



# The Boy in the Man's Mask

THE DUTY OF CARE ON  
FOOTBALL ACADEMIES

RESEARCH SUMMARY

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# Introduction

The suicide of Jeremy Wisten has prompted calls for a duty of care for young professional footballers and Academy trainees<sup>1</sup>, in an environment where it has been estimated that less than one per cent will go on to become a paid professional<sup>2</sup>. These calls reinforce research suggesting that the welfare needs of trainees are compromised by an environment in which they are treated as a commodity and where pressures to perform from clubs, coaches, families and society mean they are reluctant to communicate personal and professional issues, particularly if there is a culture of intimidation and verbal and physical abuse. This research is intended to create a deeper understanding of the emotional impact football culture has on children and young people – the boy in the man’s mask - and therefore the adults they become in and beyond football. The study explores the experiences of trainees attached to Academies and the duty of care football Academies exercise regarding safeguarding of the mental health and wellbeing of those young people. It makes suggestions on programmes which might be put in place to support Academies and their staff in identifying and dealing with psycho-social issues.

The research is based upon 36 interviews, including 11 coaches with responsibility for different age groups, five staff in professional support roles, 18 trainees and ex-trainees from different age groups (16+) and two family members of trainees. In respect of the trainees, coaches and other professionals, their experiences were not solely connected to the Academies where the interviews took place. It is important to highlight most interviewees had numerous experiences across several Academies/clubs. The report is very much a look through a long window across football from the top to the bottom.

The interviewers brought values and skills from education and counselling as well as having intimate knowledge of football as an ex-professional player and player care and welfare specialist. Trainees and staff in the Academies often did not have a language to articulate their feelings and experiences. However, the emotional effect of this culture on these individuals was experienced by the interviewers through a non-verbal process called ‘projective identification’. Through the projection of feelings that could not be put into words, the interviewers were able to contain these unconscious communications, make sense of these feelings and put them back to the interviewees in an understandable form.

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1 In this report we use the term trainee to describe the young players based at the academies. This term captures their youth, their position in the clubs and the fact that these young people are still making their way in the profession. We avoid the use to the term player as this refers to people who are established in football.

2 Brown G. and Potrac, P. (2009) ‘You’ve not made the grade, son’: de-selection and identity disruption in elite level youth football, *Soccer & Society*, 10:2, 143-159.

# Summary

- Interviewees with trainees, coaches and professional staff were accessed via Academies that are regarded as exemplary. However, the interviewees reflect upon their experiences of a much wider range of Academies and clubs. They describe the brutality of a football culture in which they are playing in constant fear of making mistakes and the reality of possible rejection from an early age. Huge pressures are placed upon them that they are not emotionally mature enough to cope with and without appropriate support from the clubs.
- Trainees were reluctant or unable to talk about stress or to show vulnerability, as the culture created leaves them fearing they will be perceived as both mentally and physically weak. The patterns of behaviour and denial of vulnerability create 'cultures of feeling' which can lead to the institutionalisation of a toxic masculinity within Academies and football more widely which, in any other environment, might be described as abuse.
- Clubs lack understanding of how to discuss support for young people in a way that nurtures them and acknowledges their dependence and interdependence.
- While the research emphasises mental and physical pressures, academy recruits are also faced with wider social pressures, including food poverty. Parents are not always in a position to drive their children to training or matches and there were cases where very young recruits had to travel substantial distances to get to training unaccompanied.
- While parents were a source of emotional and material support, they could directly or unconsciously place pressures on their youngsters who felt they had to repay them for sacrifices made or were responsible for improving families' social or financial positions. In some cases, parental pressure hindered their child's ability to enjoy their experiences of football. Some clubs are providing workshops for parents, including covering psychological support, although consistent attendance from parents remains an issue.
- Academy recruits did open up at times about the emotional agony of injury and how periods of injury could lead to depression and self-doubt. At the same time, injury is generally pathologized and seen as a function of individual weakness, and some trainees reported they avoided revealing injury, fearing losing their place in the team and status within their group.
- There was conscious acknowledgment that racism was unacceptable, although young Black recruits and coaches were constantly aware of the threat of abuse or harassment. There was also acceptance that often little is done to address racism, based on a real lack of knowledge of how to confront and deal with the issue.
- While racism is recognised as unacceptable, it was considered harder to challenge homophobia.

