



Chris Green dissects the British football academy system in his book *Every Boy's Dream*

'Very close to modern slavery'

Football academies promise their young players dreams, but fail to protect the thousands they release. **Athenea Lim** unravels the ruthless academy system

Asking any young boy in the nation what they want to be when they grow up, and chances are they'll tell you they want to be a footballer. They dream of the roars from adoring fans as they slam a football into the makeshift goal in their garden. They dream of having their very own characters in the football video games they play for hours after school. They dream of donning the designer football boots they see on their favourite players, as they unwrap a store-bought pair on Christmas day. For 1.5 million of them, this dream seems well within sight as they make their way up the academy ladder. But only 0.5% of these academy players will ever be able to live out their dream.

It is a gamble that these children are willing to sacrifice a normal childhood for, but is also one that leaves many of them victims of the relentless academy system when they reach the likely moment of deselection. Over 1.1 million of them will be released between the ages of 13 to 16. They will receive a letter, phone call, or email from the club informing them that they have not met the required standard. Clubs will then offer their released players an in-person meeting to discuss what went wrong, but this is an invitation that many find too painful to accept.

Former BBC sports journalist Chris Green believes that the academy system is almost akin to "modern slavery". Formalised in 1997 in the Charter of Quality, the academy system enabled clubs to recruit far more and far younger players than ever before. This means that increasing numbers of children

are giving up a normal education, socialisation, and even their safety.

"Education and welfare officers do the best they can, but they'll all tell you about their lack of faith in what they're doing. This system has no integrity," said Chris. "Some of this gets very close to modern slavery because they're commodifying these children, and it's against the United Nations' Rights for Children."

According to the United Nations, "children must be allowed to grow, learn, play, develop and flourish with dignity". However, with the current state of the system and the alarming rate at which children are being recruited into academies, Chris believes that these rights are far from being met.

"Clubs now trawl around looking for four-year-olds kicking a ball in playgrounds. Then when they recruit them, the demands come along to take them out of school," said Chris. "Many of them don't even enjoy being in academies. They have to jump through hoops to satisfy the demands of coaches, and they stop being a happy child."

While academies can only recruit players over nine-years-old, many clubs have set up development centres to train children as young as four-years-old.

Taha Muhammed was just 11-years-old when he was released from Charlton Athletic, but his experience at the academy still significantly disrupted his early education.

"We would train two to three times a week, and training would sometimes start as early as one o'clock," said Taha. "I'd have to miss school at least twice a week. Sometimes I'd have to travel three hours for football, so I'd miss more school because I was so tired."

The FA regulations state that players

under nine-years-old must reside within one hour of the training ground, which is increased by half an hour for those between nine and 17-years-old. However, players in the Full Time Training Model at Category 1 academies have no travel restrictions, posing risks to their safety.

"A 13-year-old boy I spoke to had been travelling from the Midlands to London by himself because he played for a Premier League academy. They would pick him up from the train station and drop him back there after training, but he'd be travelling alone at eleven o'clock at night," said Gary. "I wish clubs would stop thinking they can bend the rules and do anything to get these kids in, but stop caring about their welfare as soon as they're away from the club. What if he gets stabbed on the way home? Will the club take responsibility for that?"

Some academies illegally bypass the FA's restrictions in order to secure the best young talents. Chris claims that this is a common trend amongst bigger clubs. "I spoke to a ten-year-old who had been illegally travelling hundreds of miles to the academy he was attending," said Chris. "So he trains, comes back at midnight, obviously hasn't eaten much, so he has to take mornings or days off from school because he's simply too tired."

Despite missing over half of the school week due to training sessions and long journeys, Taha was fortunate enough to have parents who would "chew him out" if his focus on education shifted, and would tutor him after training. The 21-year-old is now a mechanical engineering student at the University of Sheffield, but his case is a rarity amongst deselected academy players rather than the norm.

