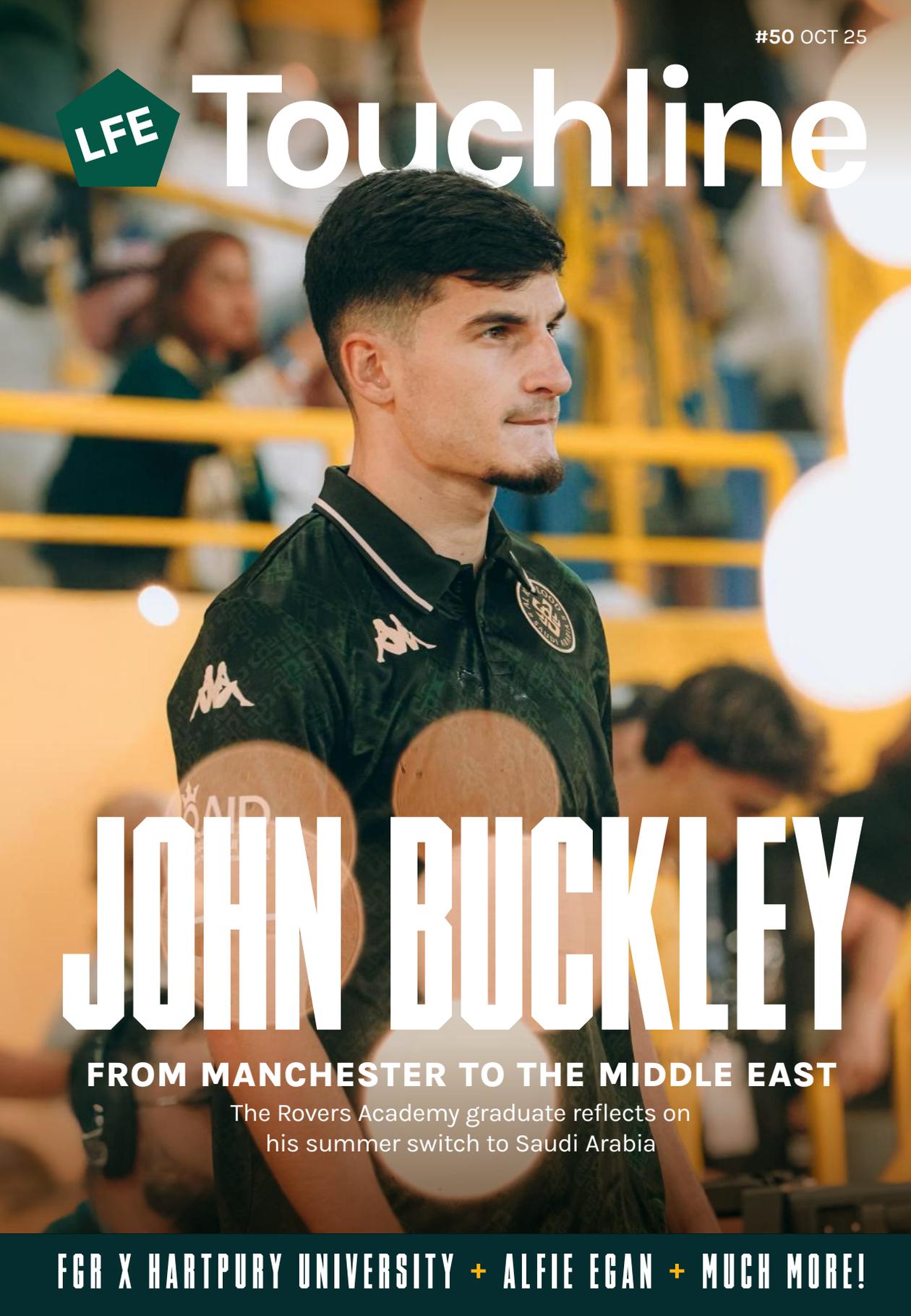




Touchline

A portrait of a young man with dark hair and a goatee, wearing a dark green football jersey with white accents and a crest. He is looking off to the side with a slight smile. The background is a blurred stadium with yellow railings and spectators.

JOHN BUCKLEY

FROM MANCHESTER TO THE MIDDLE EAST

The Rovers Academy graduate reflects on his summer switch to Saudi Arabia

FCR X HARTPURY UNIVERSITY + ALFIE EGAN + MUCH MORE!

LFE's Academy Education Managers



Paul Bartlett
 North & North East



Will Morford
 South West



Carl Craner
 West Midlands



Tom Palmer
 South



Simon Dwight
 South & London



Neil Chadwick
 North West



Peter Hood
 North East



Ian Tombs
 East Midlands



Ben Lavelle
 North West



Claire Wilberforce-Marsh
 North West & Midlands



Gabriel Mellor
 North East



Gavin Willacy
 South & London



David O'Donovan
 South East



Richard Donnelly
 Wales

ALUMNI PLAYER VOICE

In June 2021, LFE launched the Alumni Player Voice initiative to facilitate a safe and confidential space for past apprentices to talk about experiences, best practices, and areas for development regarding the transition support provided by clubs and wider organisations.

If you are an academy graduate and would like to contribute to our next session, contact PCT Support Officer, Ryan White (RWhite@lfe.org.uk) or LFE Communications (communications@lfe.org.uk).

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Cambridge United Apprentices Visit Addenbrooke's Hospital



Cambridge United apprentices Dempsy and Lennon recently visited the children's ward at Addenbrooke's Hospital, bringing plenty of smiles, games and laughter to young patients.

The visit was organised in collaboration with the Cambridge United Foundation, who continue to build strong community links and provide invaluable opportunities for the club.

Both apprentices enjoyed spending time with the children, playing games and chatting with patients, while also gaining a valuable insight into the wider role the football club plays off the pitch.

Harsh Joshi, Head of Education at the club, said: "It was a great experience for Dempsy and Lennon speaking to the children on the ward and helping to lift spirits. For me, it's also important for them to see this side of what the football club does in the wider community. We try take learning beyond the classrooms as I feel it helps give all our scholars a well-rounded experience during their apprenticeship."



It was a great experience for Dempsy and Lennon speaking to the children on the ward and helping to lift spirits.

Harsh Joshi
Head Of Education, Cambridge United

ACADEMY LEAGUES ROUND-UP



EFL YOUTH ALLIANCE NORTH

Grimsby Town lead the way in the Youth Alliance North division as things stand, four points clear of second-placed **Burton Albion** (although the latter have a game in hand). The **Mariners** have enjoyed an impressive start to the campaign, winning five of their opening seven matches and drawing the other two. They are the only team in the division still holding an unbeaten record.

