TOUCHLINE

ISSUE 53
OCT 26

LFE

ETHAN O'TOOLE

The Shrewsbury Town Academy Graduate discusses his full-circle moment

ACROSS THE CONTINENT

Shining a light on LFE Academy Graduates on the European stage



THEO RICHARDSON

The Academy Graduate reflects on his journey through football, building a business and preparing for life beyond the game

TOUCHLINE LFE

ISSUE 53 • OCT 26

Written by Henry Westmacott
Design by ICG

WHAT'S COMING UP



SEP Masterclass 1	Tue 3 Nov	Online
EFL Academy Managers Meeting	Tue 17 Nov	St George's Park
Academy Player Care Hub	Wed 18 Nov	St George's Park
Academy Player Care Hub	Mon 23 Nov	Premier League Office, London
Futures USA Tour	Thu 26 Nov - Mon 7 Dec	Tampa, Florida
Plan A deadline	Fri 27 Nov	Application
SEP Masterclass 2	Tue 15 Dec	Online
UCAS deadline	Wed 13 Jan	Application

Established by

EFL

Professional Footballers Association

Supported by

Department for Education

Apprenticeships

Cyber Essentials Certified

Investors in People We invest in people Standard

matrix

EXPLORE LFE

Find out all the latest LFE information and news

@LFEONLINE

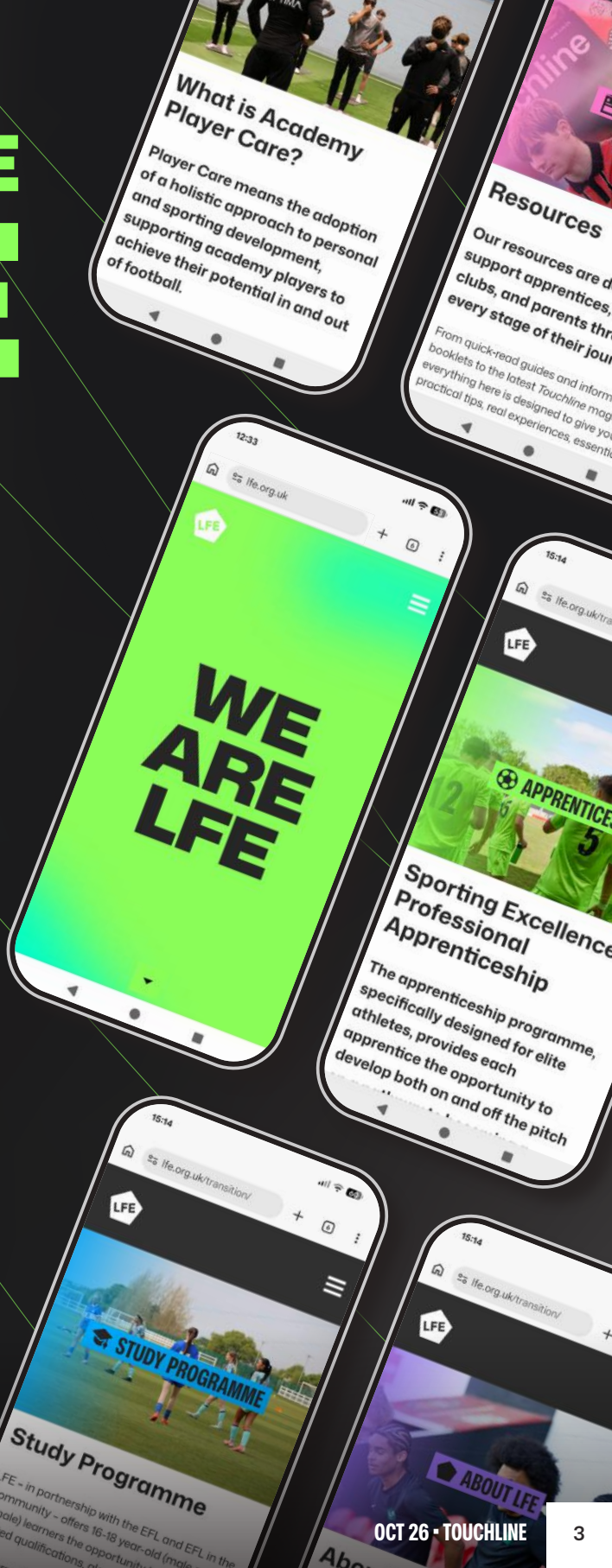
@LFEONLINE

@LFEONLINE

@LFEONLINETV

@LEAGUEFOOTBALLEDUCATION

lfe.org.uk



ACADEMY LEAGUES ROUND UP



EFL Youth Alliance North

Eight games into the campaign, two sides have set a relentless early pace at the top of the table. **Stockport County** lead the way with a flawless return of eight wins from eight, collecting the maximum 24 points and combining defensive solidity with attacking efficiency. Hot on their heels are **Wrexham**, unbeaten with seven wins and a draw, and boasting the division's most potent attack so far with 36 goals scored.

Lincoln City occupy third place on 17 points after a strong start, while **Crewe Alexandra** sit fourth with 16 points from seven matches and possess the league's best defensive record, having conceded just five goals.

Salford City complete the current top five despite a negative goal difference, highlighting an inconsistent but effective start in terms of results.

The middle of the table remains tightly packed, with just five points separating **Walsall** in sixth from **Mansfield Town** in 15th. **Burton Albion's** positive goal difference suggests they may be well placed to push higher, while **Preston North End** have made a promising start despite playing only six matches.

At the bottom end, **Chesterfield**, **Blackpool** and **Shrewsbury Town** have all struggled to find consistency, while **Morecambe's** defensive difficulties are reflected in 32 goals conceded and a league-low goal difference of -23. With several clubs having games in hand, however, the table could change significantly over the coming weeks.