Many elite academies provide their players with in-house education so they no longer need to attend school, which is a system that Chris is highly critical of. "We need the type of people who can inspire these kids to take vocational training, and actually enjoy the options that are out there to see what jobs they could get," said Chris. "At the moment, it's just bog standard education by very dull people just trying to tick boxes. The players don't even get to mix with people their own age, which is one of the great things about schools."

"You really feared for him, because he thought football was everything."

Some clubs give their players opportunities to take courses at local colleges, but many of them view it as a "day off".

"I went to this one course, and there were players from clubs like Burnley and Blackburn. They all had their arms forward on the desk, bored out of their minds," said Chris. "But they needed that education, because the vast majority don't make it, then they have nothing to fall back on."

Upon speaking to several recently released players from Premier League clubs, Chris said he "feared" for the futures because of their lack of education.

"I spoke to one boy who didn't even know what the course he was taking was about, and he'd been to it half a dozen times," said Chris. "You really feared for him, because he thought football was everything. That's the problem when they get released. They can't see a future, and that's when the mental health troubles kick in."

Former coach and Head of Education at Manchester City Academy, Pete Lowe, said that their unusual focus on education is what helped them become one of the best academies in the country.

"We were very serious about education at Manchester City for two reasons. One is to make sure they had a backup plan if they were released, and the other is a football reason," said Pete. "We wanted educated players, because they're easy to coach. They can take on board information, decipher it, and make good decisions."

Despite their emphasis on education, concentration and ambition were still areas that the Manchester City academy players struggled with. "I can't say that there were no issues with concentration, because when players leave school, they take it as if they've left school behind," said Pete. "I didn't have a problem with it, because they understood that their responsibilities were not just limited to a football pitch, so education was something they had to get through."

Unlike men's academies, women's academies and their players tend to prioritise education. This is partly due to the pay disparity, with Women's Super League players earning an average annual salary of £47,000, compared to the £3 million the average Pre-

mier League player receives.

Sunderland Women's Academy Manager Andy Grant believes that the men's game could benefit from a similar education system as the women have.

"All the girls are doing their A Levels or BTECs with local colleges. We also offer them a Diploma in Sporting Excellence, which is funded by the FA," explained Andy. "The boys usually do a BTEC in sports coaching that's offered by the academy because it's easy, but the girls are high achievers both in education and in sport."

While men's academies prioritise football in the hopes of producing elite players, the Sunderland Women's Academy proves that there is no need to compromise on education to reach the highest levels in football.

"The girls in the England squads tend to be our distinction level students," said Andy. "Money is definitely part of that difference in mindset. Girls that play for the best clubs for their whole careers may not be able to retire on the money they earn, meanwhile if one of the boys ends up playing in the Premier League for three seasons, they're set for life. But we do find that girls tend to be a lot more selective and dedicated to their education."

At the Sunderland Women's Academy, players under 16-years-old only train after school hours, giving them the freedom to socialise with their peers outside of the club. Even the older girls are only allowed to miss school days if their teachers are confident in their ability to catch up. However, boys as young as nine-years-old are missing several school days a week to attend mid-day training sessions, while others are taken out of school entirely.

"The isolation of boys in academies is extreme. When you're 20-years-old and you get released, you have very little experience to fall back on because you've just been in that cosseted world your whole life," said Andy. "If they went to school, they would be able to develop their wider social skills and it would also help keep them grounded. The insular environment they're kept in isn't helping them with any of that."

Former Stoke City academy player, Rich Wilkinson, who now counsels and researches deselected players with the PFA-affiliated



Andy Grant celebrates Sunderland Women's Youth Plate final victory

PHOTOGRAPH: ANDY GRANT

Far more of these kids, who are throwing everything into football, are getting lost in the system

Sporting Chance Clinic, has seen the impact of deselection both firsthand and through his clients. He suggests that this isolated environment results in boys developing an "athletic identity".

"When you play for a football club for years, you feel part of a family. Your reality is different, it's athletic, it's an identity," said Rich. "So the first thing I notice when players come into counselling is that they are still attached to this identity. They don't know who they are or what their reality is. When you're dealing with this loss, there's so many layers that need to be worked on slowly."