Last season's champions, **Bolton Wanderers**, have had an indifferent start to the season, currently sitting in ninth place, having lost as many matches as they've won (three).

Elsewhere, it's shaping up to be another highly competitive season, with just six points separating **Blackpool** in third and **Notts County** in 18th.



EFL YOUTH ALLIANCE SOUTH

Last season's Youth Alliance South champions, **Luton Town**, have picked up right where they left off and are enjoying a lightning-fast start to the 2025/26 campaign. **Joe Deeney's** young Hatters have been ruthless in attack, scoring a whopping 26 goals in their opening seven matches. Their only dropped points so far came in a 3-0 loss to **Forest Green Rovers**.

Cambridge United are hot on Luton's heels in second place, just two points behind the Hertfordshire side.

Last season's surprise package - particularly in the second half of the campaign - **Oxford United** have endured a slow start after finishing the 2024/25 season in magnificent fashion, winning 15 in a row between November and April. They'll be hoping for a similar upturn in fortunes soon, having won just one of their opening six matches.



U18 PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT LEAGUE NORTH (PDL NORTH)

After six matches, **Barnsley** top the PDL North division with 12 points on the board. **Wigan Athletic** sit just a point behind the Tykes and boast the best defensive record in the division so far, having conceded just seven goals. **Hull City** are third in the table, with **Mark Beard's** side proving dangerous in front of goal - scoring 16 times already - despite showing some defensive vulnerability.

Elsewhere, it's fairly tight, with just eight points separating **Fleetwood Town** in fourth and **Huddersfield Town**, who sit second from bottom.



U18 PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT LEAGUE SOUTH (PDL SOUTH)

Jason Pearce's Charlton Athletic side have made a strong start to the season and currently sit top of the **PDL South** table after six matches. They are also the only unbeaten team in the division.

Despite leading the way, there's no room for the **Addicks** to get too comfortable, with six teams breathing down their necks. **Brentford** are just a point behind and have been free scoring so far this season, netting 19 goals already. Below the Bees are **AFC Bournemouth**, **Cardiff City**, **Watford**, **Bristol City** and **Swansea City** - all within five points of league leaders Charlton.

Elsewhere, **Colchester United**, **Millwall**, and **QPR** have made slow starts to the season and will be hoping to build momentum soon.

U18 PREMIER LEAGUE NORTH

Just like last season, it's the two **Manchester** clubs battling it out at the top of the **Premier League North** division. **Manchester United** currently lead the way with 15 points, having won all five of their matches so far - scoring 15 goals and conceding none.

Last season's champions, **Manchester City**, also boast a 100% record; however, the **Citizens** have played one game fewer and sit three points behind their red counterparts.

Across the rest of the division, it's shaping up to be a highly competitive campaign, with just seven points separating **Newcastle United** in third and **Derby County** at the foot of the table.

U18 PREMIER LEAGUE SOUTH

It's three **London** clubs setting the pace in the **Premier League South** division so far, with **Arsenal** leading the way on 13 points from five games. **Crystal Palace** sit second, just a point behind the Gunners, while **Chelsea** are third on 10 points.

Chelsea, however, have played a game fewer than the two teams above them and are the only unbeaten side left in the division. If the **Blues** were to win their game in hand, they would move top of the table on goal difference.

Last season's overall **U18 Premier League** champions, **Aston Villa**, have endured a tricky start to the new campaign and currently find themselves in tenth place.



DEBUTANTS

A selection of apprentices who have made their professional debuts since the start of the 2025/26 season.

Sullyman Krubally

Burton Albion

At just 16 years and 355 days old, midfielder Sullyman Krubally became the youngest-ever player to represent the Brewers in an EFL fixture when he came on in the 79th minute of a Carabao Cup tie at Tranmere Rovers in August. He made his league debut four days later against Stockport County.



Stan Straw & McLloyd Oben

Walsall

Second-year apprentices Stan Straw and McLloyd Oben both made their senior debuts for Walsall in a Vertu Trophy win at Shrewsbury Town in September, with both players coming on in the second half.

Cameron Stones & Micah Olabiya

Wycombe Wanderers

First-year apprentices Cameron Stones and Micah Olabiya have both made their first-team debuts for the Chairboys this season, with Stones' debut coming in a Vertu Trophy fixture at Leyton Orient in August, and Olabiya's following a fortnight later at Bromley in the Carabao Cup.



Will Grainger & Yisa Alao

Sheffield Wednesday

Striker and first-year apprentice Will Grainger earned his first senior minutes in the Owls' Carabao Cup triumph over Leeds United in August, playing the final 25 minutes. Yisa Alao, also a first-year apprentice, made his debut in the previous round of the competition at Bolton Wanderers, coming on for the final 10 minutes.



Olutayo Singerr

Portsmouth

Second-year apprentice Olutayo Singerr enjoyed a successful first senior outing for Pompey back in August. Despite his team exiting the Carabao Cup after a 2-1 home loss to Reading, Singerr made his mark by coming on as a substitute and scoring a late consolation goal for John Mousinho's side.

Harry Glaves, Rhomani Murray, Deshaun Musgrave-Dore & Ethan Hodgett

Doncaster Rovers

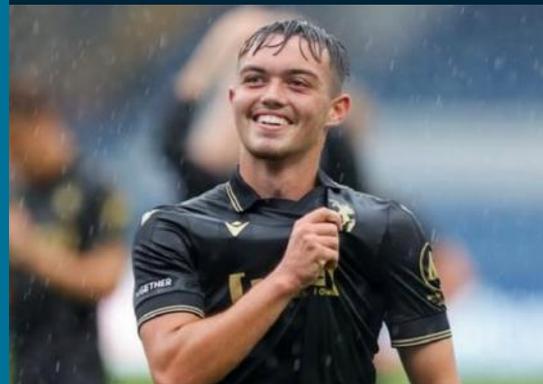
Tuesday, 2nd September, marked a special day for Doncaster Rovers, as four of the club's apprentices all made their first-team debuts against Everton U21s in the Vertu Trophy. "Their inclusion in the matchday squad reflects the club's commitment to nurturing young talent and providing meaningful opportunities for development," said Kate McDonald, Head of Academy Education.



Cruz Beszant & Louie Dayal

Gillingham

Two second-year apprentices, Cruz Beszant and Louie Dayal, have made their professional debuts for Gillingham this season. Beszant's debut came in a 0-1 win at Oldham Athletic in League Two back in August, while Dayal experienced his first taste of senior action a few days later against Fulham U21s in the Vertu Trophy - he registered two assists in a 4-1 win for the Gills.