- In terms of gender, women in Academies still struggle for recognition and respect and may feel they have to contain their frustration.
- Coaches have huge power over the future of those in their care and there was variation in how far they were seen as approachable and supportive. There is a perception that a new generation of younger coaches, who may not be former professional players, are more open to the issue of mental health.
- While the mental health of academy youngsters is neglected, this also extends to coaches, who similarly felt reluctant to show vulnerability and may not know who to approach within the club for support, leaving them at times ill-equipped to deal with the emotions of the young people they are responsible for.
- While football increasingly involves multi-disciplinary professionals, there is also a tension between the emphasis on the physiological and psychological on the one hand and trainees' emotional wellbeing and mental health on the other. Psychological support is often seen as purely supporting physical excellence, dealing with recovery from injuries and in terms of performance on the pitch, rather than providing emotional support. There is no understanding that emotional support is linked to and impacts on player performance.
- There is a fatalism running through football that things will not and cannot change and the term 'that's football' is used as justification. However, to break the cycle of harm in Academies, football needs to, and must, change.





# The experience of rejection

*'it was like a phone call maybe, a little chat in the car park, apart from that, that's about it. So literally my last experience – before I signed (here) the last team I went on trial at was (another London club). I was there for the longest, for about eight weeks and I was playing really well. And it was such a surprise because I was scoring goals and everything and then at the end it was just – this excuse has been used a lot - they just said "we've got the allocation of the players that we want for scholar so we don't have room for you. You've done really well but we don't have room." It was just literally in the car park with the coach. And I cried after, and I was old, I was 15, I actually did cry after that ... even at that age I'm thinking I was 14 or 15, it's so demanding. It's so brutal, it is very brutal like football is brutal. ... And I know that obviously but I just ended up accepting it, but looking back, I'm 14 and it's just like "see you later, out the door". It's quite – but that is football, even now at this age I'm sure it's just like that. Obviously, I haven't experienced it for a while but rejection after rejection it's tough and it can break you. And to be honest, me having my family there it really did help because I would have definitely folded if not for my family.'*

– TRAINEE

# Remaining Silent

*'I'm afraid of looking like I'm a bit weak. I've always been brought up to be like tough and strong. But I just feel ... maybe a little weak in terms of my mentality. I feel if you're mentally tough you're doing it yourself, keep going, don't let anything bring you down. And just being .....I feel like if I let it out, I'm just feeling weak and being soft, which I don't want to do.'*

– TRAINEE

# Toxic Masculinity?

*'From a personal perspective I've seen – in my perspective there was a lot of academy cultures like I said that used to wield their power unnecessarily or talk to youths in a certain way which was unacceptable. And I saw that as a youngster. Just jokes and banter. And screaming and shouting, profanity, words that I think are unnecessary. In football you can't be soft, soft like you can't cry, you can't show a negative emotion, you can't say "I'm not feeling too well". You can now, or you should be allowed to now, but when I was growing up it was a masculine thing, you couldn't do that. You couldn't have shown weakness. Fucking hell and swearing, that was tough, it's all masculine stuff and it's all stuff that's unnecessary, that's what I mean by masculine.'*

– COACH

## Reluctance to reveal vulnerability

*'Because I feel like in this football environment, I wouldn't be a problem to people that work with the club and everything. I'd rather speak to my mum or my dad. I wouldn't, I don't know, it's just a thing where I don't like people knowing my business and stuff, I'd rather keep it in the family. I think it's a thing where I don't want it to ruin my football. So I just keep it at home and then everything about football, I just keep it here. Yeah, I trust them to a certain extent but that's just – I don't really trust anybody like that. I just trust mostly my mum and my dad. That's all.' [Coaches] ask me about that "what did you do over the weekend" and stuff like that. But I wouldn't tell them that something is wrong. It's a thing where I don't want it to ruin what they think of me, and my football.'*

– TRAINEE



## Reluctance to access support

*'I think everyone gets a bit anxious, but not everyone is saying that. It's quite difficult to say that you need help because you don't want to be that person – as men as well, you're expected to be strong and deal with everything yourself. But sometimes you need to be 13, aware that you just can't do everything by yourself and you need to speak to someone. But it's quite hard to recognise that. I'm just used to dealing with it myself.'*

