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## **'Football's biggest issue': the struggle facing boys rejected by academies**

*David Conn, The Guardian.*

In March 2013 a young man killed himself after suffering years of mental health difficulties following his release by a Premier League football club's academy at the age of 16. The summing up by the coroner who presided over the inquest into his death could hardly have been a stronger or more salutary warning about the potential dangers of English football's youth development system.

Relentlessly ambitious and commercialised professional clubs recruit thousands of boys into intensive, four times a week training from the age of eight, in numbers still broadly based on those first sanctioned by the Football Association's 'Charter for Quality' 20 years ago. Hundreds of these boys are released each year, as the clubs narrow their focus on who might have a faint chance of making a career in professional football and becoming a valuable financial asset. Despite the huge numbers housed in this system, currently 12,000 boys, the chinks of first-team opportunities have diminished every year since 1997. In each transfer window, most Premier League clubs overlook their young graduates and instead spend multimillions of pounds on fully formed overseas stars.

The Premier League and Football League adamantly defend the professionalism of their youth processes, coaching and facilities, which have undoubtedly improved since the introduction in 2012 of the Elite Player Performance Plan. Both leagues stress that boys who are taken on for the 16–18 scholarship must continue with education – commonly this is a BTEC sports diploma – and receive a broad range of welfare provision and courses in life skills including emotional wellbeing. The EFL says it is 'supportive of the holistic development of young players', and the Premier League aims 'to support the development of well-rounded young players'.

Fifteen Premier League and nine Championship clubs have Category One EPPP academies and operate under-23 teams, so they report a relatively high number of 18-year-olds given initial professional contracts – 65% last year, according to the Premier League. But Gordon Taylor, chief executive of the Professional Footballers' Association, says that of the boys who make it into the elite scholarship programme at 16, past PFA research has found that five out of six are not playing professional football at 21. Taylor describes this as 'a matter of major concern'. The leagues report that many who are released find their level in non-league football, some go to university or secure scholarships in US colleges, and the LFE says it has examples of former apprentice footballers working as solicitors, accountants, cardiothoracic physiotherapists and radio producers.

The few academic studies based on limited access to clubs and young players have all produced serious concerns. Dr David Blakelock of Teesside University found in 2015 that 55% of players in his study were suffering 'clinical levels of psychological distress' 21 days after being released. Himself previously a youth footballer with Newcastle United and Nottingham Forest, Blakelock says the academy experience can narrow young boys' perspectives into an 'athletic identity', in which they see themselves almost wholly as footballers, so they can suffer 'a loss of self-worth and confidence' when that is taken away.

Chris Platts, whose 2012 doctorate for Chester University was based on questionnaires and interviews with 303 17- and 18 year olds in 21 clubs' academies, says only four have professional contracts now – a drop-out rate of 99%. Platts stresses that there are many well-intentioned, hardworking coaches and welfare officers, and regards the EPPP as a well-considered system, although he cautions that there is a quality gap between the Premier League and clubs lower down. His overriding concerns were that education was not taken seriously enough by many of the young men who believed they were within sight of being footballers, that despite the welfare programmes the academies were a high-pressure, 'unreal' environment, and there was not enough support for players released.

The Premier League's advocacy of the EPPP system was fundamentally challenged last month by one of its own clubs, newly promoted Huddersfield Town, who announced the blunt conclusion of an extensive review by scrapping the academy altogether in the 8–16 age groups. Parents of 100 boys were called to a meeting with the chief executive, Julian Winter, and told that their association with the club was to end in a month. Half the academy's 25 permanent staff are to be laid off, along with part-time people working evening and weekends. Huddersfield had found that of all the boys who had come through their system, not one had played in the Premier League since Jon Stead, who graduated in 1999. That is 18 years of boys being taken out of local and school football from the age of eight, the overwhelming majority not securing a career.

Chris Green, whose 2009 book *Every Boy's Dream* chronicled the institutionalised disappointment delivered to so many boys taken into academies so young, believes that the FA inquiry by Sheldon should look at the emotional and psychological impact of the youth development system now.

'It is very complacent to imagine that all the abuse was in the past and now we have a perfect system,' says Green. 'There are different forms of abuse. These are children, very young, they are not being given the time to play and enjoy their sport, before being taken into a system where they are seen as commodities, then discarded with too little concern about the damage it does.'

(Adapted from Conn, 2017)