Ronnie Harvey

Colchester United

Midfielder and second-year apprentice Ronnie Harvey was awarded his first senior minutes by Colchester boss Danny Cowley in the U's Carabao Cup fixture at Oxford United in early August. Harvey played the final 26 minutes plus stoppage time at the Kassam Stadium.



Tom English

Bristol Rovers

Second-year apprentice Tom English made his debut for Bristol Rovers in their Vertu Trophy win over Tottenham Hotspur U21s back in August, coming on for the final few minutes of normal time before the Pirates progressed through on penalties.



Sebastian Campbell

Plymouth Argyle

16-year-old Sebastian Campbell wrote his name into the Plymouth Argyle history books recently as he became the youngest-ever player to score for the club in their 6-2 win against Tottenham Hotspur U21s in the Vertu Trophy - a fantastic feat to achieve on his senior debut.

Mark Barber & Mamadou Diallo

Cheltenham Town

Second-year Robins apprentice Mark Barber was handed his first taste of senior football in Cheltenham Town's 0-1 loss to Barnet in late August, coming on for the final 10 minutes plus stoppage time as his team chased an equaliser. A few days later, goalkeeper Mamadou Diallo played the full 90 minutes of a Vertu Trophy fixture at Plymouth Argyle.

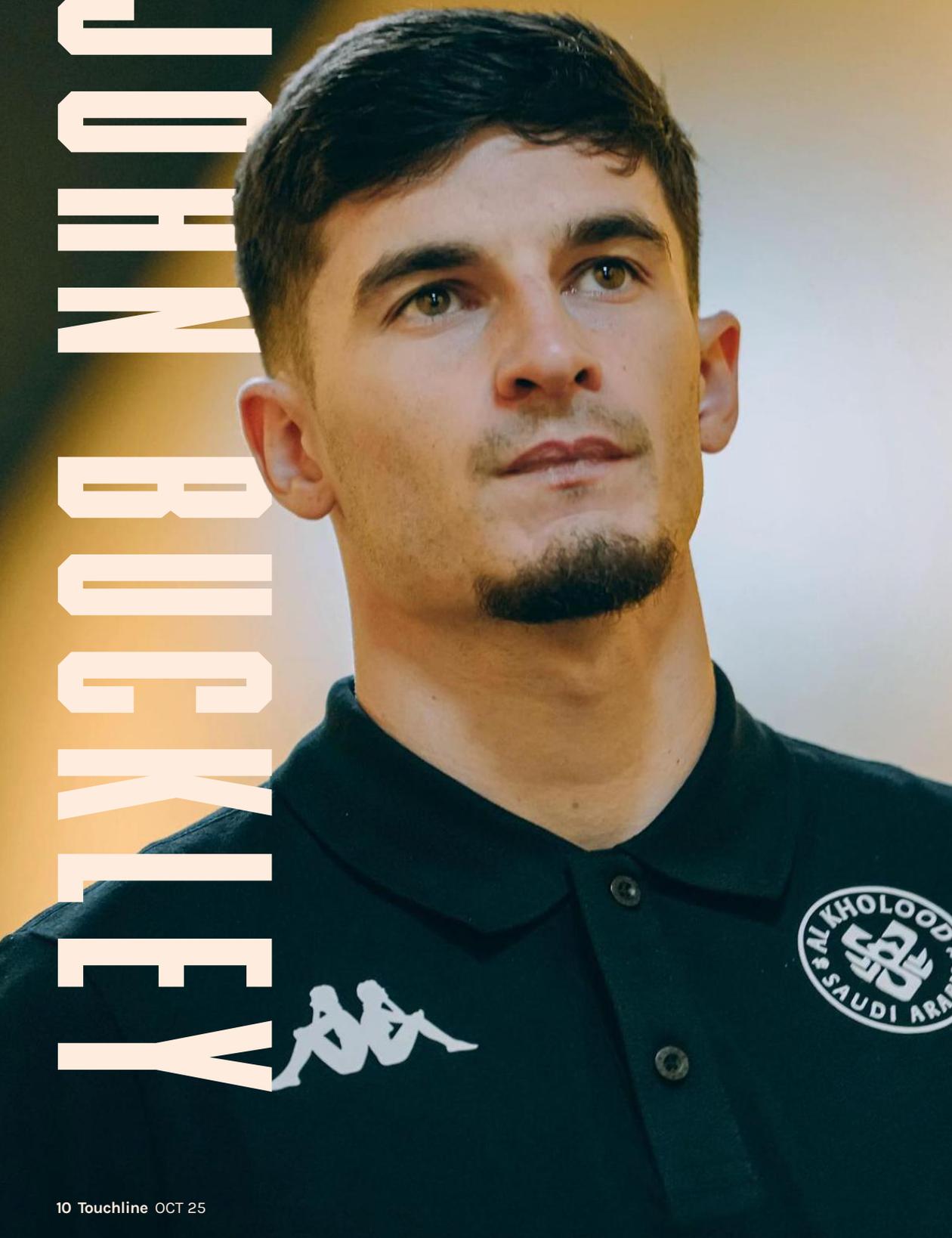


Lucca Mendonca

Peterborough United

17-year-old apprentice Lucca Mendonca became the first-ever Brazilian to represent Peterborough United when he made his senior debut for the Posh in a Carabao Cup fixture against Accrington Stanley in August.

JOHN BOGKLEY



After a 20-year stay at Blackburn Rovers, Academy graduate John Buckley departed the club in August to embark on a new chapter in the Saudi Pro League with Al-Kholood.

"I had a couple of options, and I wanted to make sure I made the right choice," Buckley told LFE. "They didn't rush me, but then I had a call with the CEO and the director here at Al-Kholood, and everything moved pretty quickly. It was all done within about a week to ten days."

"It was a really difficult decision. I know a lot of people there, and it's all I'd ever known, really - Blackburn has been a massive part of my life. It was a big decision, and it took a while for me to get my head around it, to be honest, but I needed a change in my career and to experience something different. I didn't want to regret not taking the chance further down the line, and it just felt like the right time."

Speaking to LFE via a video call from the balcony of his hotel room in the city of Ar Rass, 250 miles northwest of the country's capital, Riyadh, Manchester-born Buckley detailed the significant transition of moving from the UK to the Middle East. "It was tough right at the very start, but I'm getting used to it. It's a huge lifestyle and culture change - and it's kind of like the unknown for me - but everyone has been really welcoming: the owner of the club, the staff, the players, and the people of Saudi Arabia too."

"People live completely differently out here compared to back home. Because it's so hot during the day, most people wake up in the afternoon and their day begins then."

"You see people drinking coffee at like 1 a.m., which would never happen back home!"

