure on me and I was almost like a kid again, just enjoying my football.

“The apprenticeship has really helped me to mature as a person. I’ve been around first-team training and learned about how to be a professional, I’ve become more resilient by experiencing ups and downs and it has set me on my way to the next chapter of my life by giving me the chance to go over to America.

“Now I’m excited to start a new adventure and see where it takes me.” ■



# THE PFA SAFETY NET

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TONY ADAMS MBE

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You can text this number on a weekday between 9am and 5pm and we'll call you right back. Evening and weekend texts we'll respond to the next working day.

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SPORTING CHANCE



League Football Education



# WILL TRUEMAN

SHEFFIELD WEDNESDAY



## APPRENTICE OF THE SEASON



Throughout his apprenticeship, Will Trueman has been a great ambassador for Sheffield Wednesday, showcasing tremendous professionalism on and off the pitch.

The young midfielder has overcome injury setbacks to make positive strides as a player this season, becoming a natural leader for the Under-18s and progressing into the Under-23 group.

In the classroom, Trueman has achieved the highest possible grade profile of D\*D\*D\* on the BTEC Extended Diploma – equivalent to three A-Levels – while he is one of the first apprentices in the country to undertake and complete the new Sporting Excellence Professional (SEP) qualification.

Additionally, the 18-year-old has made an impact in the community, representing the club in distributing Christmas hampers at a homeless charity, while he also completed a three-year school project that resulted in him conducting charity work in Lesotho, Africa.

“It’s great to win this award, I’m really happy,” said Trueman. “I was glad to be nominated by the club, but for the judging panel to have chosen me as the winner is brilliant.

“All my family are really proud. As soon as I was told, I rang my mum and she was buzzing. The education side is really important for me as it helps you focus on your football as well, when you know you’ve done a good job with your studies.”

Steven Haslam, Academy Manager, said: “Will is an outstanding young man and has continued his excellent development throughout the apprenticeship. He is a valuable player in our youth team and has stepped up to form part of our Under-23 squad during his second year on the programme.

“Will is highly regarded by players and staff at the club. He is testament to our values of developing good players and good people. It’s great for the academy for one of our players to be recognised with this award. It credits all the hard work that goes on by so many staff behind the scenes.”

Youth Coach Andy Sharp added: “Will has had a progressive and positive second year of his scholarship, experiencing some challenges in relation to form and injury that he has worked to overcome.

“He has recently put a significant amount of effort into developing his physicality by engaging in extra strength and conditioning training, which he will see the benefits of. Will is developing his understanding of the in and out of possession principles of the game and understands the importance of having clarity around expectations on him in these areas before a game.

“His attitude has been consistently outstanding during a challenging period, he has always been receptive of feedback and seeks to develop his understanding further.”

“**WILL IS AN OUTSTANDING YOUNG MAN AND HAS CONTINUED HIS EXCELLENT DEVELOPMENT THROUGHOUT THE APPRENTICESHIP.**”

The Owls teenager, whose great uncle was the late Fred Trueman OBE, has not allowed his footballing talent to stop his studies and commitment to education, achieving exceptionally high marks and even being named Head Boy at St Bernard’s Catholic High School.

Trueman was described by staff as “a fantastic student and a bright boy with a promising future, who has represented the school on many levels.”

Head of Education & Welfare Dan Potts said: “Will achieved excellent GCSE grades and we identified him as a learner who was able to take the BTEC Extended Diploma. He has worked hard during the course and achieved his target grades, which are the highest possible.

“He is always willing to help staff and the other players and has been an excellent role model for the new apprentices who joined this season, under very challenging times. Will has shown he is as driven off the pitch to all elements of the education and Life Skills programme as he is on the pitch.”

# LEWIS JOHNSON

MILTON KEYNES DONS



Milton Keynes Dons starlet Lewis Johnson has enjoyed a magnificent season as a first-year apprentice, featuring nine times for the senior team and earning his first professional contract.

It is not just on the pitch where he has found success, with the 17-year-old producing quality work on a consistent basis on the BTEC Extended Diploma and Sporting Excellence Professional (SEP), as well as undertaking the National Citizen Service programme – a four-week course that provides the opportunity for young people to overcome their fears, make new friends and gain new skills.

“It’s a great feeling to win this award,” Johnson said. “I must thank my family, first and foremost. I’d also like to thank Jon Goodman (Academy Manager) for guiding me along the right path, as well as Jackie Bushell (Academy Head of Education) for making sure I stayed on top of my schoolwork and performed to the best of my ability.”

“I would like to thank my teammates, too, for supporting me and putting me in the best position to succeed, and, of course, Russell Martin for giving me an opportunity to succeed, learn and grow in the first-team environment.”

Former First Team Manager Martin added: “Lewis has been a credit to himself, his family and our academy. He has shown very early on in his first year as an apprentice that he has a mindset that sets himself apart from other players and people his age.

“He works extremely hard, asks questions and shows dedication to learning as much as he can every time he trains. He has spent a lot of time with the first-team squad because of all of these attributes and is a real example to his peers in terms of his behaviour, professionalism and mindset.”

Johnson displays incredible hunger and desire to excel academically, highlighted by his willingness to open communication with his new BTEC Tutors before starting the programme last summer, in order to get a head-start on his studies.

The exciting winger was Head Boy at his old school and has revisited to present the end of year awards, as well as supporting events to complement other schoolboys’ learning and development.

Nathan Flynn, BTEC Course Leader at MK College, said: “As with any apprentice, the transition from school environment into balancing football and education is often difficult. However, for Lewis, it seemed almost second nature.

“His willingness to embrace change and adapt to different settings really helped to build a culture for the rest of the group, helping them to adapt and overcome any worries or anxieties. Lewis’ leadership qualities have shone through, establishing himself as someone who will not only act as a role model to the group, but also as someone who they can look to for support.

“He is keen to contribute to class discussions and is never afraid to ask for help. Lewis has developed into

“**HE WORKS EXTREMELY HARD, ASKS QUESTIONS AND SHOWS DEDICATION TO LEARNING AS MUCH AS HE CAN EVERY TIME HE TRAINS.**”

a conscientious and hardworking learner, who displays an excellent level of motivation in all aspects of the course.

“Lewis is very mature in his approach to everything he does. The way he has managed to balance his studies to maintain the best standard of work, together with also regularly training and playing with the first team, before being handed a professional contract, has been nothing short of exemplary.”

Meanwhile, Academy Operations & Head of Education Bushell said: “Lewis has shown an awareness to develop himself in terms of individual and team performance, and has supported the schoolboys’ lockdown learning programme, highlighting his player journey through an engaging presentation.

“He is confident, reliable and values feedback. He is a good communicator and has developed leadership skills, which support him in everyday life situations. Lewis has the strength of character, determination and knowledge to progress through his education programme to a high level. He is a great asset to the group.”