EFL Youth Alliance South

Plymouth Argyle have emerged as the early pacesetters in the division, making a perfect start with eight wins from eight and opening up a six-point gap at the summit. Their record of 33 goals scored and 11 conceded underlines both their attacking threat and consistency, making them the standout side during the opening weeks of the campaign.

Behind them, **Portsmouth** and **Northampton Town** sit level on 18 points, with Northampton yet to taste defeat after five wins and three draws. **Stevenage**, **Wycombe Wanderers** and **Exeter City** complete a competitive top six, with just two points separating fourth and sixth place. **Gillingham** and **AFC Wimbledon** are also well positioned, having collected 14 and 13 points respectively despite playing fewer matches than several other sides.

The middle of the table remains tightly contested. **Cambridge United**, **Bromley** and **Bristol Rovers** are all tightly packed, while **Oxford United**, **Barnet** and **MK Dons** will feel there is plenty of time to climb the standings.

At the foot of the table, however, several clubs have struggled for momentum. **Watford**, **Leyton Orient**, **Luton Town** and **Swindon Town** are all searching for consistency, while **Newport County** have endured a particularly difficult start. Seven defeats from seven, combined with 32 goals conceded and a goal difference of -28, leaves them rooted to the bottom. With games in hand across the division and the season still in its infancy, there is ample opportunity for the table to change significantly in the weeks ahead.

** Correct as of 23rd October 2026*

ACADEMY LEAGUES ROUND UP

U18 Professional Development League

The U18 Professional Development League is beginning to take shape, although the uneven number of games played suggests there could still be plenty of movement in the standings over the coming weeks.

At the top, **Swansea City** and **Charlton Athletic** are setting the pace with 16 points apiece from seven matches. **Swansea** currently lead the table courtesy of a superior goal difference, having scored an impressive 24 goals while conceding just 10. **Charlton** have matched their points tally with five wins, one draw and one defeat, ensuring the race for first place remains finely balanced.

Perhaps the most eye-catching start belongs to **Millwall**, who sit third with 13 points from just five games and remain unbeaten. With two matches in hand on the leaders, they appear well placed to launch a serious challenge. **Barnsley**, **Queens Park Rangers** and **Cardiff City** complete a competitive top six, with **Cardiff** also possessing games in hand that could strengthen their position.

The middle of the table is tightly packed, with only a handful of points separating **Bolton Wanderers**, **Sheffield United**, **Bristol City** and **Wigan Athletic**. Further down, **Colchester United's** six draws from seven matches underline their difficulty in turning performances into victories.

At the bottom end, **Coventry City** and **Fleetwood Town** have struggled to build momentum, while **Peterborough United** and **Huddersfield Town** will be hoping their games in hand provide an opportunity to climb away from the lower reaches of the division. With several clubs having played as few as five matches, the table remains far from settled.







U18 Premier League North

The U18 Premier League North has already developed a familiar look at the top, with **Manchester City** making a flawless start. Six wins from six and 26 goals scored have given City an early three-point advantage over **Newcastle United**, while **Manchester United** sit third with four wins from their opening five fixtures and the league's strongest defensive record, conceding just once.

Of particular interest are **Middlesbrough**, **Derby County**, **Blackburn Rovers** and **Stoke City**, all of whom have experienced mixed starts.

Middlesbrough currently sit seventh on eight points, having won, drawn and lost two matches apiece. Their record suggests a side still searching for consistency but one that remains firmly within touching distance of the teams above them.

Derby County are one point further back in eighth. The Rams have shown flashes of quality but three defeats from six matches have prevented them from mounting a stronger challenge during the opening weeks.

Further down, **Blackburn Rovers** are 11th despite winning two of their five games. Their position is largely due to defensive struggles, having conceded 20 goals already, giving them a goal difference of -15. **Stoke City** sit 12th with four points from six matches and have similarly found results difficult to come by, although their tally of 11 goals scored suggests there are positives to build upon.

U18 Premier League South

The U18 Premier League South is already showing signs of a highly competitive season, although **Tottenham Hotspur** have established themselves as the early front-runners. They are unbeaten through six matches, collecting 16 points from a possible 18 while scoring an impressive 33 goals, giving them a four-point cushion at the top of the table.

Behind them, **Chelsea**, **Southampton** and **Fulham** are locked on 12 points, with Fulham's unbeaten record of three wins and three draws highlighting their consistency.

Among the teams of particular interest, **West Bromwich Albion** currently sit 11th with seven points from six games. While results have been inconsistent, conceding 14 goals has hindered their progress, and they will be looking to tighten up defensively to climb the table.

Just below them, **Norwich City** occupy 12th place with six points. The Canaries have shown attacking promise with 13 goals scored, but 22 goals conceded is the second-highest total in the division and has proven costly so far.

Further down, both **Reading** and **Birmingham City** have endured challenging starts. Reading are 15th with four points after one win in six matches, while **Birmingham** sit bottom of the table on three points. Defensive issues have been a common theme for both clubs, with **Reading** and **Birmingham** each conceding 22 goals already.

** Correct as of 23rd October 2026*

BUILDING BEYOND THE STICKS



For former LFE apprentice Theo Richardson, the end of 2018 marked a stark change in fortunes. Having recently left Manchester United, the then 20-year-old goalkeeper traded Premier League surroundings for the rough-and-ready world of non-league football.

Eight years on, Richardson's story looks very different. The Lincolnshire-born shot-stopper is now Hereford's No. 1, playing a key role in the club's challenge near the top of the National League North, while also serving as CEO and co-founder of HT Goalkeeping, a glove brand trusted by goalkeepers across the professional game.

The Leeds United academy graduate recently sat down with LFE at HT Goalkeeping's headquarters on the outskirts of Lincoln to discuss his career journey to this point.

"I did my apprenticeship at Leeds, and those two years were a huge learning curve," Richardson told LFE. "It was my first time living away from home and I was the only player in my age group staying in digs. Looking back, that experience at such a young age was invaluable.