"In England, most of your work as a footballer is done in the mornings, whereas here we don't train until seven or eight o'clock in the evening. So, I'm still full of energy after I finish training, and it takes me a long time to wind down when I'm back home. I've been going to sleep at around midnight and waking up around 10 a.m., and even then, the day doesn't really get going until about four o'clock when we head to the training ground. It's taken some adapting to."

Buckley's period of adaptation was made easier when he scored on his debut away from home against one of the league's stronger sides, Al-Ettifaq. "Scoring in my first game made me settle a little easier," he affirms. "The heat where we were playing was crazy, though. It was in Dammam, which is like the most humid place in Saudi Arabia. I was warming up, and I was instantly just dripping in sweat. I remember looking up at the clock once the game had started - it said we'd only played eight minutes, and I just thought: 'Impossible!'"

"However, once I scored and got myself into the game, the second half was a lot easier as I was adapting to the conditions. It was a really good first experience, and we played really well despite losing in the end - especially given it was the first time a lot of us had played together." ▶





The start to Al-Khlood's Saudi Pro League campaign didn't get any easier in matchday two as they travelled to Al-Nassr, whose starting lineup included the likes of Sadio Mané, Kingsley Coman, Marcelo Brozović, João Félix, and one of the greatest players of all time, Cristiano Ronaldo.

"I was in the tunnel before the game, and it was a little bit surreal standing next to him (Ronaldo). I'm a Manchester United fan too, so it was a really good experience playing against him, and I really enjoyed the game. Again, despite the result, we played pretty well."

While on the topic of the five-time Ballon d'Or winner, Buckley credited the impact Ronaldo has made in Saudi Arabia and believes he opened the door for players like himself to follow in his footsteps. "If he'd never come out here to play, then none of us would've eventually come out here too. He's had a big influence and changed a lot of things here and has made it accessible for players like me. I'm glad I've made the decision to come out here."



"Honestly, I don't know if it's just because my first two games have been against good sides like Ettifaq and Al-Nassr, but the standard is really good," Buckley says when asked about the difference he's felt between football in the UK and in Saudi. "You have to be completely switched on every game. Just look at some of the household names that are out here. Clubs are spending a lot of money to bring good players to the league. Obviously, the weather plays a huge role physically as well."

Football in Saudi Arabia has developed tenfold in recent years, and the sport's popularity is growing year on year - something the former Rovers apprentice has already noticed. "The facilities are great; they seem to be doing everything one hundred percent here. All the pitches, training grounds, and technology within the stadiums are great. There is VAR here as well, which is different to when I played in the Championship."

Buckley's journey in Saudi Arabia has only just begun, and he's still very much in the midst of a massive period of change. But the versatile midfielder is cherishing his adventure in the Middle East. "It's a huge life experience in itself. If I wasn't a footballer, I would never have thought of doing anything like this, so I'm thankful that I can experience different places and cultures. I feel like I've joined the league at a good time, and it's only heading in one direction." ■



“

I WAS IN THE TUNNEL BEFORE THE GAME, AND IT WAS A LITTLE BIT SURREAL STANDING NEXT TO HIM (RONALDO). I'M A MANCHESTER UNITED FAN TOO, SO IT WAS A REALLY GOOD EXPERIENCE PLAYING AGAINST HIM, AND I REALLY ENJOYED THE GAME.





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#5

50 issues of

This 50th issue represents a milestone for the publication, which continues to grow as a platform for celebrating the achievements of current and former apprentices.



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Touchline



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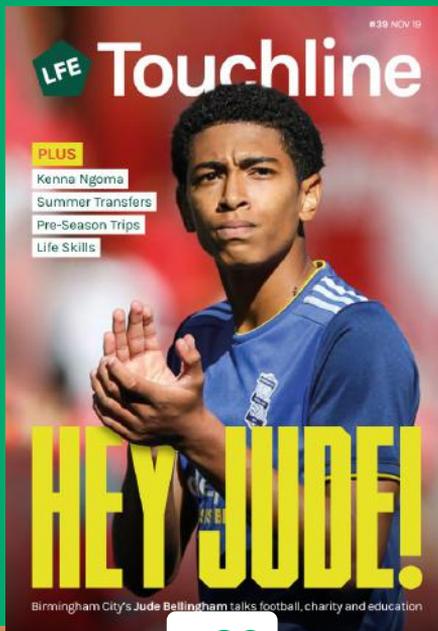
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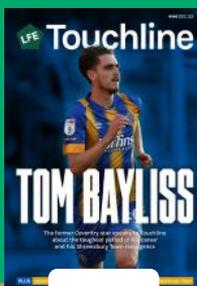
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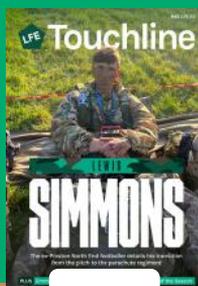
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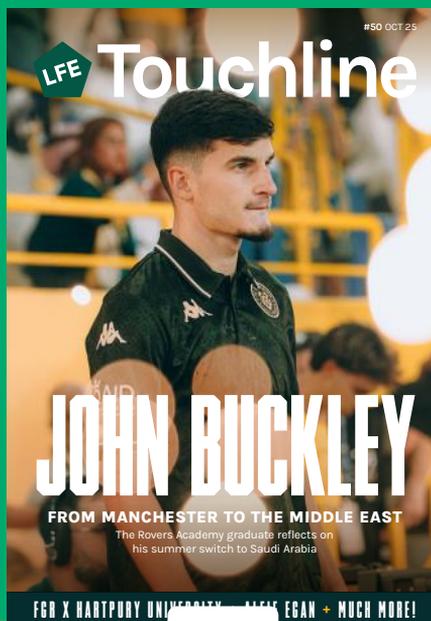
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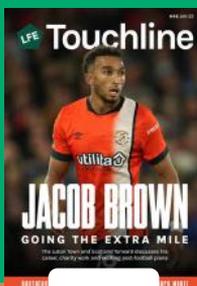
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50 issues of Touchline

Here's to many more!

The summer transfer window saw many former academy graduates making moves. Let's take a look at some of the most notable deals.

ON THE MOVE

Eberechi Eze

Former Millwall apprentice



£67.5M

Tyrhys Dolan

Former Preston North End apprentice



FREE

Jacob Ramsey

Former Aston Villa apprentice



£43M

Dominic Calvert-Lewin

Former Sheffield United apprentice



FREE

Jobe Bellingham

Former Birmingham City apprentice



£27M

Aaron Ramsdale

Former Sheffield United apprentice



FREE

James Justin

Former Luton Town apprentice



£10M

Jordan Henderson

Former Sunderland apprentice



FREE

Callum Wilson

Former Coventry City apprentice



FREE

Aaron Cresswell

Former Tranmere Rovers apprentice



FREE





Anthony Cato (27)

What is your role within LFE?