A study conducted by Rich in 2019 only cemented what he already suspected: that many players face clinical levels of psychological distress after deselection.

"It's such a panicky time for them because they've had their whole world shattered. Research says that the first 21 days after they're deselected is where some kind of intervention is needed," said Rich. "But most times the support isn't there for them, so those feelings will be shut down and dismissed, and will end up becoming unresolved trauma. If I had somebody say to me within those first 21 days: 'let's sit down and talk about what's happened', it would have been a very different outcome. I would have understood what I was feeling more."

Ex-professional footballers experience a similar identity crisis. While they have achieved the successes that most deselected players never get the opportunity to, that sense of athletic identity is still lost when they enter retirement. For many of them, addiction becomes a way to cope with this loss. High-profile former players, such as Paul Merson and Danny Murphy, have been vocal about their battles with addiction. However, the troubling rise in addiction amongst deselected players has largely gone under the radar.

"The first troubling sign I see in a lot of deselected players is addiction. Whether it be alcohol, gambling, or any addictive behaviour that can replace the loss of what they had," said Rich. "As a footballer, you're getting a lot of highs and lows in the game. You get that high when you walk out in front of thousands of people, or when you've won, or scored. And when you lose, you get the lows. When you look at addiction, you're doing the same thing in a way, aren't you?"

With clubs recruiting increasing numbers of young footballers every year, more players must inevitably face the shock of deselection. This is only exacerbated by the demand not increasing with the supply. When the Premier League was first established in 1992, there were only 12 foreign school days a week to attend mid-day training sessions, while others are taken out of school entirely.

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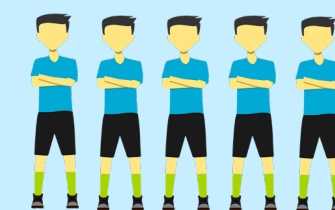
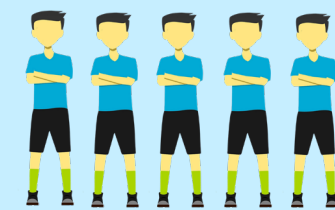
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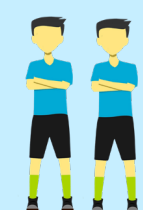
Former Stoke City academy player Rich Wilkinson now works with the PFA-affiliated Sporting Chance Clinic

PHOTOGRAPH: RICH WILKINSON

Football Academies in Numbers



There are 1.5 million academy players in the United Kingdom



20% of academy players have taken their A Levels



0.5% will be able to make a living playing football

Football's unsung heroes: the parents who dedicate their lives to their sons' dreams

Athenea Lim

Behind every Premier League star is a team that helped him reach the pinnacle of football - but not the one we see alongside him on the pitch. There are the academy coaches that honed his potential as a young player. There are the agents who brokered deals to get him at the best clubs. But there are also unsung heroes on his team that rarely get the plaudits: his parents.

Academy players devote years to achieving their dreams, but it is often overlooked that their parents do the exact same. Former BBC sports journalist Chris Green, who penned *Every Boy's Dream*, has spoken to parents of academy players all over the nation.

"It's a big ask for parents. They pick their kids up from school to get them to training, which is typically around six o'clock in the evening. If they're late, the clubs won't let them play weekend matches. So the pressure is there for them to get from work, or even get off work, to support their son," said Chris. "And this is twice a week, plus the game on the weekend. On top of that, their siblings have been ignored because one of them is quite good at football."

Chris finds that while many parents are happy to shoulder the burden, some do so with the hope for a return on their investment. "At the start, they can't wait to tell their mates that their son's been scouted by Manchester United, or whoever. And many of these families are very working class, and really cash-strapped. For years, they're thinking that their child might be the route out for them," he explained. "They hear about Michael Owen buying a whole cul de sac of houses for his family years ago, and they've probably got the future mapped out. When it doesn't work out, I think some parents don't know how to respond. Perhaps they say to their kid: 'you've let us all down', and that must be a terrific burden."