"I found it really tough at the beginning and was so homesick. However, once you settle in and realise you're there because you're doing what you love, it becomes so much easier. That experience taught me independence and resilience, qualities that have helped me throughout my career and in business."

As an apprentice, Richardson quickly came to appreciate the importance of planning for life beyond football.

"That was one of the biggest things I learned. The staff at Leeds were fantastic and always stressed the importance of education and preparing for life after your playing career, whenever that may be," he said.

"Since leaving the club, I've gone on to earn a degree, complete coaching qualifications and undertake various other courses.

"That's why, whenever I speak to players now, whether they're in an academy or already in the professional game, I always encourage them to pursue something alongside football. Preparing for that next step is crucial."

Richardson left the West Yorkshire club at the end of his apprenticeship after narrowly missing out on a professional contract. However, less than 48 hours after his departure, an unexpected opportunity arose with Leeds United's fiercest rivals across the Pennines.

"When I was at Leeds, I was competing for a professional deal with a goalkeeper called Will Huffer, who was an excellent keeper," Richardson recalled. "He was offered a new contract and I wasn't.

"After leaving the club, I went straight to train with Notts County, but then, out of nowhere, Manchester United came in for me. They'd been watching some of my Youth Cup games and, obviously, liked what they saw.

"Everything happened really quickly, and I ended up spending the next couple of years there, which was an unbelievable experience. Looking back now, it's crazy to think about some of the players I trained alongside. We're talking Wayne Rooney, Zlatan Ibrahimović and Paul Pogba, and then, as a goalkeeper, training every day with the likes of David de Gea and Dean Henderson. It was special." ▶

When his spell at Manchester United ended in 2018, Richardson spent months chasing another chance in the professional game. Trial after trial yielded little reward, and as opportunities dwindled, the young goalkeeper was forced to look elsewhere. Eventually, he found himself at Grantham Town in the eighth tier of English football, a world away from the bright lights and historic corridors of Manchester United's Carrington training complex.

"Honestly, I found it really hard," Richardson confesses. "I went from being at one of the biggest clubs in the world to spending months going on trials and waiting for the phone to ring.

"That experience, however, reinforced the importance of having something else alongside football. When football isn't going well for you, you need something else to focus on.

"Eventually, I worked my way back up the pyramid. I went from Step 4 football back to Step 1. I'm now at a big club like Hereford, and it's going really well for me. I'm really happy with where I'm at and have loved my time here so far."

Having navigated the uncertainty that comes with life after academy football, Richardson understands better than most how quickly a promising career can change course. It is why his advice to young players is both simple and emphatic.

"Start preparing now. Don't wait until football ends before you think about what comes next. Whether that's education, coaching badges, a small business or even a hobby, have something else there that you can shift your focus to.

"The biggest challenge for a lot of players is identity. They see themselves purely as footballers, but you have to remember that you're your own person first and foremost.

"Having something else gives you purpose away from the pitch."





WHAT STARTED AS A COLLEGE PROJECT QUICKLY GATHERED MOMENTUM AND EVENTUALLY BECAME A GENUINE BUSINESS VENTURE.

Richardson practises what he preaches. While continuing to climb back up the football pyramid, he has also built a future beyond the game.

In 2022, he and his brother Heath, also a goalkeeper, launched HT Goalkeeping. What started as an idea between two brothers has developed into a successful glove brand, providing Richardson with a sense of purpose away from the pitch and a business he can continue to grow alongside his playing career.

"It actually began as part of a BTEC assignment while I was at college," Heath says, joining Theo to reflect on the company's origins. "One of my modules required me to create a business concept, so I came up with a goalkeeper glove brand called HT.

"I designed sample gloves, created a logo and put together a business plan.

"At the time, Theo had just helped Buxton win promotion, and I was preparing to sign a professional contract with Bradford City. Between us, we felt we had enough credibility within the game to turn the idea into something real. What started as a college project quickly gathered momentum and eventually became a genuine business venture."

"The first year was all about research and development," Theo adds. "We designed gloves, tested products, sourced manufacturers and focused on building the brand. We registered the company, trademarked our name and slogan, and got everything in place before launching the website. ▶



“One thing many people don’t realise about starting a business, or simply don’t have the patience for, is how long it takes to build something worthwhile. We launched in July 2022 and it’s only recently that we’ve started paying ourselves. As recently as last year, we were still operating out of my garage. Now, we have our own headquarters and an apprentice working alongside us.”

The brothers set out with a simple goal: to create a premium goalkeeper glove that players of all levels could afford, without the price tag typically attached to the sport's biggest brands.

Four years on, HT Goalkeeping has established a loyal customer base across the grassroots game while also making significant inroads into the professional ranks. Today, dozens of goalkeepers across England's top divisions wear the brand's gloves.

“We started with a handful of contacts and gradually built our reputation,” Theo says. “One of the first notable professionals we signed was Corey Addai, who is now at Burton Albion, and he’s still with us today.

"We managed to get Lincoln City’s George Wickens on board last summer too which was big for us.

“Since then, we’ve grown significantly. We have around 50 professional goalkeepers wearing our gloves, ranging from the EFL and National League right through to the Women’s Super League.

“One of our proudest moments came when two goalkeepers wore HT gloves in the League One play-off final at Wembley. To see that was pretty special.”

Social media has played a pivotal role in HT Goalkeeping’s rise. Through a consistent stream of content, the brand now attracts hundreds of thousands of views every month across its digital channels, helping it build a growing audience both within and beyond the goalkeeping community.



"It's been massive," Theo admits. "It's one of the most powerful tools available because it gives you exposure for free. We post multiple times a day across different platforms and use content to tell our story.

"Our goalkeeper POV content, where we place a camera in the net, has performed particularly well because it gives viewers a unique perspective of the game that they wouldn't normally see.

"Putting faces to the brand is important too. It helps supporters and customers connect with what we're doing and understand the people behind it."

