

American Dreams:

How the NFL Academy is shaping the future

Unlocking talent and opening doors, the NFL academy is redefining pathways into America's sport.

The world's game. Eleven players, one ball, played on carpet like grass, passionate fans willing their teams on, games won by the single kick of a ball. Sound familiar? Think again. Word of American football has spread over the years and the pot has reached its boiling point, in the form of the NFL academy.

Five years ago, tucked away in North London, was the seed of the flower that now blooms. At Barnet and Southgate College, the NFL academy was set up with the aim of providing full-time education for 16–19-year-olds accompanied by intensive American football training from world class coaches. As well as aiming to boost the notoriety of the sport, it shared the goal of developing young international talent for the next level.

In 2022, the global initiative upgraded to the bright lights of Loughborough (obviously not that bright, it's the East Midlands). But what it lacks in beacons it makes up for with its elite athletic facilities. Housed at Loughborough University, the academy gained access to the elite athletic performance centre as well as the offering of classrooms at the nearby college. The initiative continued its path in October 2024, launching their second location on the Gold Coast, Australia. It marked a period of success for the academy, going unbeaten against European opposition since their first game in 2022. Rewarded with games against some of the America's best high school teams, the academy is making waves.

In February and March of this year, the academy will begin its season with trials in London, Birmingham and Manchester. They welcome anybody between the ages of 16 and 18 eligible to study in the UK.



With experience in American football not being a necessity, they accept a number of applicants who have history in other sports.

The academy recruit's athletes based on their size, speed, athleticism and explosiveness. This skillset is the same as that found in American football's distant relative, rugby.

Nathan Brindle, who plays for Blackheath Rugby and runs an Instagram centred on American football (@talk_football_uk), said "Rugby and American football share the same kind of ball and anticipation skills. Catching a contested high ball in rugby is very similar to a contested catch in American football. Rugby is a little more technical because there are no pads and the rules differ, but overall they teach the same fundamental techniques."



19-year-old Rafael Varona-Blakstad had a career mapped out in Rugby up until last season. But after being approached by Lamonte Winston, head of the NFL academy, he switched the orb for the pigskin. Speaking to The Guardian, Rafael said, "The academy is like a factory, a machine to make players and essentially get them to the states where they can play and compete at the highest level.

"It's not only the wages players are paid, they also have infinitely bigger stages. They regularly pack out 100,000-seater stadiums," he also said.

Louis Rees-Zammit's path will serve as an inspiration for talents like Rafael. Having made a name for himself in rugby, at the age of 23 he switched to American football. After only one season with the Jacksonville Jaguars in the NFL, he is already out of the league. Examples like this validate the creation of the academy.

Capturing talents at a younger age will stop them from having to play catch up later down the line. Nathan said, "I think it's good, there's more money in American football so it makes sense for some to make the transition. There are benefits there that simply aren't available if you play rugby."

Although the NFL academy has come leaps and bounds since its inauguration, there's still a long road ahead. So far over 40 academy students have secured college football scholarships in America, with over 30 playing in the 2024–25 season. Despite the upwards trend, NFL rosters are still exclusively made up of players from the US colleges.

With the initiative only being five years old, there's large reason to be hopeful. It would be unreasonable to expect the academy to be level with American colleges.



STARS IN THE MAKING

For now, the primary aim will be to make the academy an international hub for American football. Last season the academy did that, as the roster featured players from 19 countries. The hope is that one day such representation will be seep into the NFL.