# FELIX MILES

CHELTHENHAM TOWN



Felix Miles has excelled in all areas of his apprenticeship, having already made his professional debut, while also progressing well on the BTEC Extended Diploma and Sporting Excellence Professional (SEP).

The Cheltenham Town teenager reached double figures in front of goal for the youth team during the 2020/21 season, establishing himself as an influential figure in the side despite only being a first-year apprentice.

Seventeen-year-old Miles was rewarded with a first-team opportunity in December, when he appeared for the final quarter of an hour of a Papa John’s Trophy defeat to Portsmouth.

“I feel really honoured to receive this award,” he said. “It’s been a really great year for me. I’ve played a lot of games, got a nice number of goals and assists, and it’s been positive overall.

“Coming in every day and training and making that step up to be an apprentice has been really good. The transition from Under-16s, where I didn’t really play too much, to then playing solidly with the Under-18s, has been really good for me.”

Michael Duff, First Team Manager, said: “Felix’s creativity and ability on the ball caught my eye in pre-season and I felt he could cope with the demands of training with the first team. He has trained with us all season and he is constantly improving, moving the ball very well and scoring goals and assists in training.

“The professionals love training with him because he is very creative and always taking risks, which is rare in a young player. He works very hard, he’s polite and is always doing extra to try and improve. I have enjoyed having him in the first-team environment and he is there on merit due to his playing ability.”

The talented midfielder has showcased tremendous resilience and strength of character to reach this stage in his career, having missed a lot of football over the years due to suffering from an extra bone growth in his foot, as well as being diagnosed with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome.

Pete Haynes, Lead PDP Coach, said: “I have known Felix for the past nine years after he joined as an Under-9. Throughout his time with the club, Felix has been an exceptional young man who has dealt with ups and downs, both inside and outside of football, with great maturity, resilience and always with a smile on his face.

“Felix’s attitude, application, work rate and sheer desire to succeed is phenomenal – his mentality is stronger than any other young player I have worked with, especially when dealing with the highs and lows that come with being a young man finding his way in a very competitive environment.

“From his strength and conditioning sessions, to his individual work, to performing at high level men’s football on work experience, Felix’s ability to put his mind to something

“**FELIX’S ATTITUDE, APPLICATION, WORK RATE AND SHEER DESIRE TO SUCCEED IS PHENOMENAL.**”

and not only cope, but strive and succeed, is testament to him as a person.”

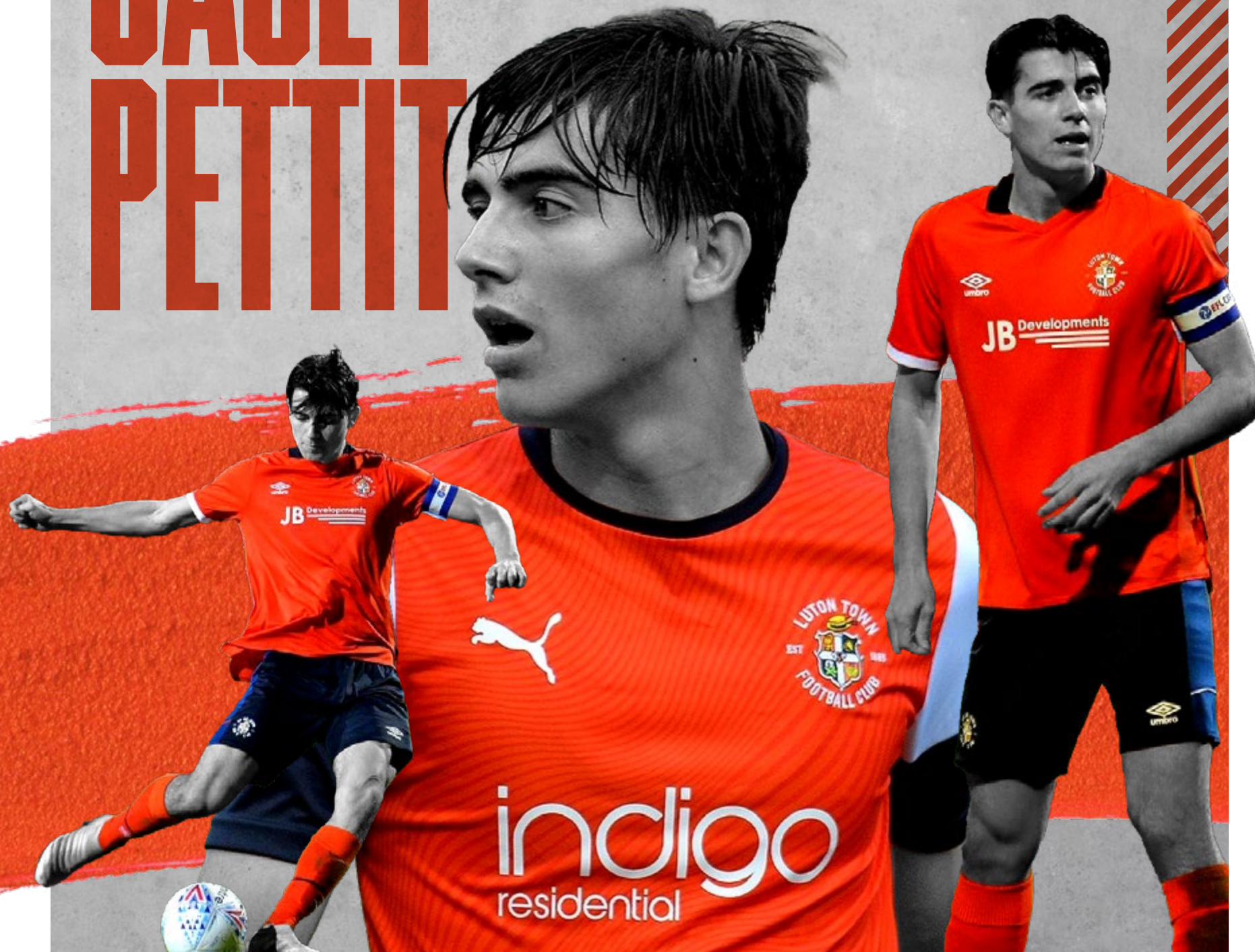
Miles’ commitment to education has seen him achieve in the classroom, too, gaining distinction grades in all of his assignments so far. In addition, he has delivered a number of training sessions to the Under-9s to support them in their football development and also read to local primary school children over Zoom on World Book Day.

Academy Manager Antoine Thompson added: “Felix’s technical play has been a pleasure to watch, with his tricks and outrageous goals over the years.

“He’s trained with the first team all season and made his debut for the first team as an Under-17. Most importantly, he’s developed into a grounded young man who shows respect, manners and exemplary behaviour in our environment and the wider community.

“As a young man in the workplace, Felix sets an extremely good example and leads his age group through his punctuality, work rate and the way he embodies the club’s values of honesty, integrity and respect.”