Working alongside family can often test even the strongest relationships, but Theo and Heath have found a formula that works. By playing to each other's strengths, the brothers have struck an effective balance in the day-to-day running of HT Goalkeeping.

"It works because we have different strengths," Heath explains.

"I handle most of the operational side, including finance and logistics, while Theo focuses more on marketing, partnerships, product development and social media.

"Because we have distinct roles, we complement each other rather than clash."

Discussing the challenge of balancing life as a semi-professional footballer with running his own company, Theo is quick to highlight the crossover between the two. The skills he developed throughout his career in the game, he says, have proved invaluable in the world of business.

"Discipline, patience and consistency. They're the most valuable transferable skills I've learned.

"Football teaches you that nothing happens overnight. You have to go out and earn opportunities and build credibility. Business is exactly the same.

"Just like breaking into a first team, you have to work your way up in business, earn people's trust and keep improving every day." ■





The Joe Thompson Spirit Award is inspired by the life and legacy of Joe Thompson (1989–2025), whose remarkable journey embodied resilience, courage, and hope.

A former Manchester United and Rochdale academy player, Joe made over 200 appearances for Rochdale. He twice returned to professional football after battling Hodgkin lymphoma, later becoming an LFE Life Skills Programme deliverer, mentor, and motivational speaker whose message resonated across academies and wider communities.

Joe was recognised as EFL Apprentice of the Year in 2007 and received the EFL's prestigious Sir Tom Finney Award in 2019 for his exemplary contribution on and off the pitch. He was dedicated to creating a legacy through the countless young people he inspired to persevere in the face of adversity.

Within LFE's programme, Joe's voice and values have long been integral to how apprentices are supported.

He delivered his workshop, Darkness and Light, sharing practical lessons on resilience and self-development with apprentices, staff, and parents/carers. His story has also featured in the media as a powerful example of overcoming setbacks.

The Joe Thompson Spirit Award recognises apprentices who have demonstrated resilience, strength in adversity, and the indomitable spirit associated with Joe Thompson. It celebrates individuals who have overcome barriers to learning and development – whether in football performance, education, or their personal lives – and who have positively influenced their club or community through the way they respond to challenges.

Three inspiring apprentices have been selected as the inaugural recipients of the award.



MACKENZIE INMAN

Bristol City

The inaugural recipient of the award is Bristol City defender Mackenzie Inman, whose apprenticeship journey has been marked by resilience, perseverance and personal growth.

Having joined Bristol City's Academy at Under-12 level, Mackenzie progressed through the age groups to earn a scholarship with the club. Alongside the demands of his apprenticeship, he completed his English Functional Skills qualification and developed into what Bristol City Head of Education Jodie Baker describes as a "polite, respectful and personable young man".

His apprenticeship years were significantly disrupted by injury. During the Professional Development Phase, Mackenzie suffered seven serious injuries, including knee dislocations and multiple ligament tears, resulting in lengthy spells away from both training and education. Rather than allowing these setbacks to define him, he focused on his studies and personal development.

"The injuries were difficult because football has always been such a huge part of my life," said Mackenzie. "But instead of letting those setbacks define me, I used them as motivation to come back stronger."

His dedication was reflected academically, where he exceeded expectations by achieving a Merit-Pass in his BTEC Diploma, surpassing his original target. Away from education and football, he volunteered with the Robins Foundation, supporting disadvantaged children through the Premier League Reading Stars programme and later assisting with coaching Bristol City's Under-12s team during his rehabilitation.

Mackenzie also faced significant personal challenges. During his first year as an apprentice, his grandmother, who had Parkinson's disease and dementia, sadly passed away following a prolonged hospital stay. He learned she had only days to live on the same day he suffered a second knee dislocation. Despite dealing with his own grief, he supported his family and delivered a heartfelt eulogy at her funeral.

Now in the final year of an extended apprenticeship, Mackenzie is exploring opportunities within the US college system. His journey is a powerful example of determination, character and resilience, making him a deserving recipient of this award.



JOE REES

Wrexham

Wrexham AFC midfielder Joe Rees is the second recipient of the award, recognised for the resilience and determination he showed in overcoming significant health challenges during his apprenticeship journey.

Joe's first year as an apprentice was disrupted by a serious heart condition. In January 2025, he experienced rapid heart palpitations and chest discomfort during training and was admitted to hospital, where he spent a week undergoing tests and monitoring. Initially diagnosed with myocarditis, he was advised to spend an extended period recovering at home.

After returning to training, Joe suffered a second episode. This time, academy staff were able to capture the irregular heartbeat on an ECG, leading to a diagnosis of supraventricular tachycardia (SVT). He underwent successful cardiac ablation surgery in May 2025, with doctors later confirming he was fit to return to football.

"It was a challenging time for Joe while he was experiencing symptoms and undergoing testing for his heart, but he remained calm, mature, patient and positive throughout," said U18s Physiotherapist Dan Jones.

Despite concerns that the timing of his surgery would prevent him from joining Wrexham's Under-18s pre-season tour of Canada, Joe recovered quickly enough to take part. Since returning, he has experienced no further cardiac issues and enjoyed a successful second year free from injury setbacks.

Alongside his recovery, Joe continued to excel away from the pitch. Despite missing significant time due to medical appointments, he achieved a Distinction in his Extended BTEC Diploma, demonstrating the same dedication to his education as he did to his rehabilitation.

Wrexham Head of Education Kierenne Baldwin praised Joe's "exceptional resilience, courage and determination", highlighting his consistent commitment to training, matches, gym work and education. Having now signed his first professional contract with the club, Joe's journey is a powerful example of perseverance, professionalism and a determination to thrive in the face of adversity.



KARL AGNERO

Port Vale

Port Vale's Karl Agnero is the third and final recipient of the award, recognised for the extraordinary resilience and determination he has shown in overcoming a life-threatening health challenge.