AC: Transition and Careers Officer.

How long have you been with LFE?

AC: Just over seven years now.

Could you describe your daily responsibilities?

AC: I support the Player Care Programme that we offer to clubs, with a specific focus on managing and overseeing LFE's Transition initiatives. This includes the Assessment Trials, Tracking & Monitoring, Careers Guidance, and the development of post-apprenticeship opportunities.

What do you enjoy most about your role?

AC: My favourite part of the role is making players aware of the incredible opportunities available to them and guiding them along pathways that can genuinely be life changing.

What did you do prior to working at LFE?

AC: Prior to joining LFE, I spent six years in Blackpool's academy until the age of 18. I then transitioned out of the academy system and went on to study Sport & Exercise Science at Liverpool John Moores University. I've been working for LFE since the final year of my degree.





How do you like to spend your time outside of work?

AC: I really enjoy football coaching now, maybe even more than playing! I also exercise regularly and have recently gotten into padel. I love music as well and can play the guitar.

What football team do you support?

AC: Liverpool.

Favourite holiday destination?

AC: I'm going to Thailand in November. I've been before and loved it, so I'd say Thailand.



ALFIE

ALFIE EGAN JOINED AFC WIMBLEDON'S ACADEMY AS A TEENAGER AND PROGRESSED ALL THE WAY THROUGH THE DONS' SETUP TO EARN A PROFESSIONAL CONTRACT AT THE CONCLUSION OF HIS SCHOLARSHIP.

"I joined Wimbledon when I was 13 and spent all of my teenage years there," Egan told LFE. "I signed a pre-scholarship at 15, which meant I would spend at least the next two years there, which was good."

Reminiscing on his time as an apprentice, Egan pinpoints those two years as the most enjoyable period of his footballing career. "Those two years were the best of my life. I was surrounded by some great people every day.

"I think I appreciate it more now than when I was actually there because, obviously, at the time it's hard to look past just playing football and enjoying yourself with your teammates. But I learnt so many lessons. I have stories and memories that I'll still talk about when I'm 60 years old."

Discussing his scholarship years in further detail, Egan credits both AFC Wimbledon and LFE for creating such a positive environment to thrive and develop in. "The club created an environment where everyone was on a level playing field, and the focus was never solely on football - it was about the bigger picture. It was all about learning, developing, and becoming a better person - not just as a footballer, but more importantly, as a person.

I'm not sure whether we just found a sweet spot within our group, but as a cohort, we embodied all of that. Never any arguments, bickering, or anything like that - just simply good times.

"LFE's help always echoed what the club was trying to do as well," Egan affirmed. "I remember LFE partners coming in and delivering sessions to us across lots of different topics. If I'm honest with you, I've definitely learnt to appreciate those sessions a lot more now, as I've got older and matured. Looking back, they were really important because everything I learnt in those sessions has come to fruition now, and I'm using those skills in my career."

Egan signed his first professional contract in 2016 and recalls the daunting nature of having to make the jump from the academy to the first team. "It was a scary time for sure. You're 17 or 18 and walking into a dressing room full of seasoned pros in their late 20s and early 30s who have enjoyed great careers. I was a little starstruck at first. None of them had played in the Premier League, for example, but I was a big Millwall fan growing up, and Wimbledon at the time had a few ex-Millwall players in the squad. It was nerve-wracking - all of the emotions you can think of rolled into one - but it's just about taking it in your stride." ►

EGAN



During his time as a professional, Egan began exploring other interests away from the pitch and started to picture what his life might look like in a post-football career. "I was fascinated by what else was out there. Being in the football or sports world in general is like being in a bubble. I didn't really realise how thick that bubble was, and it's hard to look outside of it. But I did begin to start thinking about what I was interested in away from football, and what skills I had developed that could make me successful elsewhere. I had played games in the league, so at the time I very much had a career in football still to pursue - but I started to have conversations about it. I began talking to other players about their ambitions and plans after football, because unless you're playing at the very highest level and earning ridiculous amounts of money, you're going to have to work after you finish playing."

Egan's Wimbledon deal expired, and the midfielder wasn't offered fresh terms - prompting the search for a new club to begin. "The first couple of months were really tough as I didn't know what I was going to do. When you're playing well and in the spotlight, agents love you - but when you're not doing so well, it's hard to get a text back. So, I was a little lost, to be honest with you.

"I went on trial at Ebbsfleet, who were in the National League, and eventually signed a deal there. It was a completely different environment to the one I was in at Wimbledon. It was still very professional, but a lot different. It will have changed now, though, as a lot of non-league clubs are full-time."



Egan admits to initially looking down on the prospect of playing in non-league - something he urges current players, especially young ones looking to gain experience in men's football, not to do. "At the start, I couldn't even get into the team, and it really hit my ego. My pride was dented. It was really tough to adapt to.

"I thought it was going to be easy, having dropped down from a professional team - but it was the complete opposite. It was super physical, and the first season was a real shock to the system. But I adapted and ended up staying for three years - and loved it, to be honest.



“The facilities and stadiums are also really good. That doesn’t just go for the National League that I was playing in - National League North and South clubs are really great too. Even clubs further down at step three and four.

“It’s not a walk in the park. There are some great players in non-league, and if you go and play games and do well, you’re setting yourself up for a career at that level at least, which is worth a lot of praise. It’s not just a stepping stone anymore for players - it’s an environment and level that is really challenging and professional.”

Despite the immediate disappointment that came with leaving Wimbledon and professional football behind, Egan looks back on his time in SW17 with great fondness.

“You know what, I had a few successful years there and think I did really well. I played a handful of professional games in the league, which is the pinnacle of my footballing achievements, and I’ll always be proud of that.

“Football was great for me. I learnt so much in a brilliant environment and have some unbelievable memories for life thanks to football!”

Following a few seasons of full-time football in the National League with Ebbsfleet, Egan signed for part-time National League South side Dorking Wanderers.

“A club full of great people. The lads were fantastic, and the manager is a legend,” he says with a beaming smile. “It was a really good place to go and experience my first taste of part-time football. ▶



FOOTBALL WAS GREAT FOR ME. I LEARNT SO MUCH IN A BRILLIANT ENVIRONMENT AND HAVE SOME UNBELIEVABLE MEMORIES FOR LIFE THANKS TO FOOTBALL.



They only trained on Tuesday and Thursday evenings, so I had so much spare time on my hands - and there's only so much gym work you can do!

"I began thinking about what I could potentially do in my spare time, and fortunately, I had a cousin who owned a recruitment company. So, I reached out to him and asked if he thought I might be suited to it. I went in for a couple of days and, to be honest with you, never looked back. The environment was great, and it felt as close to a football changing room as you could possibly get.