# CASEY PETTIT



**As a schoolboy, Casey Pettit began his journey in academy football at his beloved West Ham United before moving on to bitter rivals Millwall, but was left without a scholarship offer in 2019.**

Not to be deterred, he continued to pursue his dream and quickly caught the attention of Luton Town, who jumped at the chance to recruit the promising midfielder following a two-week trial. Since then, the 18-year-old has proved to be an all-round high achiever, captaining the Under-18s and Under-21s sides, alongside exceeding his target grades with a D\*D\*D\* profile on the BTEC Extended Diploma and finishing the Sporting Excellence Professional (SEP) programme.

"I joined Luton at the back end of the Under-16 season, and I've loved every minute of being here," Pettit told LFE. "From day one, I've tried to separate myself from the rest of the group by being more than just a footballer.

"There's the playing side, where obviously I want to be a leader on the pitch, but it's also important to set the standard off the pitch, whether that's in the classroom or wider activities. Doing that maximises my own development and then also encourages the rest of the lads to push themselves, so we can all improve as a unit.

"I always had in my mind when working on the BTEC or SEP, 'how can I relate this to my football'? There's a lot of information on the BTEC that you can absorb and then use to improve your own performance. In the SEP, you're analysing your clips, identifying strengths and weaknesses and setting targets, so it keeps you on track and self-aware of your development." ▶



In addition to his classroom commitments, Pettit, who penned a professional contract at the completion of his apprenticeship in July, has utilised his spare time to initiate a second career pathway.

The multifaceted teenager runs his own coaching company away from the Sky Bet Championship club, working with individuals and teams, and is currently studying for his UEFA B Coaching qualification, remaining on course to become one of the youngest people to attain it.

He said: "Football won't last forever, even if you do get a professional contract and have a good career in the game, so it takes the pressure off me now, knowing I've got qualifications under my belt."

"When we did the Level 2 badge as part of the education programme, I never had it in my mind that I wanted to be a coach, but while I was doing the course, I found that I really enjoyed it and decided to move on to the UEFA B licence."

"I set up my own coaching business to keep developing my skills and get a bit of extra income. I started with one-to-ones, working mainly with Under-13 to Under-15 age groups, and I've got about 10 boys and one or two girls that I work with now."

"I also coach four teams, which range from Under-12s to Under-14s. The apprenticeship offers different opportunities and pathways, and coaching is one that I've discovered a real passion for."

Pettit has received loyal support from his growing clientele, with some travelling from Luton to his local field in Essex. And despite his playing progress, the first-year professional is keen to continue his coaching project, which he insists is aiding his football development.

"I take it as a huge compliment that they're willing to go that far to receive coaching from me," he added. "The relationships I've built with the parents and their kids are too strong to let go of. Having put so much work into developing these players, it'd be a shame to just leave that now."

"Playing is my number one priority, but you also need a distraction and a release to keep your mind refreshed, and I've found that coaching can actually enhance my performance on the pitch."

"As a captain, you need to be a good communicator and build solid relationships with the coaches and players. You've got to be approachable and trustworthy, and you need to be willing to set standards and be an example for everyone to follow. Coaching has helped me develop those attributes."

"When I'm working with teams, I'm seeing the game from a different perspective and it's improving my tactical knowledge. I can also understand my coaches better and what they're asking of us in certain sessions and drills."

"It's important to consider, can you add something else into your routine that relieves the pressure from football for a while, can you invest time into an interest that can also give you transferable skills and help you improve as a player, and can you work on something that can act as preparation for life after playing?"

The Hatters starlet continues to be a shining example to his peers outside of football as well, having raised money for a range of local and national causes, including Prostate Cancer UK and the NHS.

"My number one aim as a footballer is to become a role model," Pettit continued. "I want people to look up to me for the right reasons. Seeing players like Jordan Henderson and Marcus Rashford inspiring people for their work off the pitch motivates me to replicate what they're doing and keep helping causes that I believe in."

"My dad was diagnosed with prostate cancer in 2012, and thanks to the support and treatment of Prostate Cancer UK, he's still here today. I've always wanted to repay the charity for everything they did for him, so I feel strongly about making my mark and helping people."

"When I was younger, I was a big West Ham fan and went to a lot of the games, so after the final whistle, I'd go down to the players' car park and take a shirt or a ball or something like that, and just get the players to sign them. Then, I'd auction those items off for charity."

"Isla's Fight is another cause that I've raised money for, in support of a little girl who has a rare type of child cancer. We tend to take being healthy for granted and it's important to recognise people's struggle."

"More recently, it's been a time to show appreciation to key workers that have been trying to save lives throughout the pandemic. I felt it was only right that I made a contribution to show my gratitude to them, so I decided to auction a few things off and donate the proceeds to the NHS."

"I still feel like I can do a lot more and part of the motivation to keep progressing in football is that I can gain a larger following and raise more funds for those in need." ■



**"THE APPRENTICESHIP OFFERS DIFFERENT OPPORTUNITIES AND PATHWAYS, AND COACHING IS ONE THAT I'VE DISCOVERED A REAL PASSION FOR."**



# STEWY'S SUPPORT



Former England forward Paul Stewart delivered safeguarding awareness education, as part of LFE's Life Skills programme, throughout the 2020/21 season. He has supported academy players, parents, carers and staff across 20 deliveries.

His journey through childhood to life as a professional footballer has been well-documented in the news, along with hundreds of other former footballers who have spoken out about the historical sexual abuse they faced as children.

"Since I came forward in 2016, I've always wanted to try and make a difference," he told LFE. "People might say it was brave, but for me it was all about trying to make a difference and this work I believe is making a difference, because it is raising the awareness and educating the industry."

Stewart, who played over 500 games for the likes of Liverpool, Manchester City and Tottenham Hotspur, has undergone rigorous safeguarding training and is much more than an ex-footballer with a victim's story. He is principled and adamant that this education is relevant to the people he is working with.

He said: "The game has changed and the sessions incorporate everything from today's world. I don't just talk about my experience; I talk about all forms of abuse within the sporting arena. I have to educate, as well as tell my own story, and so it covers social media, consent, isolation, banter, everything we have to be totally aware of to be safe."

"The academy players sit and listen and I get questions fired at me about what it was like at Liverpool and how it was for me when the abuse happened. If people are asking questions, people have taken notice."

The 1991 FA Cup winner also works with the EFL and the NSPCC to provide training to Heads of Safeguarding and those in other roles, too.

"For the first time, we have CEOs, Directors and Board Members on the course to help them realise that safeguarding has got to be a priority in the club and it is heart-warming to see," Stewart added.

"We need to understand that you can't cut corners on children's safety. The fact that so many people are on these courses is massive."

Earlier this year, The FA published the Sheldon Report, which investigated non-recent sexual abuse allegations in football. Stewart is one of the survivors to support the industry in learning from what happened. He has also featured in a three-part BBC documentary called Football's Darkest Secret and he recently appeared on mainstream news channels.