– TRAINEE

*'But if I told someone else something, a coach or something, how do I know they're not going to tell anyone and speak about it? How do I truly know they ain't gonna speak about it in a certain way? And you don't want to be known as the guy who is talking, or your name gets about.'*

– TRAINEE

# The whole picture

*'I think it teaches them good skills but I think the pressure that's put on these players and athletes from such a young age, me personally, I think is too high for such a young age. And I don't think external facts are taken into account enough. An example is when I was at (a previous club), there was a 15 year old kid, who like you said, we got on really well, we had more conversations with his coaches. And I think the players can and will speak to people like myself or the physios a little bit more. Finding out the kid hasn't eaten or had food available for him for maybe 40 hours based on his home life. So that sat with me and I ended up going out and buying him food once a week. Nothing crazy it was like a few ... bars and some bananas. But that for me felt wow, this guy's doing all of this exercise and the demands on him are so high yet he probably goes home with nothing to eat. I think they could do more because that was one of an academy at the time but I bet there was probably 10 or 20 in the same boat and just managed to find the one because he opened up and he had that conversation.'*

**– SPORTS PSYCHOLOGIST**

*'But it's about putting things into context...So a lot of the time people look at people and they don't know what's going on in their life behind the scenes. They don't know what their background is, they don't know enough about the players. They don't know enough about the soft things about the player, what they like, family, who is disabled in the family, who's excelling in the family. They don't get the social side of understanding about the player. But the coaches don't get taught that. Now a lot of the courses we've got now, like the youth courses, are starting to try and address that.'*

**– CLUB DEVELOPMENT OFFICER**

*'I kind of fell out with them because they just saw me as – they didn't see the whole picture, I'll come to training late, I might be 20 minutes late. Obviously I'd got this ego and then I'm coming late and they're probably thinking in their head "this guy doesn't give a toss about the club", I'd come in late. But I'm the only one getting public transport, training late at night, getting home at 10.30 da de dah. These are all getting cars, picked up and they're just saying "we don't know, his attitude and all this". I'm saying that you can't really question my attitude because I'm coming from (area distant from the academy), I'm leaving school early, I'm saying I can't even do the last period, I need to be early to get the train so just so I can leave, because I'm on the train. Just going back and forth. My mum was there supporting me, but she had to work. Because you need to understand the full picture. Everyone gets a bath, it's easy for them to just jump in the warm bath. If it's raining, I'm going home soaked, I'm going in my uniform for training. Then I'm getting changed when I'm there, last minute, or I'm getting changed on the train even. Then I'm training, no spare clothes, I'm wet, I'm just going on the train home, late at night. And I'm like how come you got judged with that. How can they doubt how much I want to go into football, it's crazy.'*

**– TRAINEE**

# Parental Pressure and support

*'If I was there and I got rejected, I feel like it would have been a massive row between me, my mum and my dad in the car on the way back...if I didn't get in... the car with him, raging. He's got a massive expectation, his standards are very, very high for everything... [There is] some realistic stuff, but some is quite unrealistic stuff. Sort of like being the best in every test here, I've got to get the highest. I haven't told my dad I'm injured, I told my mum.... I just don't want to tell him because I feel like it will be another argument about me getting injured. Even though I can't help it, he will try and make it as if it was like something I did wrong or something. But I don't even want to talk to him about it so I told my mum and she can tell him .... But I won't, I don't want to do it. It will just be another argument and I'll just get down again so I just don't want to do that.'*

– TRAINEE

*'She had to sacrifice a lot. She still takes me to football now and she's always at matches. But she's not one of their parents who puts a lot of pressure and stuff. If I have a bad game she'll say "I didn't think you were that great." But she's not going to go and shout at me, she knows .....I think she's very supportive. I couldn't ask for more. I feel like I have to repay her by making it for her. Yes, I always have a plan B. I'm not one of them like football and work, end of. But that is my main thing. My mum wants me to make it but for me – for myself and my mum. My family in general, especially my mum. But there's no pressure, like you have to make it or she's forcing me to go there one to one, like some people's parents are.'*