"I think I was fortunate because the kind of career I chose within recruitment was very active, fast paced, and competitive, so all the soft skills I acquired during my time as a footballer suited the industry well. I also think I had a bit of a chip on my shoulder and wanted to prove to people that I could make a success of myself away from the world of sport. I began working at the bottom and earning pretty much all my money from commission, so I was extremely driven in that sense. I worked really hard and ended up being a Divisional Manager, looking after loads of consultants."

After three years working in recruitment across three different firms, Egan decided to take a leap of faith and pursue something closer to his heart. He launched his own company, with the help of his cousin: Crossover Partners, aimed at helping former athletes find meaning, momentum, and real careers off the pitch. "I sat down with my cousin one day and just asked what he thought of the idea, and he told me it was a no-brainer. He said he'd seen me come into the world of recruitment with zero previous experience and make a success of it due to the traits I had learned in sport - so we launched Crossover Partners together.

"We're here as a service to guide and support athletes transitioning out of their sport. We specifically focus on helping them transition into sales and recruitment, because it's what we've both done and have experience in. We also know that athletes are really suited to this particular industry.

"In 2023, I looked into the figures and studied them quite a lot, and it turned out that 27% of athletes go into sales in their post-sporting careers - which is a huge percentage. So, if we can connect as many athletes into our area of expertise as possible, then great. We just want to help anyone who needs that support and guidance.

"We want to ensure that people know they have these skills, nurture them, and realise what they can do. It's all formed through lived experience, and I want to share what I've learnt with others to give athletes guidance into successful, new-found careers."

Reflecting on his post-football success, Egan is insistent that his time as an athlete played a crucial role in shaping it. "I think it's the main reason I've made a success of it. All of the skills that I learnt and crafted while playing football are the reason I've done well. The biggest one for me is structure. Football taught me structure, and that's helped me massively in the working world. Then comes the other skills such as organisation and the drive to succeed. I pick up skills fast and can be taught very quickly - you learn to be coachable as a footballer. I think these skills are what set athletes apart." ■



PITCH TO DECKS WITH DJ PEPS

Herve Pepe Ngoma (aka DJ Peps) came onboard the LFE Life Skills and Personal Development programmes over the summer and has since begun delivering sessions to apprentices at EFL clubs across the country.

During his sessions, DJ Peps shares his own story in football and details his transition from being a player at Leicester City to becoming a full-time DJ. He highlights the importance of players developing other interests away from the pitch, and introduces apprentices to the art of DJ'ing by getting them on the decks.

Last month, LFE visited Bristol City's Robins High Performance Centre to see DJ Peps in action and it's fair to say the workshop was very well received!

Hear from the apprentices themselves...

Desmond Kumih Barimah: "It was really good. I had a little spin which was fun and picked it up pretty quick. It was a good experience, and I think it's something that I might tap into in the future and develop as a hobby on the side."

Billy Amos: "It was really fun to actually get on the decks and have a play around."

Devont'e Ferguson: "Definitely a 10/10 session. It's made me really want to get into a bit of DJ'ing myself."

Hugo Dali-Kemmerly: "It was amazing. We all got an opportunity to have a go on the decks, and he showed us what to do. It's really good that this sort of stuff is put on for us."

Trayvion Jackson: "It was a great insight into the kind of stuff we can do outside of football. I had a great time and it's good to get out of that football zone sometimes and do something different."



COPING WITH ILLNESS AND INJURY

WAYS TO HELP YOURSELF

COPING STRATEGIES



Confidence building

You want to have faith in your own abilities and preparation. Why not track your progress in a creative way such as a video blog.



Your rehab environment

Know what environment best supports your rehab. You might want to remain involved by watching training and matches.



Use your support network!

Your family, friends, coach and physio are just a few people around who can support you.



Remain positive and pro-active!

Your thoughts can influence your feelings and behaviours during recovery from illness and injury. Stay positive and focused on what YOU can do to support your own progress.



Research how you can help yourself

If you're a problem-focused copier, you might want to read into your injury and how others have coped.



Motivation

To have the best chance of recovering fully, you need a strong purpose to do so. Identify what motivates you to recover.

Joel Burgess



Joel Burgess signed a two-year scholarship at Bolton Wanderers at the age of 16, harbouring dreams of a future professional career with his hometown club. However, at the conclusion of his scholarship in 2023, Joel wasn't offered a new deal.

Fast forward to the present day and the former Wanderers midfielder is now preparing to enter the third year of his law degree at Newcastle University.

Joel is one of many former players who have made the transition from full-time football to education and benefitted from The Players Foundation's Educational Support Grant. He recently spoke to the foundation's PR Adviser, Paul Newman.

Tell us about your time at Bolton Wanderers and what your aspirations were as a footballer?

"I joined Bolton at 16 and signed a two-year scholarship. I was hopeful of earning a professional contract and was actually captain of the U18s in my second year but then received the news in April 2023 that I wasn't going to be given a professional contract.

"I did go on trial at Hull City which was eventually unsuccessful, and it was then that I decided my next move was to go to university and study law."

How did that decision impact you during that time?

"It was pretty 50/50 to be honest when it came to knowing whether I was going to get a professional deal so I did begin to have some thoughts about what I might want to do if I didn't get one, but of course it was disappointing. It was tough, but luckily, I managed to move on quite quickly mentally and progress into my next step."

How important was it to make a 'next step' plan while still being an apprentice?

"I applied to university around the Christmas time. I applied as a back-up option in case I didn't get a professional contract because for me personally I didn't like the idea of having to wait around for another year just playing semi-pro football and not doing much else. I wanted to go straight into university."

University can be challenging financially if you're not earning a living and you applied for our Educational Support Grant. How did you find this process?

"The grant has been really useful for me, and it was a really smooth process. I was informed about it going into my second year from one of my coaches at university. I went through the application process and received the grant which helped me massively in a financial sense."

How has the grant helped you personally?

"My life at university mainly consists of lectures and coursework etc in the day and then I play for the university's football team which is semi-professional level, so that takes up a lot of my evenings during the week and then my weekend's too which means it would be very difficult for me to get a job at the same time. The grant from the foundation really helps ease that financial pressure and allows me to have my full focus on my degree and football which is ideal."

How are you finding university life?

"I've absolutely loved my time at Newcastle so far. Combining the football and studying has been a challenge for sure, but I've made so many new friends and that helps. It's a bit of a daunting prospect going to university, but I've enjoyed it so much and I'm confident I made the right decision."

What are your post-university ambitions?