**SINCE I CAME FORWARD IN 2016, I'VE ALWAYS WANTED TO TRY AND MAKE A DIFFERENCE. PEOPLE MIGHT SAY IT WAS BRAVE, BUT FOR ME IT WAS ALL ABOUT TRYING TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE AND THIS WORK I BELIEVE IS MAKING A DIFFERENCE, BECAUSE IT IS RAISING THE AWARENESS AND EDUCATING THE INDUSTRY.**



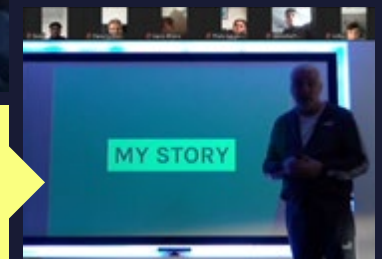
**"EVERY MEMBER OF STAFF WITHIN THE ACADEMY WILL HAVE HAD SOME LEVEL OF SAFEGUARDING, SO YOU ARE IN A SAFE ENVIRONMENT AND YOU CAN TALK. PLEASE TALK AND DON'T KEEP ANYTHING IN LIKE I DID FOR MANY YEARS."**



"The feedback is the highlight, and people are still talking to me about the sessions afterwards. Some have had bad experiences and so I can see this is making a difference."

"One club said that the next day, in the changing room, the staff spent an hour with the players discussing the session about how impactful and helpful it was."

**"THE CHALLENGES WITHIN THE GAME ARE DIFFICULT ENOUGH TO ALSO CARRY ANYTHING ON YOUR SHOULDERS."**



"When I look at my career, I didn't enjoy it and so I try to say, 'I want you to enjoy this experience and you can enjoy it by knowing if you have an issue, however big or small, there is a support network around you now and you can talk to someone'."

### FURTHER SUPPORT

**Alex Richards, EFL Safeguarding Manager**

01772 325940 | [arichards@efl.com](mailto:arichards@efl.com)

**The FA Safeguarding Team**

0800 169 1863 | [safeguarding@thefa.com](mailto:safeguarding@thefa.com)

Ask to speak to The FA Safeguarding Team

**NSPCC Helpline**

0808 800 5000 | [help@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:help@nspcc.org.uk)

**In an emergency, or if someone is in immediate danger, call the police on 999 (101 for non-emergencies)**



# FIVE WAYS TO WELL-BEING

LFE teamed up with the Sporting Chance Clinic and If U Care Share to outline various methods to help look after your well-being.



LEARN A DANCE



GO WALKING OR HIKING



PRACTICE YOGA OR PILATES



PLAY OTHER SPORTS

*i.e. cycling, golf, tennis*



TRY A HOME WORKOUT

## BE ACTIVE



LEARN A LANGUAGE



PLAY AN INSTRUMENT



LISTEN TO A PODCAST



READ A BOOK



WATCH A DOCUMENTARY

## LEARNING



JOIN A VIDEO CALL



MEET UP FACE-TO-FACE



SEND A TEXT MESSAGE



SHARE ON SOCIAL MEDIA



TALK ON THE PHONE

## COMMUNICATION



ADVISE CHILDREN AND YOUTHS



FIND TIME FOR YOURSELF



PRAISE OTHERS



HELP THOSE IN NEED



OFFER ACTS OF KINDNESS

## GIVE



KEEP A JOURNAL



PRACTICE MINDFULNESS



ACKNOWLEDGE DAILY THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS



RECOGNISE ACHIEVEMENTS



TRY DEEP BREATHING EXERCISES

## TAKE NOTICE

# "I wrote about my day-to-day experience as an academy player and they loved it..."

Burton Albion's Under-18s caused a stir in last season's FA Youth Cup, beating Category One academies Stoke City and Southampton during their run to the fifth round. First-year apprentice **Ben Radcliffe** donned the captain's armband for their trip to eventual champions Aston Villa after establishing himself as a key figure in the team.



And it was not just on the pitch where the 17-year-old made his mark, having been named as one of this year's BBC Young Reporter competition winners with his piece, 'The experience of being an apprentice footballer at a professional club'.

"I was looking for football scores on the BBC Sport website and noticed there was a link promoting the competition," he told LFE. "It said something along the lines of 'write about what you do' and I think being an academy footballer isn't often documented, so I thought it'd be a decent topic.

"I can't say I really have a massive interest in writing, but I saw it and thought 'why not'? I wrote about my day-to-day experience as an academy player and they loved it, which was completely surreal.

"I didn't expect to win, I just felt it would be good experience to enter and maybe something I could stick on my CV. To end up being one of the winners and seeing myself being interviewed on national TV was bizarre."

More than 2,500 young people aged 11 to 18 entered, with the versatile midfielder becoming one of 15 winners, triumphing in the Me and My World (16-18) category.

His submission, judged by editors, presenters and reporters across the BBC, including Huw Edwards, Greg James, Alex Jones and Laura Kuenssberg, highlighted the importance of mental health in football, while he also shared his experience of being an apprentice at Burton.

"I'm not afraid to put myself out there and do things that others might not have the confidence to do," said Radcliffe. "Some lads might be conscious of what their teammates think of them if they do something that's not quite the norm, but I'm not concerned about that.

"Fortunately, I haven't experienced mental health issues, but I recognised that others might be going through some difficulties. I wanted to make the point that it is a normal thing and wanted to show my teammates that they can rely on me for support if they're struggling with anything.

"Everyone goes through negative phases from time to time, but there is always light at the end of the tunnel. The more people speak out about mental health, the more common it becomes as a topic, which then hopefully encourages more and more people to open up. That's why I wanted to be involved in that movement to creating a new culture."

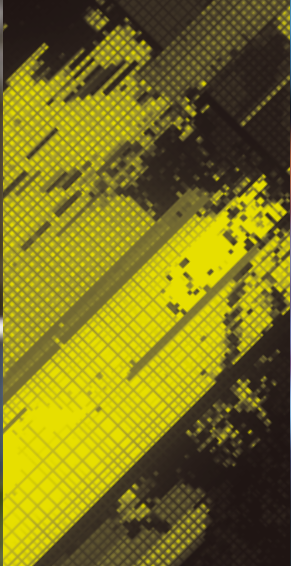
Determined to be a leader in all aspects of the apprenticeship, Radcliffe is excelling in the classroom, too. The talented teenager is studying the BTEC Extended Diploma and an additional A-Level in business, which he believes is benefiting his football development.