Former Oxford United Club Psychotherapist Gary Bloom, took part in the club's meetings to inform players of their deselection, and can attest to their impact on the player's parents. "The parents are financially and emotionally invested in their child being successful. So it's not just a rejection of their child. It's a rejection of them, their hopes, and dreams," he said. "Especially when they come from financially challenging backgrounds, the chance to see their kid become a professional footballer is incredibly enticing."

Other parents Gary has encountered have only the best intentions, but still see their son as a nearly impossible dream. "One of the issues with released players is that,

Former Oxford United club psychotherapist Gary Bloom



PHOTOGRAPH: GARY BLOOM

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no matter how much clubs try to signal to them that they're not quite at the standard the club would have hoped for, they form a cognitive dissonance whereby they don't want to hear what's being said to them," he said. "The parents especially don't want to hear what's being said to them. A head of the Oxford United academy said to me that his biggest problem was the parents, because kids are hearing different stories, and they all believe what they want to believe."

Clubs have begun offering parents classes on how to raise a child in the academy, but Gary believes they may need to rethink their approach.

"In my experience, you can offer parents all the education you want, but they don't necessarily want to listen. Very often, people like myself are seen as not being able to understand," said Gary. "We come from a middle-class, educated background. The parents are thinking: 'how the hell would you know what it's like to be in my position? We've taken our kid hundreds of thousands of miles around the country to play football, and at 14 they're being released and all those dreams are dashed to nothing.' We've come a long way, but we need to think about how we can actually help these parents as much as we help the players."



Football is widely considered a working class sport

PHOTOGRAPH: DYLAN THOMAS

'They overheard their seven-year-old son saying he'd been culled'

Athenea Lim

In 2020, the footballing world was stunned by the suicide of 18-year-old former Manchester City academy player, Jeremy Wisten. His inquest posed serious questions about Manchester City's support, or lack thereof, of their released players. Football clubs and the PFA have responded by introducing aftercare plans and in-house mental health support, but some of the sport's leading psychologists still question whether it is enough.

Former Stoke City academy player Rich Wilkinson was released at 16-years-old through a letter in the post, leaving him with trauma that took him 25 years to come to terms with. The now 42-year-old specialises in counselling deselected academy players with the PFA-affiliated Sporting Chance Clinic.

"Things have changed since I was a player. There's safeguarding and player care now, and some clubs even have psychologists," said Rich. "But when I spent time at a club for my research, I found that their psychologist wasn't getting time to do sessions. It was just grabbing moments with players in the tunnel or in the car park. It's very difficult to apply any kind of support system when that's the only time you've been allocated."

Only players released after receiving a contract at 16-years-old can access the support offered by Sporting Chance Clinic, which Rich is highly critical of. "For anyone that hasn't received a contract, the PFA doesn't have that support in place for them," said Rich. "If you're under 16, you'll be released with only the limited support the club offers."

As a teenager playing with the older players, and hearing from coaches that he would be playing alongside the first team the following year, Rich's deselection took him completely by surprise. He believes that this is one of the main aspects clubs need to improve on to ensure their players are well prepared for any eventuality.

"Clubs need to get better at telling their players that perhaps they're not going to make it. But it's difficult to tell a 16-year-old that their dream may come short, because they don't want to hear that," said Rich. "But we need to get better at educating the players and making them understand that, while they might not make it, they should still enjoy the academy experience."

Former BBC sports journalist Chris Green has spoken to dozens of academy players and coaches on the impact of deselection. He believes that people who work in football believe they have the "hardest job" in releasing players, but don't appreciate how much harder it is on the players.

"It's heartbreaking to speak to deselected players, because you look into their eyes and you can see that they gave everything,

The Academy System

Foundation Phase
Under-9 to Under-11

Youth Development Phase
Under-12 to Under-16

Professional Development Phase
Under-17 to Under-21

and their everything wasn't good enough," said Chris. "I don't think people in the game care. Or they may care, but they don't want to open up a door that shows them the reality of what's gone on." Or they may care, but they don't want to open up a door that shows them the reality of what's gone on."

