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Premier League Castoffs, Starting Over at Age 11

England's soccer machine discards preteen players, and their dreams, with ease and efficiency every year. But not every player, or every family, is willing to give up.

By TARIQ PANJA OCT. 20, 2017

BOULOGNE-SUR-MER, France — The road back to professional soccer begins in the dark.

Two hours before dawn on the first Sunday in September, a group of 11- and 12-year-old boys have piled into a van outside their coach's house in London to start their 17-hour workday. Some of the boys have been up since 2 a.m. in order to get on the road by 4, and most don't leave the van until it pulls to a stop in a parking lot in France five hours later.

Only then do the boys emerge bleary eyed at the Complexe de la Waroquerie, a sports facility in this coastal city. Their appearance at the Chti's Cup, a competitive youth tournament, is the latest stop in what for most will be an unlikely (and in most cases, fruitless) journey toward a professional soccer career.

Several of the boys donning the sky blue shirts of this club, Focus Football, have already suffered massive disappointment in the game. Cut loose by England's biggest clubs before they reached their teenage years, they now toil with a developmental program based in a high school sports hall that is a world away from the manicured academies of the Premier League.

Focus Football is run by Sean Daly, a gruff but well-connected former employee at Chelsea and Tottenham. Daly, 28, has built a reputation for resurrecting the "careers" of children, some as young as 8, who have been told they are not good enough to play elite-level soccer. His track

record, and his extensive contacts, are why many of these boys have come with him to France, and it is why some of their family members have made the trip, too.

Nisar Bhatti is one of them, leaning against a rail on the side of a field where his son Iyad is about to take the field for the Focus under-11s. Before the match, the teams line up under a marquee designed to look like a players' tunnel before emerging to the unmistakable sound of the Champions League anthem.

"Your mind does drift," Nisar Bhatti said about the prospect of his son playing in the real Champions League one day. When Iyad delivers an inch perfect cross for a teammate to score with a header, his father exclaims, "Get in, Iyad!" before turning to say — only half-jokingly — "the dream's back on."

The Numbers

The odds, of course, are heavily stacked against any youth player, whether at Focus or at the most gilded Premier League academy, someday making it as a top-tier professional.

"The stat that is relevant here is that around one-third of 1 percent of all boys who enter an academy at the age of 9 will make a living from the game," said Michael Calvin, who has written a book about the youth academy economy.

Calvin said even fewer — "only 180 of the 1.5 million boys who are playing organized youth football in England at any one time" — will play a single minute in the Premier League.

Still, Iyad Bhatti clings to that dream. A diminutive right-sided attacker, he was at Tottenham for several years before being released in 2016. Nisar Bhatti said the club based its decision on a database that compared Iyad's physical and athletic attributes to previous players', but also on physical data it sought from him and his wife.

"The cutthroat nature is incredible — they drop you like that," Nisar Bhatti said. "You learn that your kid is like a Kleenex: They can just throw it away and pick up another one."

Daly, who once helped clubs make such decisions, knows this better than most. That is why he reminds his charges, with a mix of realism and motivational psychology, of the fight they have on their hands.

“Most of you won’t make it, the statistics are clear,” he tells his team in the cramped, concrete-floored dressing room in Boulogne. “And I can tell you, you definitely won’t make it if you don’t work hard, if you don’t put a shift in every time you train, every time you play.”

Still, whatever the message, a child’s dreams are a powerful motivator.

On the surface, the rules governing young players in English soccer are strict. Teams can sign players to their academies as early as age 9, but cannot formalize that arrangement, through a professional contract, until they are 16.

Yet using inducements to forge connections, and loyalty, is not uncommon. Some clubs offer to pay for private school educations for academy players, and even for the players’ siblings. Legitimate payments for travel allowances are regularly abused — a way to funnel money to underage players in contravention of the rules — and poaching the best prospects from rival clubs is common, so much so that Huddersfield, promoted to the Premier League this season, recently scrapped its youth programs for players under 16.

The Huddersfield chairman, Dean Hoyle, said the change was made because the club no longer felt it could promise players “a strong and obvious pathway to the first team.” News media reports suggested something more sinister at work; even if Huddersfield could scout talent, The Daily Mirror noted, “chances are Manchester City, Manchester United, Liverpool or even Chelsea will quickly be along to have a ‘chat’ with your parents.”

The problems for the boys begin when, suddenly, it’s all over. Clubs usually warn parents that their children are about to be released, to give them time to lay the groundwork for what is often the biggest disappointment of a young child’s life. But however the news is delivered, the cull can feel ruthless.