"Having the right attitude in college, where you're engaging with the teachers and staying focused in lessons, definitely helps you on the pitch," he continued. "The lads respect the work I put in, so even though I'm doing it for me, if I can inspire them as well, that's a bonus. ▶"





ESSEX  
SPORT



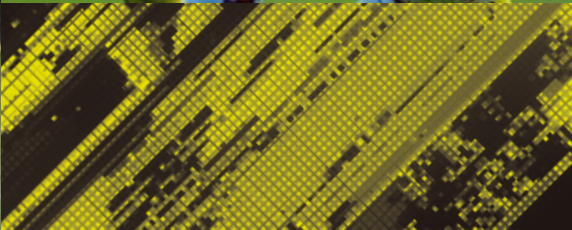
**"You can only do so much on the pitch and you need to be a good person as well as a player."**

"You've got so many responsibilities as a footballer; it's not just limited to kicking a ball around on a field of grass. You're in the public eye, you become a role model for others, you've got to be able to communicate properly to handle media commitments and you need the mental strength to handle pressure and expectations.

"Being professional and respectful in every aspect of your apprenticeship is very important. You can only do so much on the pitch and you need to be a good person as well as a player. Anyone who gets into an academy is obviously a good footballer, so it's how you develop yourself off the pitch that can really set you apart from the rest.

"The college work has also directly improved my game because some of the topics are about tactics, analysis, performance and diet. Obviously, we do video sessions with club staff, but it's really helpful to analyse your game with someone completely different, who isn't watching you every day and focusing on your known strengths and weaknesses."

By committing to his studies, the Brewers prospect will unlock several transition options for himself at the end of the apprenticeship, providing exciting opportunities if his ultimate goal of being awarded a professional contract does not come to fruition.



"It's not healthy to be focused on football all day every day," Radcliffe added. "I wouldn't say I do my A-Level in my spare time, but sometimes you can be getting home from training at 2pm, so you've got a lot of extra time compared to people at school. I use that to do some reading or complete some work that I've been set.

"The football side of the apprenticeship is very intense and that's ultimately what we all sign for a club to do, but having the education alongside that gives you time off from focusing all your energy on football. I personally prefer to do something productive, rather than spending hours on video games.

"I've particularly enjoyed my business A-Level because it's not related to sport. I study one-on-one with a tutor and it gives me time to focus on something completely different, which really helps to avoid getting swept up in the pressurised football environment.

"Obviously, my objective is to get a professional contract, but I've already done plenty of research and have a clear vision that if I don't, I want to go to America to study a business management or business-related degree.

"It's going to be a demanding season trying to earn a pro contract, but at least I can feel at ease knowing that I'll be prepared to go down another pathway if football doesn't work out." ■



# COMMUNITY ACTIVITY



Bolton Wanderers first-year apprentices had the opportunity to hone their communication skills while helping the local area by assisting pupils with revamping a garden on the grounds of Sharples School.



In conjunction with the club's Community Trust, the social action project will go towards their Sporting Excellence Professional (SEP) qualification, which is specifically designed for young footballers to develop attributes that directly transfer onto the pitch.

Alex Norwood, Head of Academy Education, told LFE: "One of the SEP units looks at personal and professional communication and part of that is public appearances, so this will be able to generate some good evidence for them and hopefully it's a valuable learning experience.

"Obviously, communication is a key aspect to an event like this, but above all, I think it's important for them to gain knowledge of what their role is as players, and that they are seen as role models.

"It's really important for the boys to have an idea of the work that the Community Trust do, and also for them to realise that they can make a positive impact just by sacrificing a bit of their time.

"The lads have been signing autographs and having photos taken; they've represented the club brilliantly. Ultimately, they want to be professional footballers and this sort of activity, where they're interacting with students, just gives them a taste of what life could be like and the commitments that will be asked of them."

Each player will be able to use the community activity as evidence for their SEP portfolio, while they will also talk about the experience during a professional interview towards the end of the qualification.

Aside from their academic commitments, however, some are now keen to continue making an impact in the local area during their spare time.

"This is one of the first community events we've been able to attend and I think we should do more because it's good for us to develop important skills and it's good for them as well," said midfielder Arran Pettifer.

"It's good to give back and give the young lads something that they can get excited about and I think we've gained a lot from being around them as well. They seem to have really enjoyed it and obviously it's nice for them to see some of the players from their club.

"I've been at Bolton for 11 years, so it's nice to now be representing the club in the community.

"You never know when it's going to end, so it's important to try and make an impact before it's too late."

Seventeen-year-old Max Conway added: "I'm proud to be a Bolton player because we've got a great community. Seeing the smiles on people's faces when we walked in was great to see and it's a good indication of what life as a footballer can be like.

"All the different elements of the SEP qualification help us to learn a lot of personal skills that will prepare us for life after the apprenticeship. With these sorts of events, teamwork is a key factor because we're helping each other get the job done to the best of our ability, so we can also translate certain experiences onto the pitch."



# JAMIL'S AMERICAN JOURNEY

In the summer of 2016, **Jamil Roberts'** career in football was hanging by a thread after being released by Plymouth Argyle at the conclusion of his apprenticeship.

Almost five years later, the 23-year-old was accepting the NCAA Division 1 Offensive Most Outstanding Player award, having scored the winning goal to help Marshall University become NCAA National Champions for the first time in school history, since being established in 1895.

The versatile forward struck three straight match-winners in the quarter-final, semi-final and final, netting an extra time golden goal with the last kick of his college career before turning professional with Sporting Kansas City, who selected him with the 77th pick of the 2021 MLS SuperDraft.

"I've watched the game back many times and I still pinch myself," he told LFE. "To be the one who scored the historic goal and complete my four years at Marshall in that way, I couldn't have scripted it any better.

"Without blowing my trumpet too much, it did get to the point where I felt like a small town celebrity, which was very surreal. I don't think I paid for a drink in the month following the tournament. Everywhere I went, it was either on the house or someone was buying it for me.

"Some of the great Marshall athletes have had streets named after them around the city and there's a rumour that I'll have one of my own. There has also been talk that I could be an early inductee into the Hall of Fame. To even be mentioned in the same category as people like Randy Moss and Chad Pennington, who are NFL legends, that to me is just incredible."

Unseeded Marshall enjoyed a fairytale run to the National crown, seeing off number one ranked Clemson, reigning champions Georgetown, hosts North Carolina and then Indiana, who boast one of the most successful soccer programmes in the nation.

"The NCAA Division 1 Tournament is the best against the best from across the whole country," said Roberts, who was named as one of four finalists for Best Play at the 2021 ESPY Awards. "There are over 200 D1 teams and then 32 make it to the post-season competition.

"We had to beat some powerhouses of college soccer and we were dubbed as an underdog story by the media, but we never saw it that way. We were prepared to the finest detail for every opponent, which gave us so much belief in each round.

"Every single player played their part in helping us win the title, but inevitably my goal gets highlighted the most. I was a left-back in the Under-18s at Plymouth, but after one training session here, I was moved forward. That's completely changed the trajectory of my career and to finish my time at Marshall with a tap-in, a proper striker's goal, was very fitting."

The American journey all started for Roberts in 2017, having spent a season struggling to make an impact at Dorchester Town in non-league, although a potential contract offer from Grimsby Town almost prevented him from making the switch across the pond.