Chris gets visibly emotional as he recalls a conversation he had with a recently deselected seven-year-old boy and his parents. "He came out of it so hopelessly beaten up, saying: 'I'm never going to be anything in life'. And when I spoke to the club, they denied it was them, they said it was the parents," he said. "The parents could not have known less about football, they just believed the man in the tracksuit from the Premier League club. They overheard their son saying he'd been culled, and when you hear that word you think of baby seals being whacked on the head, it's terrible terminology. And that goes to show the type of language people at the club use amongst each other."

While some clubs prioritise mental health and take discernible action to ensure their players welfare, the culture at football clubs often means that players are unwilling to seek help even when it is readily available to them.

Former Charlton Academy player Taha Muhammed was released when he was 11-years-old. Although the club made every

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Former Charlton Athletic academy player Taha Muhammed was released at 11-years-old



PHOTOGRAPH: TAHA MUHAMMED

effort to support him both before and after deselection, he found himself unwilling to let his guard down.

"It was around my thirtieth game for the academy, when I started not playing to the standard expected," said Tah. "I was going through a difficult time in my personal life, which really affected my mental state, and started to take a toll on my performance."

Taha's coaches gave him a warning about his poor form, and offered their support, but he felt too uncomfortable to accept it. "I probably should have told them about what was going on with me. I know they would have been nice about it," he said. "But it just felt too risky, I was just worried about how they'd react."

The reluctance to open up is something observed in all clubs. With the competitive nature of academies, none of the young players want to give their coaches a reason to see them as inferior.

Rich previously worked as an independent counsellor contracted to a football club, and found that none of the players were willing to make use of his support. "I was not part of the club, so they knew they'd be safe to share with me," he said. "It was all confidential, and nothing would go back to safeguarding or player care, but it still wasn't enough for players to open up to me or share what was going on."

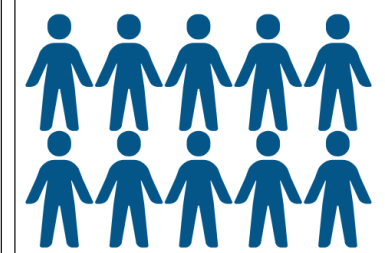
Rich believes a mentorship programme, where newly deselected players are paired with former players who have gone through the same thing, could be the way forward.

"A parent who was worried about their son contacted me, and luckily I managed to have three telephone conversations with

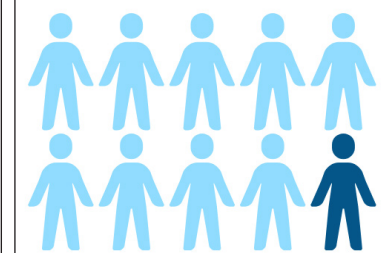
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him. They weren't counselling sessions because that wouldn't have worked," said Rich. "If I mentioned counselling, he would have run a mile because he didn't think he needed it. But what was really beneficial was letting him tell his story to me. I did offer counselling to him at the end, and it wasn't taken, but during our conversations he would say 'it's been really good to talk to you' and 'I've never said this to anyone before', so I think there's some real scope there with this idea."

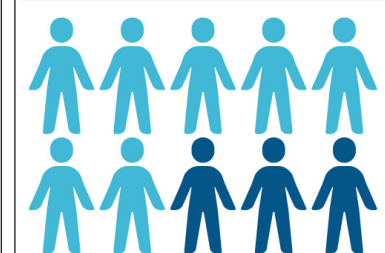
Of the 100 deselected academy players surveyed



Nearly 90% experienced anxiety or depression following their deselection



Nearly 75% think they were not given enough support



Jeremy Wisten took his own life just over one year after being released from Manchester City's academy



PHOTOGRAPH: GUTS GAMING