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## How football's youth academy culture is failing youngsters who don't make the grade

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It's a lamentable list of scarred young men whose lives ended following their release by clubs they hoped would turn them into professional footballers. **Josh Lyons**; **Joe Darlington**; **Alex Stephen**; **Reece Staples**; and, more recently, **Jeremy Wisten** all had their dreams dashed when they didn't make the grade. Their tragedy was that they did not "just move on" to the next stage of their lives. For each of these youngsters, being let go led to a period of mental turmoil which culminated in their premature deaths.

The loss of these promising young lives has prompted renewed calls for improving the aftercare of released academy players. But bolstering exit strategies for young players who do not make the grade may not go far enough. To protect the mental health of youngsters whose footballing ambitions will not be realised, a change in youth academy culture is needed.

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Our research is concerned with life after sport and athletes' well-being, and examining coach development and sport psychology, particularly within youth football. The work that we do aims to spread awareness of the underlying psychological processes and environmental conditions that contribute to the mental health problems of youth players at the end of careers that never really got started.

## Set up to fail

In the pursuit of footballing stardom, young players from all over the country flock to professional academy set-ups within clubs to hone their skills and progress through the ranks to the first team and possibly beyond. In the process, they may begin to identify with the role of an athlete, and the extent to which they do determines how much value they attach to the successes, failures and feedback they experience within the game.

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Given that only 0.5% of academy recruits go on to play for the first team, youth players usually need to dedicate huge amounts of time and effort to have even a slim chance of making the grade, which increases the likelihood of developing a strong athletic identity.

This can be beneficial for athletes' motivation and commitment to their sport. But if a youth player's adoption of this role becomes too intense and they start seeing themselves as an athlete and little else, this can lead to problems. For example, if a young player is not selected or is forced to stop playing due to a serious injury or illness, psychological and emotional problems can arise because they are no longer able to do what has come to define them and give their life meaning.



**Trov Townsford**  
@Towno10



Remember: to get released from a club is the most difficult thing for a young person to comprehend

The game is built around dreams & then they are smashed. Mentally & Emotionally it's overwhelming

Parents never be afraid to check on your children, one life lost is too many

9:17 AM · Oct 26, 2020



195



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Children, some as young as five, are being enrolled in academy settings where they are commonly referred to as “pro” or “elite” youth players. These children are put through intensive training regimes and competition schedules that often preclude them from exploring other activities and mixing with young people from different backgrounds.

So it is unsurprising that some might commit too early to an athletic identity – known as “athletic identity foreclosure” – and miss out on wider developmental experiences that would better prepare them for life after football.

Reports of first-team managers not giving young talent a chance, and stories of youth coaches prioritising the development of their very best players, or recruiting and promoting their own child over others, are common. Cases such as these add more weight to the notion that youth players are expected to devote themselves to a system that seems geared towards helping the few rather than the many.

The way clubs communicate the bleak reality of rejection can often be insensitive. For example, former Manchester United youth player **Devonte Redmond** found out he'd been released on Twitter. Fortunately he was signed elsewhere, but others in similar circumstances don't manage to recover so well, inside or outside the game.

### **Tackling symptoms and causes**

A steadily increasing range of initiatives exist in an attempt to provide released academy players with the support and guidance they need to successfully move on. But understanding the psychology of players with strong and exclusive athletic identities allows us to appreciate how challenging and overwhelming a prospect this can be. Some players may feel there's nothing to move on to – and aftercare services and social support networks might not be able to convince them otherwise.



Marcus Rashford's recent child poverty campaigning revealed how footballers can be more than just athletes. Shutterstock

To give discarded young players the best possible chance of recovery, a preventative approach should also be considered. Youth academies must change the ethos that encourages a fixation with an identity that is solely about being an athlete, and create a culture that develops multidimensional people instead. Such a move might lessen the pain of being rejected so the fallout is more manageable for young players.

Allowing athletes to explore other identities – as Manchester United striker Marcus Rashford has done with his child poverty campaigning – can actually boost their sporting performance, further strengthening the argument for challenging the status quo. Promoting interests and causes beyond football may be especially effective for smaller clubs which have limited resources to provide care for those they have to release.

There is much more to a young player than what they can potentially offer a first-team squad. The gatekeepers of professional football must start thinking more holistically about what they can do to prepare and support the players they turn down. If they don't, the importance of this message will continue to be ignored, and more fledgling impressionable lives could be damaged, or worse, lost.

 Football

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