“There’s a period of self-pity that comes after being released,” he added. “Some lads are ready to go straight into a new challenge after the apprenticeship, but I wasn’t. I needed some time to reflect and refocus.”

“A year on from leaving Plymouth, I was refreshed and incredibly motivated to take on the challenge of America. Instead of holding onto a lot of bitterness, I was able to disconnect from that negativity and just focus on myself and my objectives.”

“I was in pre-season training with Grimsby Town in League Two at the time and they’d made it clear that they intended to sign me. But the U.S. route offered a long-term guarantee of full-time football alongside getting a degree.”

“At this point now, I’ve had four years of development, where I’ve matured physically as an athlete and mentally as a person, so now I feel a lot better prepared to start my professional career.”

Following a steady first two seasons with the Thundering Herd, Roberts had a breakout year in 2019, registering eight goals and 10 assists in 18 games, which put him on the radar of several MLS clubs.

He said: “I believe my goal contributions tally was top three in the country and my assist numbers were top five, so I was suddenly being touted as one of the most promising forwards in the country and talks between myself and other clubs intensified.”

“My final season was delayed due to Covid, but I was still eligible to enter the 2021 draft and I was invited to the Combine, held in Kansas City.”

“We played three games with every MLS and USL scout or sporting director in attendance, and then there were six or seven weeks of non-stop conversations with clubs and agents up until the event in late January.”

Despite being predicted by many as a first-round prospect, MLS restrictions on the number of international players allowed on each roster meant that the talented left-footer slipped down the pecking order, eventually being taken off the board in the third round.



**“IN ALL ASPECTS, IT’S BEEN THE BEST EXPERIENCE OF MY LIFE.”**

“I had a really good Combine and great conversations with quite a few clubs in the lead up to the draft, but I had the international tag hanging over me,” Roberts continued. “When I finally saw my name come up next to Sporting KC, the feeling was indescribable.”

“It was the culmination of a long journey, with many ups and downs. There was a realisation that I was right to believe in myself and I wasn’t deluded to have these ambitions.”

“It couldn’t have worked out better for me. The training ground is the U.S. National Team’s HQ and it’s an environment where there is no excuse not to succeed. I’m so grateful to have been given this opportunity.”

Roberts, who will spend the remainder of the season at affiliate club Sporting KC II in the second division, has not progressed solely as a footballer, with the U.S. scholarship route allowing him to further his studies, attaining a Bachelor’s degree in Health Sciences.

“My coach took a big interest in making sure everyone was focusing on their education and the university provided a lot of support staff for the student-athletes,” he said. “I also had an academic advisor who would organise additional tutoring for certain classes whenever I needed it.”

“I’ve always been interested in the psychology of sport, but I wanted to broaden my knowledge of the whole subject, so I chose to study Health Sciences and then I plan on eventually getting my Master’s, specialising in psychology.”

“The education I’ve received has been first class and it has helped with my own mental state. Obviously, I’ve matured with age and my headspace is a lot clearer anyway, but I do feel like the education has been a contributing factor and some of the things that I’ve learned and applied to my own game have been invaluable.”

The experience in the States is not just limited to on the pitch and in the classroom, providing opportunities to travel and learn about different cultures.

“It’s massively broadened my horizons,” Roberts said. “Our team was made up of lads from America, England, Germany, Argentina, Yemen, New Zealand, and that’s just what I remember off the top of my head.”

“Aside from going to university in West Virginia and now playing in Kansas City, I’ve visited places like Florida, Miami, New York, California, LA, San Diego, Seattle, Chicago and North Carolina, so I’m well-travelled.”

“I made a commitment to immerse myself in the community and make an effort to understand the local culture, and I feel like I’ve done that. I’ve become a much more rounded person with a better perspective on the world.”

“Overall, it’s been a learning curve on and off the pitch. It’s allowed me to pursue education at a level I never thought I’d reach and it’s enabled me to achieve my dream of becoming a professional footballer, which I didn’t think would be possible after being released at 17.”

“In all aspects, it’s been the best experience of my life and I hope that it continues now that I’m away from the college environment.”