Over the past year, Karl's apprenticeship journey has been defined by his battle with aplastic anaemia, a rare and serious bone marrow failure disorder that prevents the body from producing sufficient blood cells. The condition can cause severe fatigue, increased susceptibility to infections, and uncontrolled bleeding, creating significant uncertainty for any young person, let alone an aspiring professional footballer.

Despite the difficulties of his diagnosis and recovery, Karl refused to let adversity define him. Academy and Foundation Tutor Robert Hare praised the third-year apprentice for demonstrating "extraordinary strength, determination and an unbreakable spirit" throughout his illness.

Known for his positive and upbeat personality, Karl maintained an optimistic outlook at every stage of his recovery, providing inspiration not only to staff but also to his fellow players.

His commitment to regaining full fitness was clear as he worked tirelessly to rebuild his strength and rejoin group training.

Lead Phase Coach Leo Donnellan described Karl's return as "remarkable", highlighting the professionalism and character he displayed while managing both the physical and mental demands of his recovery. Head of Education Matthew Meredith echoed those sentiments, praising Karl's determination to improve and his willingness to embrace feedback as he worked towards full fitness.

Away from the pitch, Karl remained equally committed to his studies, consistently maintaining high standards and staying fully engaged with his academic responsibilities despite the challenges he faced.

Staff at the club have highlighted the positive influence Karl has had on those around him, with his perseverance serving as a powerful example that setbacks can be overcome with the right mindset. His courage, positivity and relentless work ethic make him a worthy recipient of the award and a true embodiment of the values and legacy it represents.



ELAINE BRAND

What is your role within LFE?

EB: As Assistant Projects Manager, I'm responsible for the day-to-day management of LFE's communications, overseeing digital media and our printed publications. I work closely with Henry, our Media Officer, as well as the wider Projects and Player Care team.



How long have you been with LFE?

EB: I joined LFE in February 2006, which makes me one of the longest-serving members of staff! I originally joined the Management Information Systems (MIS) team before moving across to Projects and Communications in 2007. One of my first big projects was building and maintaining LFE's first company website, as well as working on the very first editions of Touchline magazine. It's been great to see how much LFE and communications have evolved since then.

Could you describe your daily responsibilities?

EB: A big part of my role is overseeing the production of all LFE's printed and digital resources, working with designers and suppliers to make sure everything we produce is engaging, professional and, importantly, something our audiences actually want to read and use. We have a small communications team, so there's always plenty going on from managing our social media channels and creating content to keeping an eye on the finer details that make our communications work well.







What do you enjoy most about your role?

EB: I get to work with almost everyone at LFE in some way, as well as the EFL communications team, so there's always someone new to speak to, something different to work on or a new idea to bring to life. I also really enjoy seeing how things have developed over the years. Watching the resources and communications we've created evolve and ultimately improve the experience for apprentices is really rewarding.

What did you do prior to working at LFE?

EB: Before joining LFE, I worked in the call centre at Lancashire Ambulance Service while completing my degree at the University of Central Lancashire. Prior to that, I worked in the In-Patients department at Royal Preston Hospital.

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

EB: I like to keep busy and active. During the summer, I play cricket for Vernon Carus Women's team, and I try to fit in weekly circuit classes and plenty of walks with our cockapoo, Rex. I also have two teenage boys, so I've become a part-time boxing referee at home!

What football team do you support?

EB: Preston North End... I'm not sure whether that says more about my loyalty or my poor decision-making.!

Favourite holiday destination?

EB: Probably the Maldives. I've been to the South of France more than anywhere else and love it, but the Maldives was amazing.



DEBUTANTS

A selection of apprentices who have made their league debuts since the start of the 2026/27 season.



George Gryba

PRESTON NORTH END (SECOND YEAR)

George Gryba made his Championship debut for the Lilywhites during Preston's home defeat to Wolves in August, with the forward being introduced in the 76th minute.

Harvey Higgins

BLACKBURN ROVERS (SECOND YEAR)

Harvey Higgins made his first league appearance for Tony Mowbray's side in a fierce Lancashire derby against Preston in September, playing the final 15 minutes plus stoppage time at Deepdale.



Noah Town

BARNSLEY (SECOND YEAR)

Midfielder Noah Town was handed his first League One minutes in the Tykes' opening-day defeat to Bromley at Oakwell, coming on in the 85th minute.







Lucas Griffiths-Brown & Louis Millard

SWINDON TOWN (SECOND YEARS)

Two second-year apprentices made their senior debuts for the Robins on the opening day of the season at Northampton. Winger Louis Millard started the 0-0 draw and played 51 minutes, while full-back Lucas Griffiths-Brown came on in the 90th minute to help Ian Holloway's side secure a point.

** Correct as of 23rd October 2026*

ON THE MOVE

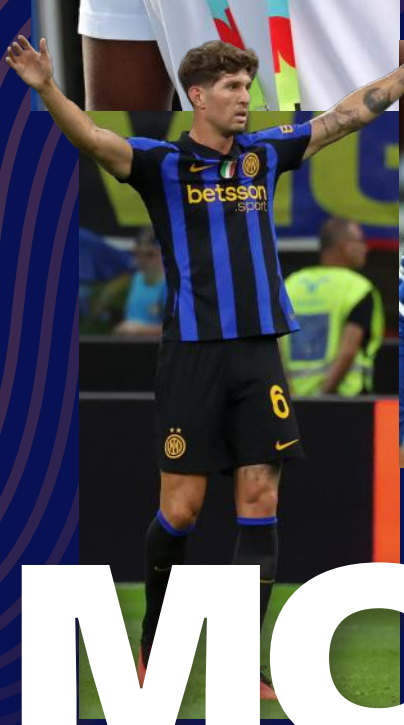

FIFA WORLD CUP 2026




CMC
MARKETS


Indeed


MANGATA
10


betsson
sport
6


CMC
MARKETS




33











The summer transfer window saw a number of academy graduates secure moves.

Here are some of the most notable deals.