"I'd like to work within football in a law capacity. All the big football clubs have lawyers. I've also considered going into agency because I've got the background of being a player in a professional environment, and then hopefully have my law degree on top of that. I think the combination of these two things would work really well if I was to go down this pathway."



Since the start of the 2024/25 season, Forest Green Rovers have been working in partnership with Hartpury University, allowing young professionals at the National League club to earn a degree while gaining men's football experience by playing for Hartpury Football Club, who compete at Step Four of the English football pyramid. This initiative helps bridge the gap between Under-18s and senior football.

LFE recently travelled to the Gloucestershire-based university to find out more about the partnership from the players and staff.



Our first conversation was with Yan Klukowski, Head of Academy at Forest Green Rovers, who shared the club's mission behind the project.

Yan, how did this partnership come about, and what is the aim?

"This was originally an idea driven by the club's previous Academy Manager, and I've since picked it up. It really is a first-class provision. We offer players the opportunity to extend their scholarship for a third year, with the second year of the provision aligning with their first-year professional contracts.

"We understand there's a significant gap between the Under-18s and the first team, and we're working to bridge that gap as best we can, giving players a bit more time to develop.

"It also gives them valuable insight into how education works within a university setting; thanks to the first-class facilities we have here at Hartpury. Alongside their studies, they train full-time across both Forest Green and Hartpury's programmes, so that when they step into the first-team environment, they're a little more prepared. What we've found is that giving them that extra year—allowing for a small, measured step in their development—has helped them significantly, both as players and as people."

You mention bridging the gap between the Under-18s and first-team football. Have you seen this approach come to fruition?

"Yes, we've already seen some really positive outcomes. The boys currently on the programme have had valuable exposure with the Forest Green first team, including training sessions and involvement in matchday squads for both the Premier League Cup and National League Cup fixtures.

"Alongside that, they have the opportunity to train full-time here at Hartpury. One of the great advantages of Hartpury is that they have their own men's team competing at Step Four, which gives the players the chance to go out on loan and play in a very competitive league, exposing them to senior football. That way, when they eventually return to the first-team environment at Forest Green, they're much better prepared."

What does a typical day look like for one of your players here at Hartpury?

“I think their days start a fair bit earlier than they’re usually used to! They’ll have training sessions in the morning, followed by things like strength and conditioning work and analysis sessions. After that, they get a chance to recharge before getting stuck into their studies.

“They’re already quite used to balancing both sides of the programme. The apprenticeship provided by LFE is first-class and offers a strong balance between football development and education. The academic workload here is certainly more challenging and time-consuming, but the LFE Apprenticeship Programme has prepared them well for the demands they face at Hartpury.”

How important do you believe their continuation in education is?

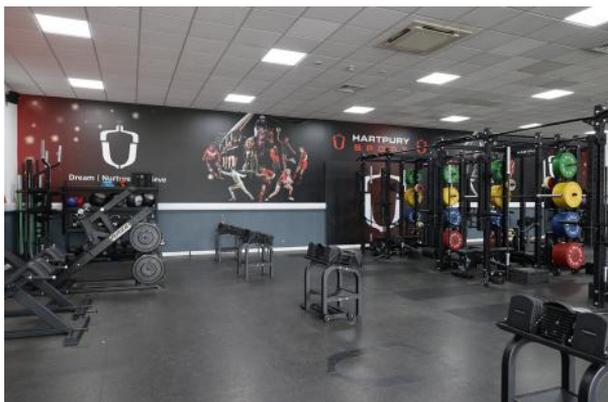
“It’s massively important. We’re really committed to providing individuals with as many opportunities as possible. Everyone knows the statistics when it comes to making it in the professional game, and while our main goal is to see our players break into the first team, we also want to make sure we’re developing well-rounded individuals who have options outside of football.

“The ideal scenario is that they build a career in the game while continuing their studies, so that when the time comes to retire, they have a passion and a clear path to transition into.”

How would you sum up the relationship between Forest Green Rovers and Hartpury University?

“The relationship is really strong. It’s not just about us benefiting from them; we also provide opportunities for players here at Hartpury to potentially make the step from the university environment into the professional game with us at Forest Green, as they have some very talented players.

“By forging these links, we strengthen the bond between local organisations, which shows that we genuinely care about the children and young people in our pathway.”



We then caught up with two players at the heart of the project – Keon Sanniola and Will Merrett – who have just begun their second year at Hartpury.

How have you found the experience so far?

Keon Sanniola: “My first year was really good. It involved a lot of character building, as I was going into an environment that was new to me. I made a lot of friends, on and off the pitch.”

Will Merrett: “I’d echo what Keon said. We spent a lot of time last year in a totally new environment, and being back in the classroom during the day was a big adjustment. In terms of personal growth, it was massive – it took a lot of adaptation.”

How did you feel you developed during your first year?

Keon Sanniola: “I definitely found more discipline and structure. Balancing football and education is a really important skill to have. Some days we’d be in for a gym session at 7am, straight into an analysis session, and then into lectures and studying. It was a really valuable experience and has helped set me up to go again in my second year and be even better.”

Will Merrett: “My time management skills definitely improved, that’s for sure. With training, matches, and classroom responsibilities, you have to shift your focus between both aspects of the programme and stay fully engaged in everything you do. Our schedules changed daily, so being adaptable was key.”

How did balancing both football and education on the LFE Apprenticeship Programme help ease your transition into this next stage?

Keon Sanniola: “Obviously, the jump from college work to university work is quite big, and studying at university is a lot more intense. But in my opinion, the two years we spent studying alongside football at Forest Green as apprentices set us up perfectly for this next step.”

Will Merrett: “I definitely agree with Keon. During the two-year apprenticeship, I completed my SEP, but I also studied Psychology A-Level at a local sixth form. So, although the overall workload at university has increased quite a bit, I actually found the transition fairly smooth.”



How important is it to have a separate focus – in this case, education – to help you switch off from football at times?

Keon Sanniola: “It’s so important to have balance in your life and not put all your eggs in one basket. Football is a high-pressure environment, and its key to take your mind off it at times and focus on something different. Education really helps with that – with lectures, coursework, and deadlines to meet, your attention has to shift, which gives you that mental break from football.”

Will Merrett: “As a professional footballer, you do have a lot of spare time. You might only be at the training ground from 10am to 1pm, so like Keon said, it’s really important to have something else to focus on. I actually feel like my educational responsibilities have helped me on the pitch, because I’m not constantly overthinking about football when I’m not playing.”

“Also, some of the things we’re learning on the course – like the psychology side of the game and injury management – are directly applicable to me as a player, which has been really helpful too.”

The facilities on campus are fantastic – how impressed have you been with what’s available here?