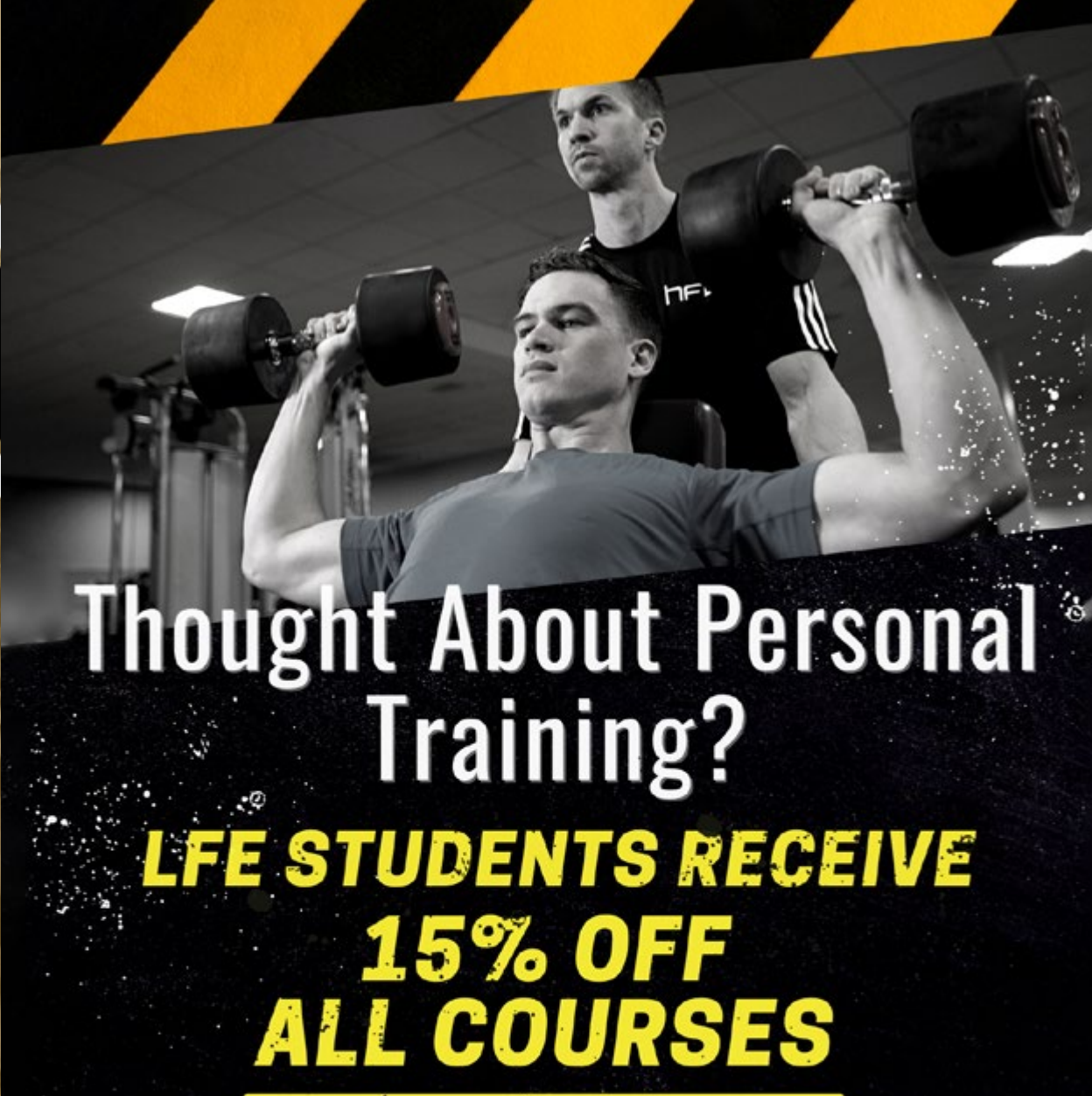


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# SEEDS OF

Of all the alternative careers that academy footballers can pursue after being released, it is fair to say that selling plants does not often, if at all, come up in discussion.

# CHANGE

But for ex-Wolverhampton Wanderers apprentice Dylan Stringer-Moth, it is a pathway that has developed into a profitable business venture.

The 25-year-old had graduated with a degree in Sport Coaching and Development, but felt that it was not his “true passion” and kept himself open to other options.

At the start of lockdown in March 2020, Stringer-Moth volunteered his services to a garden centre owned by his girlfriend’s family, which sparked a budding interest that would turn into a full-time project.

He told LFE: “When the pandemic hit, I had a lot of free time because I couldn’t go into work, so I started helping out at the garden centre as they were still able to do deliveries. ▶



"I was doing drop-offs all over Manchester and that inspired an idea between myself and my girlfriend to create our own service across the whole country. We did a bit of research and convinced ourselves that it was something we could do.

"We started the business last August, called One Click Plants. We have a garden centre where we grow our stock, but it's an online store and we deliver across the UK and Northern Ireland.

"We do garden project enquiries as well, so if someone wants their garden transformed, they'll send us their budget, a photo and the dimensions of what they need and then we'll provide recommendations for them based on the plants we sell. We also create videos for people, showing them how to grow their plants.

"My girlfriend is a lot more knowledgeable than me, but I'm learning every day about all the products, seasonal trends and what sells best throughout the year. I've enjoyed the process so far."

As with any startup, establishing the business has been a challenging operation, with Stringer-Moth juggling several roles across the different aspects of the company.

"My girlfriend and I are running the business and then we have one other person who is basically a picker and packer," he continued. "We have to do all sorts of things, like customer service, social media and marketing, sorting stock and orders, handling finances, managing the picker and packer, and so on. We're constantly busy, but that's how I like it.

"I think you learn on the job in business. You're not going to get it right first time every time, so you've got to be resilient and keep believing in your project. You probably learn more from the failures than you do from the successes.

"At first, we were a bit sceptical whether to take the plunge and commit to the business full-time, so we've been really surprised by the success we've had already.

"We've had a year now to learn our trade and stay afloat, so now we'll be setting some objectives and projections for the next 12 months and beyond."

One Click Plants is emerging as a reputable brand, with over 200 five-star reviews on Trust Pilot and almost 12,000 followers on Instagram, with renowned home improvement accounts now using the service.

"We try to stand out from the crowd by offering a fast delivery service," he added. "Our stock enables us to be ready to provide next day delivery. Our plants are also a bit bigger than the norm, and therefore better value for money than a lot of our rivals.



"We sent stuff to Kady McDermott from Love Island, whose home account had a crazy number of followers. Courtney Black, who is a popular online fitness instructor, has also collaborated with us. That kind of thing is great exposure for us because we can use their platform to advertise to a new and much bigger audience, which leads to more sales."

Stringer-Moth's only prior experience in business came via his startup clothing brand, called Attivo, which offered a sports clothing range and enjoyed plenty of success, until production was stopped in favour of his current venture. He believes all apprentices have the skillset to succeed in the industry.

"Everyone has more to offer than just football," said Stringer-Moth, who still plays semi-professionally for Chadderton FC. "Progressing through the academy ranks, you have to be self-motivated to pursue your goals and resilient when you encounter adversity. It takes a lot of effort, sacrifice and determination to get to the apprenticeship level, and that's exactly what is required in business.

"It can be a little intimidating at first to drift out of that comfort zone, but sometimes it's the only way you'll find your true passion. I never would have imagined that I'd be enjoying running a successful plant business, but you never know what is going to be your calling until you give it a go." ■

**"IT CAN BE A LITTLE INTIMIDATING AT FIRST TO DRIFT OUT OF THAT COMFORT ZONE, BUT SOMETIMES IT'S THE ONLY WAY YOU'LL FIND YOUR TRUE PASSION."**



[Click here to visit One Click Plants](#)

# ENGLAND EURO 2020 FORMER APPRENTICES



TEN FORMER LFE APPRENTICES REPRESENTED THE THREE LIONS THIS SUMMER AS THEY CONTRIBUTED TO ENGLAND'S HEROIC RUN TO THE UEFA EURO 2020 FINAL.

Manager Gareth Southgate handed game time to seven of those players during the competition, with Barnsley academy graduate **John Stones** and Leeds United's **Kalvin Phillips** starting all seven matches.

Ex-Sheffield United youngster **Harry Maguire** was rewarded for his excellent performances with a place in the Team of the Tournament, while former Southampton apprentice **Luke Shaw** was another star performer, registering three assists and scoring a terrific opener just 116 seconds into the final defeat to Italy.

Manchester United captain **Maguire** and Liverpool skipper **Jordan Henderson** (formerly of Sunderland) found themselves on the scoresheet during the 4-0 rout of Ukraine at the quarter final stage, while midfielder **Phillips** was the provider for England's winning goal against Croatia to kickstart their campaign.

Elsewhere, **Jude Bellingham** and **Dominic Calvert-Lewin** both appeared multiple times off the bench, with the former becoming the youngest ever player to feature in a knockout game at a European Championship, aged just 18 years and four days.