OLLIE WATKINS
Exeter City academy graduate

£64M

CALLUM WILSON
Coventry City academy graduate

FREE

DJED SPENCE
Fulham academy graduate

£25.6M

KARL DARLOW
Nottingham Forest academy graduate

FREE

JOHN STONES
Barnsley academy graduate

FREE

ABDUL ABDULMALIK
Millwall academy graduate

£1.5M

BRENNAN JOHNSON
Nottingham Forest academy graduate

UNDISCLOSED

BEN CHILWELL
Leicester City academy graduate

UNDISCLOSED

HAYDEN HACKNEY
Middlesbrough academy graduate

£16.5M

JORDAN JAMES
Birmingham City academy graduate

LOAN

JORDAN HENDERSON
Sunderland academy graduate

FREE

ASHLEY PHILLIPS
Blackburn Rovers academy graduate

£7M

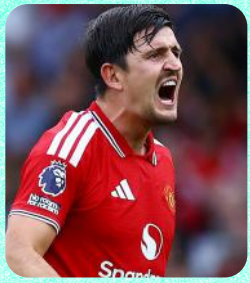
ACROSS THE

When Fenerbahçe faced Aston Villa in the Champions League recently, the only former LFE apprentice on the pitch was representing the Turkish champions, not the side in claret and blue.















LFE academy graduates featuring in some of the biggest games in world football has become commonplace in recent years, with nine representing England at the last World Cup and many of those stars playing key roles in recent Nations League successes. As this season's European competitions gather pace, it's not just the superstars who came through our pathway getting their moment on the biggest stage.

While Birmingham City academy graduate Jude Bellingham continues to shine at Real Madrid, alongside his brother Jobe at Borussia Dortmund, John Stones at Inter Milan and Harry Maguire at Manchester United, LFE alumni are also starring for Aston Villa and Arsenal. Charlton Athletic product Ezri Konsa, former Brighton scholar Ben White and ex-Millwall apprentice Eberechi Eze are all regulars at the highest level. Yet there is also a lesser-known alumnus making a major impact in the Champions League.

CONTINENT

Brummie Archie Brown outjumped England international Ainsley Maitland-Niles to head home Fenerbahçe's winner in their play-off tie against Lyon, securing the Istanbul-based giants a place in the group stage back in August.

The former Derby County youngster was at it again on Matchday 1, scoring Fenerbahçe's goal in a 1-1 draw with Roma and winning the Player of the Match award.

Standing at 6ft 3in, with long braids and a bandana around his head, Brown is a distinctive figure, marauding forward from left-back and posing a major threat from set pieces. But it has taken time for him to find his place.

A prolific goalscorer at youth level for Derby, he helped the club win the 2018-19 Premier League U18 title with victory over Arsenal. Two years later, however, he was allowed to join Lausanne in Switzerland without making a first-team appearance for the Rams.

Brown became a regular for Lausanne and subsequently earned a move to Gent in Belgium, where he gained his first taste of European football in the UEFA Europa Conference League.

His performances for Gent were so impressive that he earned a call-up to the England Under-20 squad before Fenerbahçe paid £7 million to sign him last year. He made his Champions League debut just a month after moving to Turkey, and Nottingham Forest are now reportedly lining up a move for him in January.

He is currently a regular starter in a side packed with household names. Brown plays in defence alongside Nathan Aké and Nelson Semedo, in front of Ederson in goal, with N'Golo Kanté shielding the back line and Romelu Lukaku leading the attack. It is a long way from Derby's youth team. ▶



Like so many high-profile English players abroad, Brown took the plunge early and has never looked back.

Alongside Ezri Konsa in Charlton's youth team were Atlético Madrid star Ademola Lookman and the lesser-known Sam Bone.

Having spent his early years in Singapore, where his father, former Sunderland player Billy Bone, was a professional footballer, it was perhaps less surprising that Bone headed overseas after being released by the Addicks. In his case, that meant Ireland.

The move has brought a wealth of European experience. This summer alone, Bone faced Ajax both in Dublin and Amsterdam, with television audiences around the world seeing him make last-ditch tackles in front of 52,000 spectators at the Johan Cruyff Arena.



“ WHEN THE DRAW CAME OUT, WE WERE ECSTATIC. YOU WANT TO PLAY THOSE GAMES IN THOSE STADIUMS.





Fellow Kent native Dan Bent has also enjoyed a European adventure. The former Gillingham apprentice featured for Northern Irish champions Larne against former European Cup winners Red Star Belgrade, who hammered them 10-0 on aggregate, before later travelling to Georgia to face Dinamo Tbilisi.

"Red Star was probably the biggest game in the club's history," said centre-back Bent, who headed to the United States on a scholarship after being released by Gillingham.

"When the draw came out, we were ecstatic. You want to play those games in those stadiums. Everyone tells you about how long the tunnel is there and how intimidating it is, and then suddenly you're there, part of it, able to tell that story yourself.

"There were 27,000 there and the funny thing is that, for them, that's a medium-sized crowd and the stadium was only half full. The population of Larne could have filled the rest of it.

"Red Star were just on another level. You don't realise it until you're in amongst it. You do your best, but sometimes there are gaps that are hard to bridge.

"But to play in that competition, at that ground, against a team of that stature, was amazing. I'll remember it for the rest of my life."

After spells in Georgia, Ohio and South Carolina, Bent was back on the move when an MLS opportunity failed to materialise, using his footballing ability to forge a career far from home. In 2019, he joined Bruno's Magpies in Gibraltar. They may sound like a pub team, but three years later he was making his European debut.

Subsequent moves to Lincoln Red Imps and, since last summer, Larne have brought silverware and more than 20 appearances in European competition.

A similar story can be found in former Ipswich Town apprentice Matt Healy, who returned to Ireland after a spell in Belgium. The midfielder has now accumulated 10 Conference League appearances for Shamrock Rovers, facing the likes of Sparta Prague and Ukrainian giants Shakhtar Donetsk.