“You are like a piece of meat really,” one Focus parent said of her son’s dismissal by a Premier League academy. “They need you until they don’t.”

A Last Chance

At times, Focus Football appears to be as much a therapy session for parents as it is a venue for their children to hone their soccer skills and climb back onto the professional ladder.

At a training session inside the gymnasium of a North London school, Seth Johnson and Maria Sheehan sit together on a long wooden bench. They are reminiscing, and also commiserating. Their boys, Joe and Henry, played soccer together as 4-year-olds before losing touch. Now they are back together: Joe, tall and thickset, was released by Arsenal after five years for a perceived lack of pace. Henry, slim and wiry, spent a similar period at Tottenham before being told he wouldn't be kept on account of his size.

"I was devastated," Maria Sheehan said. Henry had loved his time at Spurs, training with top coaches and sharing space in the gym with first-team stars like Dele Alli. But after Spurs cut him loose and Watford, another Premier League team, also rejected him because of his lack of physicality, the Sheehans say they have decided to bide their time, to let their preteen son regain his confidence.

"We thought, we're not putting him through this all the time; he's not going to have all these rejections," Maria Sheehan said.

Signing a youth contract with a professional club comes with risks. For every year a child spends at an academy, the team can request compensation from a rival should a parent wish to switch clubs. That amount grows quietly year by year, and it can reach six figures by the time the child turns 16 — effectively handcuffing a boy to a club just when he is free to make his own decisions about his career.

Daly and Focus Football, as well as a few similar setups, offer another path. The Focus players are a mix: boys whose parents declined to sign youth contracts, thus keeping their options open but giving clubs little reason to invest in them, and those who did but later were released after a year or two, or more.

The parents' faith in Daly, who says he does not make any money when Focus players are signed by professional teams, stems from his coaching ability but also from his contacts.

"He will prepare you because he knows each academy, knows what they require," said Alex Quarcoo, a hairdressing salon owner whose son Malachi joined Focus after he was released by Tottenham after three years. "He'll only take them when they are ready."

They come, Quarcoo said, because they — players and parents — are not ready to give up their dreams. "My view is, one way or another, we want to get our children back in," Quarcoo said.

To be clear, Focus is not a charity. Most parents spend just under \$100 a month for a child to attend two training sessions and play a game once a week. The very best players are invited to attend a so-called elite group session.

And Daly can be abrasive, which can seem jarring given that his charges are so young. “Don’t stop the van,” he barked over the phone on the way to France. “I don’t care if he says he’s going to be sick. They have to learn to be mentally tough.”

Later, after the under-11 team’s goalkeeper committed a blunder in an early game at the tournament in France, Daly dropped the boy for a subsequent game.

“He always tells it straight,” said Damian Kelly, who drives his prodigiously gifted 12-year-old son, Kyle, 40 miles to play for Focus. “What he’s always said is that he’ll always have the child’s best interests at heart, and he’s proved that over the last four or five years.”

At the Chti’s Cup, both Focus teams progress to the latter stages of the tournament. And one, a team featuring boys born in 2005, is involved in a remarkable passage of play that belies their age. Leading by 2-0 with the clock ticking down, Daly instructs his players to slow the tempo, to conserve energy for the greater challenges that lie ahead. The team responds, passing the ball in short, neat triangles for a full three minutes before the referee blows the final whistle. The rival team doesn’t touch the ball.

The 2005 team’s tournament ends with a semifinal loss, though, and as the 2006 age group plays its quarterfinal game, Harley Taggart, a midfielder who is among the smallest players at the tournament, nurses a knee injury on the bench. The day has taken its toll.

Harley is hoping to sign with Norwich City, a second division team that played in the Premier League as recently as 2016, but even at 11 he is wise to the system. “I’d like to live up there,” he said. “They pay for private school.”

When his team’s opponent, a bigger and more physical squad from Racing Club Lens, defeats Focus with a shot from outside the penalty area on the last kick of the game, Harley, alone on the bench in a shirt several sizes too big for him, puts his hands over his face and bursts into tears.

A few weeks later, before a Focus training session back in London, one of his teammates, Claude Smith-Kabanda, reflected on the trip. Claude, 11, was about to complete his first month of high school, but his larger aspirations remain unchanged. The trip to France was challenging, he said, but it hadn't altered his belief in himself.

"I think," he said, "I'm going to make it."

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