## SQUAD

**Jude Bellingham**  
Birmingham City apprentice  
Borussia Dortmund

**Dominic Calvert-Lewin**  
Sheffield United apprentice  
Everton

**Ben Chilwell**  
Leicester City apprentice  
Chelsea

**Jordan Henderson**  
Sunderland apprentice  
Liverpool

**Harry Maguire**  
Sheffield United apprentice  
Manchester United

**Kalvin Phillips**  
Leeds United

**Aaron Ramsdale**  
Sheffield United apprentice  
Arsenal

**Luke Shaw**  
Southampton apprentice  
Manchester United

**John Stones**  
Barnsley apprentice  
Manchester City

**Ben White**  
Brighton & Hove Albion apprentice  
Arsenal

## STANDBY LIST

**Ben Godfrey**  
York City apprentice  
Everton

**James Ward-Prowse**  
Southampton

**Ollie Watkins**  
Exeter City apprentice  
Aston Villa

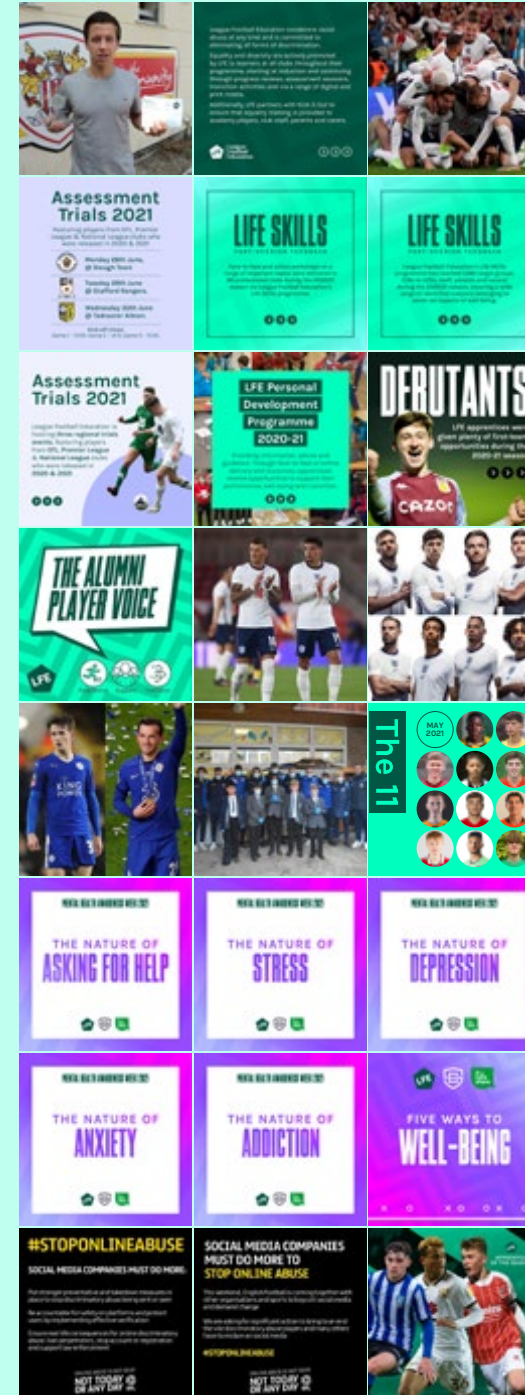


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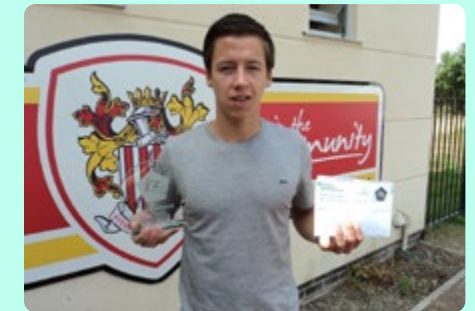
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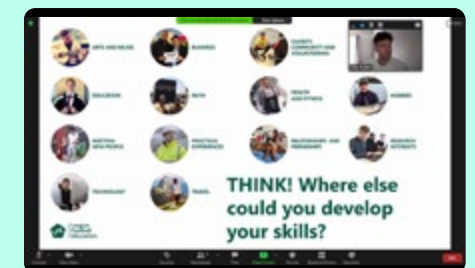
**League Football Education** @LFEonline  
Everyone at League Football Education is heartbroken to learn of the passing of former Stevenage apprentice & 2013 Mike Johnson Award winner **Spencer McCall**, following a brave battle with a rare bone cancer. Deepest condolences to his friends and family.



**Joe England** @joeengland  
It's been a pleasure to work with the @LFEonline on their Assessment Trials this year. Massive thank you to all three venues @sloughtownfc, @SRFCofficial & @TadcasterAlbion, and best of luck to all the players 🙌



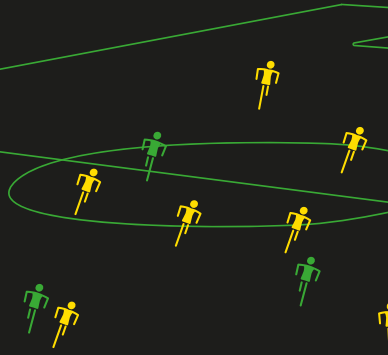
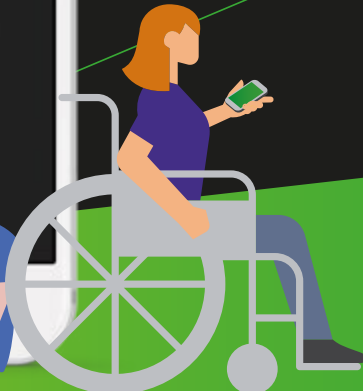
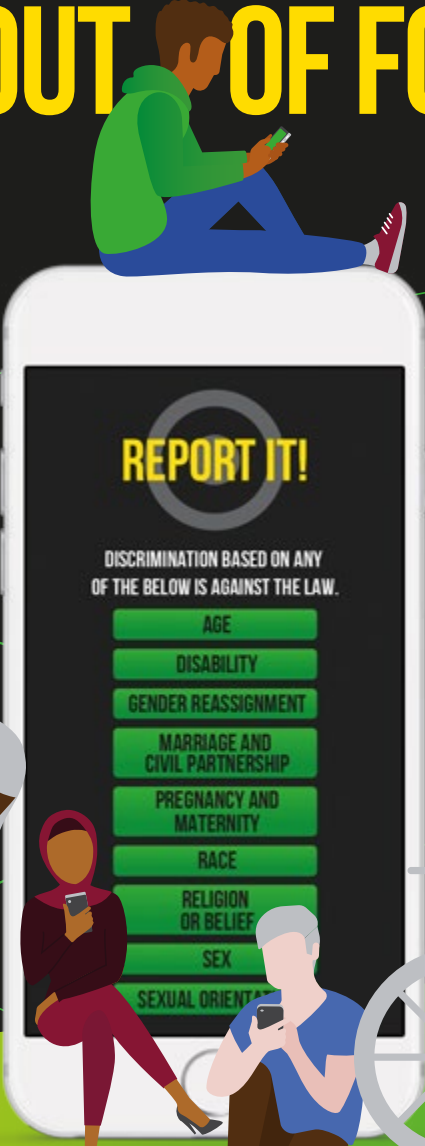
**Plymouth Argyle Academy** @PAFCAcademy  
Massive thank you to @jackrutter2 for the fantastic delivery of @LFEonline Personal Development program. 7 great sessions our first year apprentices really enjoyed and developed both on and off the pitch.



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