– TRAINEE

# Agents

*'I've seen families, and they have to be managed. They are in that group of people that need to be managed and families, the agents, the one parent families, the two parent families that are separated. The families that are, you can see that they're just in it for the money, you can see it. Families that are disinterested who send their son or daughter from East London, catching five trains and all they've got is a packet of crisps. There's so many different families and outside pressure. Agents are probably the worse because with the younger age groups they're not supposed to be there, but you know that they've got them all signed and you see them grow from the age of 12-13. And then by the time they're 17-18 you're saying "right, I want you to do this" – "but I've got to speak to my agent first". I'm thinking ok how long have you known your agent, two weeks? And that outside pressure – you have to take it on board, you have to know, it is part of the environment. But it's such a negative part of the environment, such a negative side, you have to get on board with the agent now. Because the agent speaks now for the families, speaks for the player and you literally – and I always say to the player, this is one thing I always say – "if your agent says something to me, I have to assume that you asked him to say it." I don't say "you shouldn't have this agent, you shouldn't have that agent. You asked your agent to say this and your agent works for you, it's not the other way around." Because I think players think that they're working for their agents. So yeah, handling parents and outside influences is one of the most difficult things.'*

– SENIOR COACH

# Racism

*'Because we talk about it now like, imagine that you make your first team debut and you do a mistake and you get that abuse or people bully you. Yes, it's more like imagine you're making your first team debut, you make a mistake and people are like, they start racially abusing you. You can't talk about it with white people, they don't understand it. If they make a mistake, it's more like "ah, you're rubbish". We're going to get abused because of our skin colour. They just don't understand it because it will never happen to them. They sympathise with us but then at the same time they haven't got to worry about it.'*

– TRAINEE

# Recommendations and possible solutions

The reality of the 'Boy behind the Man's Mask' needs to be acknowledged by the football authorities and clubs. Before any progress can be made in supporting children and young people in football, they must acknowledge their duty of care and the potentially harmful training cultures and practices within the game. They must accept that these practices can harm children and young people thus impacting the adults they become. As a start, clubs could undertake anonymous mental and emotional audits to test the findings of the research within their own Academy.

1. Clubs and authorities could embark on ongoing preventative work and policy development to consistently challenge a culture of harm and demonstrate they are invested in change. This includes reflection on the language and behaviours within the culture of football and their impact – terms such as 'that's football' and 'banter' can normalise and legitimise abuse. Change involves a move towards an interdisciplinary and cooperative ethos based on education and inclusive leadership.
2. Awareness and understanding of the emotional vulnerability of children and young people, need to be promoted throughout football by the football authorities, recognising trainees' reluctance to seek support inside Academies. This could be addressed by:
  - coaching modules that invest in the complex nature of trainees as young people with very different emotional responses to adults and varying age-appropriate developmental needs.
  - acknowledging that sport psychology has a specific role in football around performance but does not cater for the emotional wellbeing or development of young people. There is a clear requirement for professionals trained and accredited in psychosocial support skills to be available to meet the developmental needs of the 'boy behind the man's mask' in Academies.



- the creation of safe spaces outside of clubs and Academies where trainees and professional staff feel they can speak openly and without discrimination or fear of reprisals. Football needs to provide free access to professionals, alongside the PFA's offer, who understand and can support the mental health and emotional wellbeing of those within the system and the challenges and pressures that it brings. This includes the provision of support for those released by clubs and the staff charged with delivering news of release.
  - the provision of accredited formal psychosocial supervision for those working with young people in Academies to support their capacity to provide appropriate developmental support.
  - an integrated structure that transcends individual clubs and pulls together a network of support for trainees and staff providing clearly signposted access to external professional support that can help clubs fulfil their commitment to their duty of care.
3. Clubs need to be careful about the gaps and tensions in multidisciplinary support based on hierarchical relationships. In particular, clubs need to be more aware of their trainees' lives outside of Academies. They have to be aware of the wider social issues that impinge on their recruits, including food and energy poverty and lack of parental support for travel. This is particularly important in a period when communities are struggling with huge rises in the cost of living. Support is also required for staff who realise this situation and feel powerless to act on it.
  4. Clubs need to do further work with parents, guardians, and schools to promote understanding of their role in supporting the emotional and developmental needs of young people within the football environment. A multi-stakeholder approach which embraces their various perspectives as equally valid and informative in the ongoing development of each individual trainee should be adopted.