Meanwhile, former Colchester United left-back Al-Amin Kazeem has made six Europa Conference League qualifying appearances for Ireland's St Patrick's Athletic. ■

BE SAFE BE GUARDED

Safeguarding is the action taken to protect people's health, wellbeing, and human rights, enabling them to live free from harm, abuse and neglect

Safeguarding refers to people of all ages, sexes and backgrounds, never feel like you aren't important!

Common examples of harm, abuse and neglect



SEXUAL, PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL ABUSE



TRAFFICKING



IDENTITY ISSUE



POVERTY



NEGLECT



BULLYING



MENTAL HEALTH



FORCED MARRIAGE



GROOMING

If you or anyone you know is a victim of physical, mental or emotional harm it is important to seek immediate help. If you need guidance or advice, your club's DSO (Designated Safeguarding Officer) is always on hand to help. In situations requiring urgent assistance, always call the emergency services (999).

TRANSITION

Careers

LFE apprentices 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 Manager

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

FAMILIAR SURROUNDINGS

Ethan O'Toole spent over a decade in Shrewsbury Town's academy before departing the club at the conclusion of his apprenticeship.

Now, after three years of studying at Loughborough University, the former Shrews scholar is back at the Shropshire club in a new capacity. He recently sat down with LFE to discuss his journey.

"I went through the younger age groups at the club and then went on to sign my scholarship, which was a great feeling," Ethan told LFE. "That period as an apprentice was such a valuable experience and helped me grow significantly in terms of character. You learn so much about yourself, and you're constantly developing every day because of the values you're expected to uphold while representing the club.

"Obviously, you grow a lot as a footballer too, but you also notice the biggest differences off the pitch. The things you are exposed to, from life-skills workshops and guest speakers to educational sessions, are so important. They're experiences you wouldn't typically encounter through a more traditional education route, such as sixth form."

As Ethan approached the end of his time as an apprentice, he began to shift his focus to the prospect of attending university.

"I think having Charlie (Musselwhite) here as Academy Manager really benefited me.

"He's had a similar journey to me in terms of going from playing and then eventually going to university at Loughborough too, so when it came to deciding my next steps, he was really helpful in giving me advice on the higher education side.

"I'd always enjoyed academic work and was keen to continue in education whether I got a professional contract or not. Football was important, but it certainly wasn't going to define my identity."

"When I knew I wasn't getting a new deal and had decided that university was definitely what I wanted to do, the support I received was great from the likes of LFE, the PFA, and of course the club and its staff. I was really well briefed on everything, which made my decision so much easier."

Ethan went on to study Sports Management at Loughborough and play for the university's first-team football side for three years, a period he now reflects on with great fondness. ►


OXEN
SHREWSBURY TOWN FOOTBALL CLUB
1886
FLOREAT SALOPIA

I WAS REALLY KEEN TO LEARN ABOUT ALL ASPECTS OF AN ORGANISATION, AND THAT'S WHAT THIS ROLE IS EFFECTIVELY ALLOWING ME TO DO.



"I couldn't recommend it more highly to anyone. It was just brilliant.

"It's perfect if you want to continue your education but at the same time still play football at a good level and continue to develop. I played five times a week, including training and matches, with the first team, who compete at Step 4 of the football pyramid, so the standard was really high. The facilities I got to use were exceptional too. It was just like being in a professional environment again, if not better. To experience all of that and then come out of it with a degree is ideal."

In the months following his graduation, Ethan was keen to return to the sports industry and put his degree to use.

"I always wanted to get back into the industry. That's why I specifically chose to study Sports Management at university. I wasn't particularly set on any one role; I just wanted to get behind the scenes and learn how a club operates."

Luckily for Ethan, a role at his former club, Shrewsbury Town, became available through the new Off Pitch Pathway Scheme (OPPS), a joint initiative from the PFA and the EFL administered by LFE. The scheme creates funded, long-term placements for former players and scholars in non-coaching roles at EFL clubs.

"It just sounded tailor-made for what I wanted to do," Ethan admitted. "As I mentioned, I was really keen to learn about all aspects of an organisation, and that's what this role is effectively allowing me to do.

"I work predominantly across the football and commercial departments, but Charlie (Academy Manager) told me from the get-go that it was a very open-ended opportunity to learn about everything that goes on at a club on a day-to-day basis, which is great.

"I'm fairly new to it all, as I haven't been back here long, but it's been really eye-opening. When you're a player, you're not exposed to much of what goes on in the background, and you rarely see all the hard work that is done to put you in the best possible position to go out on the pitch and perform.

"I'm just really grateful to everyone involved for the opportunity, Liam the CEO, Charlie, and of course LFE, the PFA and the EFL. The support has been amazing."



Having been associated with the League Two outfit for more than a decade before returning to the club in July, Ethan believes his past experiences in the academy and knowledge of the club stand him in good stead as he embraces this opportunity.

"Having been at the club for such a long time previously has definitely helped me settle into the role and feel more confident in getting going straight away. I feel like I can make a real difference, particularly within the academy, thanks to my own experiences."

Looking ahead, Ethan is confident that the experience he gains over the coming season will be hugely beneficial to his future career.

"It's going to be so beneficial, whatever I choose to do next. There is so much that I've learned already, and I'm really looking forward to learning even more as the year progresses. The sports industry is notoriously difficult to get your foot in the door in, which is why I'm so thankful that this OPPS opportunity came around." ■









PLAN A

Our mission is to Engage, Enrich and Empower young people to reach their full potential in football and in life.

















What is Plan A?

First launched in the 2025/26 season, 'Plan A' represents an alternative in how personal development, life skills, and transition readiness are delivered within academy football. Rather than relying solely on one-off workshops, Plan A assists clubs in building a sequenced, long-term approach that keeps personal growth at the very forefront of operations.