Keon Sanniola: “They’re great. I didn’t live on campus last year, but whenever I was here, I had full access to all the facilities. It’s a fantastic opportunity to better yourself – physically, mentally, technically, and even personally.”

Will Merrett: “Yeah, the facilities are brilliant. The pitches we play on are amazing, and the astroturf is really good too. Hartpury is huge on sport, so the access we get is top class. I lived on campus last year, so I could use the performance gym whenever I wanted — and by the way, it’s one of the best gyms I’ve ever seen.

“There’s also so much support here, from psychologists and sports scientists to physios. Even the food they provide us with is brilliant.”

On the pitch, how have you developed as a footballer?

Keon Sanniola: “There’s definitely a big jump from Under-18s to first-team football, so this programme is a great opportunity for us to grow, develop, and improve as players. Personally, one area I needed to work on was my intensity on the pitch, and playing men’s football week in, week out for Hartpury has definitely helped me with that. Hopefully, it paves the way for me to get closer to the first team.”

Will Merrett: “I agree. The biggest difference between youth football and men’s football is the physicality. Here, we’re playing against men who don’t care if you’re 18, 25, or 30. There’s also a strong emphasis on winning — those three points on a Saturday mean a lot because there’s much more at stake.”

In what ways do you see this degree benefiting your long-term career, on and off the pitch?

Keon Sanniola: “It goes without saying that education is important. Hopefully, we both make careers out of the game, but if that doesn’t happen, we’ll be fortunate to have a degree to our name. I also believe it’s important to keep expanding your knowledge and always strive to learn more — and that’s exactly what studying for a degree allows you to do.”

Will Merrett: “Keon is spot on. Even if we go on to have a highly successful 15-year career in football, it’s a very short career, and we’ll need to do something afterwards. Of course, my priority is to play sport first and foremost, but after that, the next best thing for me would be to work in sport, so this degree will really help with that. I also don’t want to be worrying about life after football — I want to be prepared and have stability.”





PRE-SEASON AT UNIVERSITY of BATH

FOUR UNDER-18 SQUADS - MILLWALL, CREWE ALEXANDRA, GRIMSBY TOWN, AND HUDDERSFIELD TOWN – WERE INVITED TO THE UNIVERSITY OF BATH IN JULY FOR A WEEK-LONG PRE-SEASON TRAINING CAMP.

Throughout the week at Team Bath's Sports Training Village, the apprentices took part in a range of specialised sessions, including high-intensity football training, strength and conditioning, and recovery work in the campus's state-of-the-art hydrotherapy pool.

They also played in-house pre-season friendlies against each other as they looked to build fitness levels ahead of the new season.

In addition, the apprentices were given time to relax and enjoy team bonding activities, including sightseeing in the city centre, bowling, and quiz nights.

LFE travelled to Somerset during the second week of the camps to spend time with Crewe Alexandra and Millwall.



ARCHIE KIRBY

MILLWALL U18S

“I think it’s been amazing to see the University and everything they have to offer. The facilities here are great — we even got to try out the hydro pool, which was really cool. Even as an academy, we don’t have facilities like this. The fact that you can access all of this while also getting an education is really impressive.”

IAGO SCOTT

CREWE ALEXANDRA U18S

“It’s been a great experience — something different and refreshing. What really stands out are the facilities. At our club, we don’t have the privilege of accessing this kind of setup, so it’s been a valuable opportunity.”

JAYDEN TEKTAS

MILLWALL U18S

“Before coming here I was definitely closed minded towards the idea of university but now that I’ve come here it’s opened my mind a lot and is definitely something I might explore if professional football doesn’t quite work out for me.”

TOM GRAVES

CREWE ALEXANDRA U18S

“I’ve really enjoyed it, and I know the rest of the team have too. It’s been a great chance to bond as a group, and we’ve made the most of all the training sessions and opportunities we’ve been given.”

CHRIS PERRY

MILLWALL LEAD U18S COACH

“It’s been absolutely brilliant. I didn’t really know what to expect, but this has been a complete step up. The facilities are outstanding — they’ve got everything you could want — and the staff have been fantastic. They go above and beyond to make sure everything is spot on. It’s been a great experience for the boys.”



CHE WILSON

HEAD OF FOOTBALL AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BATH, OVERSAW THE CAMPS.

The former Norwich City, Bristol Rovers, and Southend United defender also introduced the apprentices to university football, outlining the transition opportunities available and explaining what Bath can offer players who choose the higher education route in the future.

“It’s been fantastic,” Wilson told LFE. “I’ve had the chance to present to the lads the kind of exit route we can offer if things don’t quite work out for them on the professional pathway, and they’ve all been really engaged. I think it’s sparked genuine interest. Even during the presentations — when they first walked into the room, some seemed a little reluctant, but as soon as they saw what we do here and what we can offer, they had loads of questions. It’s a fantastic option and safety net for them.”

“With regards to the men’s first team here at the university, they compete at the highest level of university football, and many of the players in that league are former professional academy players — so there’s a really strong pedigree. A lot of our first-team players also play semi-professionally outside of the university programme, so the standard is very competitive.”



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League Football Education @LFEonline

Congratulations to the eleven former LFE apprentices involved in Grimsby Town's historic Carabao Cup triumph over Manchester United last night, as the Mariners knocked the six-time winners of the competition out on penalties at Blundell Park.

Christy Pym, Kieran Green, Evan Kouri, Cam McJannet, Charles Vernam (x1), Cameron Gardner, Reece Staunton, Clarke Oduor, and Henry Brown all featured in the match. Danny Rose and last season's League Two Apprentice of the Year nominee Seb Auton were unused substitutes on the night.

A fantastic achievement for all involved!

#GTFCC

League Football Education 1d · 🌐

💡 "Hopefully, we make careers out of the game - but if we don't, we'll have our degrees to fall back on"

📖 Forest Green Rovers' Keon Sanniola and Will Merrett are both pursuing Sports Science degrees at Hartpury University. Here, Keon highlights the importance of furthering your education alongside a career in sport.

💛 The Rovers second-year professionals are able to pursue their education thanks to the club's partnership with the Gloucestershire-based university.

#HigherEducation 🎓



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Careers

LFE learners can take advantage of employment opportunities thanks to LFE's partnerships with a variety of different organisations.

Scan the QR code to browse our range of exciting pathways.



LFE Transition Officer

Academy players can seek information, advice and guidance regarding alternative options at any time from LFE's Transition Officer, Anthony Cato.

Contact him at acato@lfe.org.uk

Higher Education

All LFE apprentices can pursue a route to university in the UK or abroad if they achieve the required academic qualifications.

Scan the QR code to view our informative guides to Higher Education or USA Scholarships.