# Homophobia and banter

*'Sometimes if one of the boys is wearing tights, or something – if someone says "you're a fairy" or something like that, or 'that's gay' or whatever. I suppose, I don't say it because I wear tights to work, but I think because we're all here, we don't mean anything malicious by it. It's just the way you say it and stuff. Nothing, I wouldn't say nothing racist, but I suppose that could be classed as homophobic, but I don't think anyone means it like that.'*

– TRAINEE

*'I think fortunately in academy football racism, I'm not saying it's not there – I don't think that's a form of abuse between academy players...I think racism of young people, there's more outcry to racism. And yet, some of them who would be appalled hearing racist abuse are quite happy to use homophobic abuse. They don't think it's the same. Well I know it's not the same but it's still abuse, it's still discrimination.'*

– COACH

## Gender

*'[my colleague] thinks there's a level playing field and as much as I've spoken to him many times, he doesn't get there is not a level playing field. And that for me is quite hard because I really like him and I know that he really tries to help me and stuff like that. But he doesn't see it. ...I don't know. I wonder if it's – you know culture, it's football culture, environment. I also feel that – and I made a point of this yesterday in the meeting, that if behaviours continue to be accepted, they will always be accepted. And I'm not saying that's right but the culture and environment is not gonna change, it's not gonna change. It's too far off, I think it's sad. ... I don't know a female other than me. I don't know a female who will put up with the shit that I've got to put up with and keep their mouth shut'*

– FEMALE STAFF MEMBER



## Support for Coaches

*'I think I would feel safe (to challenge situations in the Academy), but I wouldn't know where to go. I would feel like I could speak to someone, but maybe it's who to speak to, when to speak to that person. For example, if you see it once, do you go and see someone? Probably not. But if it's a regular thing then maybe but then it's who, when and where, looking at that sort of thing.'*

– COACH

*'I try to leave my pressures at work and when I come home I try to leave that outside of the house. Because like I say your work life balance is too important. But not every coach in my environment is going to understand to do that for themselves. So I'm nearly 50 years old and I understand my body, I understand when I'm getting stressed. I understand when I need to step away a little bit. But a lot of these coaches won't and they're under pressure and when they're under pressure that's when things can fall down. And that's when the kids will start to feel it. The environment isn't one that offers those type of provision. .... and there's nobody in this country yet who's taking it serious from a football point of view.'*

– COACH

# Conclusion

This is the first report that records, in their own words, the experiences of Academy trainees, coaches and professional staff with regard to the emotional and psychosocial pressures of Academy football. The interviews took place in Academies that are exemplars, however those interviewed describe previous experiences evidencing cultures and practices underpinned by fear and the reality of rejection, some from an early age. Huge pressures are placed on trainees which they are not emotionally mature enough to cope with and without appropriate support from the clubs. Sports psychology does not address the mental health of trainees. Such neglect extends to coaches, who also feel reluctant to show vulnerability and do not know who to approach within clubs for support. How can this not impact on the performance and development of staff, Academy recruits, players and potential players?

We hope the report builds on current debates over mental health in football, not just in the English game, but globally. The report echoes the experiences of the former Swedish youth player Martin Bengtsson who has stated ‘it’s not done to talk about depression or bullying. Especially among young players it’s almost impossible to talk about how you feel. You fear, if you do, you won’t be playing on Saturday.’<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, players such as Everton’s Dominic Calvert-Lewin opened up about struggling with mental health issues, alongside other prominent players in recent years. We could also reflect on the appalling revelations of rape and sexual abuse between 1970 and 2005, which first came to light in November 2016, an extreme but nonetheless real example of the abhorrent behaviours toxic cultures can hide and their devastating lasting outcomes on the ‘boys behind the man’s mask’.

Whether clubs are only interested in the ‘bottom line’ and a return on their investment or are looking to mitigate the risk of future damages claims or are committed to doing what is best and right for everyone who they rely on for the success of their business, this report will be of interest and, the outcomes, we believe, far reaching should the recommendations be acted upon.

To ensure lessons have been learned from those brave enough to share their lived experiences and in respect of those who could not, there needs to be action to challenge the fatalism running throughout football that things will not and cannot change because ‘that’s football’. Football is whatever we want it to be.

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1 <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2022/jun/26/martin-bengtsson-swedish-football-wonderkid-inter-film-tigers>