The core philosophy is simple: encourage players to put themselves first and actively design their own health, well-being, and future career pathway as their 'Plan A'. By leveraging the incredible platform of football, the campaign empowers young apprentices to acquire practical experience, build deep emotional resilience, and make a positive social impact in their communities.

How It Works and Funding Support

Clubs design a customised plan targeting awareness, community engagement, and developmental growth. Approved campaigns are reimbursed upon submitting a creative showcase (such as videos, presentations, or photo galleries) that documents their delivery and outcomes.

Delivering Success: The 2025/26 Cohort

In its debut year, the Plan A campaigns generated incredible engagement across the academy network.

These 12 clubs successfully delivered campaigns covering community engagement, mental health, transition support, teamwork, and career development. Their achievements are summarised on the following pages.

BLACKPOOL	Culture & Equality: 'Culture World Cup Campaign'
CARLISLE UNITED	Performance Psychology: 'Building the Mindset Behind Performance'
COLCHESTER UNITED	Community Engagement: Supermarket Foodbank & Care Home Connections
FOREST GREEN ROVERS	Structured Personal Development: Academy Workbook Programme
LINCOLN CITY	The Communication, Resilience and Perseverance Campaign
MIDDLESBROUGH	Inclusion & Diversity: 'The Taste of Africa' Campaign

PLYMOUTH ARGYLE	Local Advocacy: Community Champions & Plymouth Soup Run
PORTSMOUTH	Charitable Outreach: Supporting 'Sophie's Legacy'
SHREWSBURY TOWN	Eudaimonic Well-being: 'De-Stress My Life' & Identity Exploration Campaign
STEVENAGE	Social Action: Monday Food Bank Operations with 'Feed Up Warm Up'
STOKE CITY	'Potters Pathways': On and Off the Pitch Careers Event
SUNDERLAND	'Beyond the Game' Transition Support Event

BEYOND THE TOUCHLINE



Every parent wants the best for their child. Yet academy football can bring challenges that few families are prepared for.

Pressure. Expectations. Confidence. Setbacks. Success. Identity.

Beyond the Touchline is an engaging parent event designed to help parents better understand the emotional journey of academy football and the important role they play in supporting their child.

The sessions are hosted and delivered by Dr Chris McCready, a former professional footballer with more than 300 senior appearances to his name. Since hanging up his boots in 2014, the Crewe Alexandra academy graduate has built a wealth of experience within the player care sector.

A PhD researcher specialising in identity and personal development, Chris has worked in athlete support roles at Manchester United and UK Sport. He is also a former member of the PFA Players' Board.

LFE recently attended a session at QPR's training ground.

Through the use of two professional actors, James Padmore, who is also Chris' business partner, and Ned Linforth, the thought-provoking session explored:

- The emotional journey of academy football
- Identity, wellbeing and personal development
- Expectations, pressure and support
- Effective sporting parenting





Speaking to LFE after the session, Dr Chris McCready said:

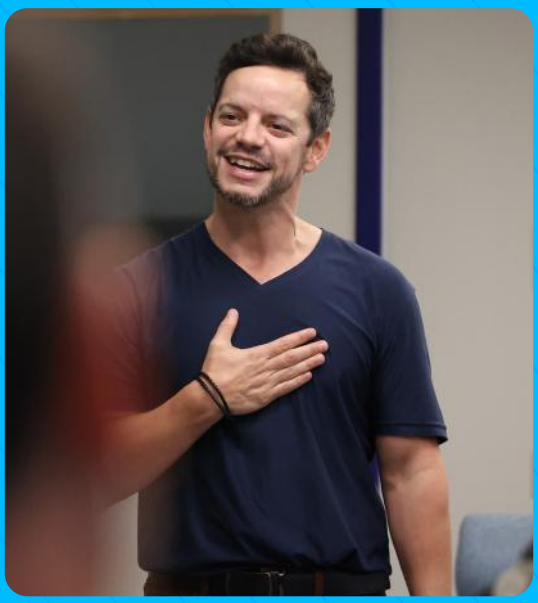
"It was amazing. We're really proud of what we've created. It's great to be out on the road and delivering these sessions to parents at different clubs.

"I think we're helping parents and resonating with them in a unique way. I made the point at the start of the session that I could simply stand in front of a PowerPoint presentation, but I don't think that would stick, if we're honest.

"This is a great way of delivering our message without lecturing people. We're offering a cautionary tale, and it seems to be hitting home."







Actor James Padmore told LFE:

"It went really well. It was nice tonight because the audience were incredibly interactive and engaged. They were actually responding to the characters, which was a new experience for us, but a refreshing one.

"I think that showed they were fully invested in the session, which is a great sign for us. We had a few parents here tonight who had attended before, and they told us afterwards that they picked up new things from the session the second time around, which is both interesting and encouraging."

QPR Academy Player Care Lead Luciano Venturini added:

"It was a really powerful evening. To have Chris and his team come in and provide a live performance like that was incredibly impactful.

"At QPR, we're very transparent with parents about retain and release decisions, as well as the overall academy journey and the emotional rollercoaster that comes with it.

"Tonight's session supported that message brilliantly. Listening to some of the conversations parents were having between scenes, it was clear there was a genuine understanding of the impact of the session and just how true to life it was."

FOLLOW LFE









League Football Education
@LFEonline

🗣️ *"The programme gives you enough time to get to know your learners."*

After his Level 2 group all achieved top marks of Double Distinction in the 2025/26 academic year, @BristolRoversCT BTEC Tutor Jack Munday reflected on the progress his learners made and detailed the environment created when speaking to LFE at yesterday's FCC Study Programme Summer Conference.

#FCCStudyProgramme



League Football Education
@LFEonline

📍We're at Loughborough University for our FCC Study Programme Summer Conference.

#FCCStudyProgramme











@LFEONLINE

@LFEONLINE

@LFEONLINE

@LFEONLINETV

@LEAGUEFOOTBALLEDUCATION