



# Touchline



# NATHAN LOWE

## COVERING ALL BASES

The EFL League Two Young Player of the Year discusses his career to date, university, community work, and identity

**THEO KNIGHT + UNIVERSITY OF STIRLING + EFL AWARDS + MUCH MORE!**



After 21 years with LFE, Keith Leighton, Regional Officer and previous Chief Education Officer, has officially retired.

Since joining LFE, Keith has been present to face the challenges and celebrate the successes. Guiding LFE through three Ofsted inspections resulting in 'Outstanding' achievements, his dedication has been unwavering and his expertise invaluable.

Keith stated: "I would like to express my sincere appreciation to my colleagues. It has been a pleasure to work alongside such a talented group of staff. Additionally, I want to acknowledge the incredible young people I have had the pleasure to mentor and work with. Their curiosity, resilience, and drive to achieve their goals and watching them develop as people has continually reminded me of why I entered this profession."

Thank you for all you have done for LFE Keith and all at LFE wish you a healthy and happy retirement. Keep smiling!

## LFE's Regional Officers



**Paul Bartlett**  
North & North East



**Carl Craner**  
West Midlands



**Simon Dwight**  
South & London



**Peter Hood**  
North East



**Ben Lavelle**  
North West



**Gabriel Mellor**  
North East



**Will Morford**  
South West



**Tom Palmer**  
South



**Craig Skinner**  
North West



**Ian Tombs**  
East Midlands



**Claire Wilberforce-Marsh**  
North West & Midlands



**Gavin Willacy**  
South & London

### 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 ex-apprentice 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).

## Joe Thompson 1989 – 2025

LFE were deeply saddened to learn of the passing of former apprentice, Joe Thompson, aged 36.

Thompson's early years were spent at Manchester United before joining Rochdale in 2005. He made his first team debut for the Dale in May 2006 aged just 17, and the following year went onto pick up the LFE League Two Apprentice of the Year Award.

The midfielder spent six years at Rochdale before signing for Tranmere Rovers in the summer of 2012. It was during his time at Prenton Park that Thompson was diagnosed with cancer for the first time. He completed remission in June 2014 and set his sights on a return to professional football as soon as possible.

Joe successfully returned to the pitch with a short stint at Bury, before moving to Carlisle United for the 2015/16 campaign. After a season of rebuilding himself in Cumbria,

Thompson made a return to Rochdale, the place he called "home." However, three years after his first diagnosis, Joe was diagnosed with cancer once again, requiring life-threatening stem cell treatment. True to his strength and character, Joe defied the odds by beating cancer for a second time and returning to professional football again.

He played a starring role in Rochdale's fight to avoid relegation in the 2017/18 season and on the final day of the campaign scored the winning goal against Charlton Athletic to keep the Club in League One.

Thompson retired in 2019 and received the prestigious Sir Tom Finney Award for his contribution to the EFL. After collecting the award, Joe told LFE: "For me to receive the recognition for the Sir Tom Finney Award is amazing. I'm truly blessed and to win it in front of so many of my peers and so many of the guys from Rochdale, as well as my wife, it's a moment I will always savour."

Thompson would go onto pursue a career in motivational speaking and delivered on the LFE Life Skills programme for four years, turning his book 'Darkness and Light' into a workshop, teaching young apprentices about resilience and the importance of being authentic.

In April of last year, Thompson was diagnosed with cancer for a third time and despite battling courageously for 12 months, passed away in April.

Joe impacted so many people's lives and will always be remembered as an incredible person, someone who radiated positivity and strength in abundance.

Rest in peace, Joe.

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# ACADEMY LEAGUES ROUND-UP



## EFL YOUTH ALLIANCE NORTH

Following an extremely tense title race between **Bolton Wanderers** and **Wrexham** all season long, it was Dave Gardiner's Bolton side who were crowned eventual champions in the Youth Alliance North division, finishing two points clear of the Welsh outfit.

All in all, it was a superb season for **Bolton** with the Whites boasting the best records across the board. The Greater Manchester side won 19 out of their 24 matches, scoring a tremendous 83 goals and conceding only 25 – the leading offensive and defensive records in the division.

**Bolton's** achievements didn't stop there. Due to the system of the competition, the winners of both the Youth Alliance North and South divisions meet in the Youth Alliance National Final. **Bolton** took on the southern champions **Luton Town** and were victorious at the Toughsheet Community Stadium, beating the Hatters 7-2.

## EFL YOUTH ALLIANCE SOUTH

After finding themselves four points off the pace but with three games in hand at the turn of the year, **Luton Town** came strong in the back end of the season to see themselves crowned Youth Alliance South champions. The young Hatters were prolific in front of goal throughout the whole campaign, with their attacking prowess encapsulated in their final league fixture of the season, beating **Newport County** 8-1. Joe Deeney's side then travelled north to meet **Bolton** in the Youth Alliance National Final, yet came up short to a very strong Wanderers outfit.

The closest challengers to **Luton** were **Oxford United** who finished three points adrift. The young Us enjoyed a magnificent second half of the campaign after a shaky start, winning an impressive 15 league games in a row between November and April. However, a 2-0 defeat at **Portsmouth** in their third from final game condemned Stevie Kinniburgh's side to second place.



## U18 PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT LEAGUE NORTH (PDL NORTH)

Just like the club's first team, **Burnley's** U18s tasted success this season, winning the U18 PDL North division, and they did it with a big fight back. At the turn of the year the young Clarets were sat six points behind **Sheffield United** at the summit, with the South Yorkshire side possessing a game in hand at the time too. However, Tony Philliskirk's **Burnley** side went from strength to strength after Christmas, scoring more and conceding less than the rest of the pack. They ended the season with an impressive 88 goals scored and a mere 26 goals conceded in their 31 league matches.

Given their PDL North success, **Burnley** faced PDL South runners-up **Watford** in the PDL play-off semi-final for a chance to make it to the final and be in with a shot of being crowned the overall PDL National champions. Unfortunately for the Clarets, a 2-1 defeat against the young Hornets meant they would have to settle for just the northern bragging rights.

## U18 PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT LEAGUE SOUTH (PDL SOUTH)

In the U18 PDL South division it was **Bristol City** who finished the season at the summit, winning the league with a fairly comfortable six-point gap between themselves and second placed **Watford** in the end. Trevor Challis' side sat at the top of the table for much of the campaign and never really looked like surrendering their position. A 2-0 win for **Watford** over eventual champions **Bristol City** in April gave Matt Bevan's side a glimmer of hope going into the final weeks; however, the Robins had the title pretty much sealed by then.

Following their PDL South success, **Bristol City** took on PDL North runners-up **Sheffield Wednesday** in the PDL play-off semi-final. A 2-0 win over the Owls booked them a place in the U18 PDL National Final in which they went onto beat **Watford** 2-1 at Ashton Gate to be crowned PDL National champions.

## U18 PREMIER LEAGUE

**Manchester City** made it to the U18 Premier League National Final after narrowly beating **Manchester United** to the U18 Premier League North title. The two city rivals enjoyed exceptional seasons respectively, with both teams finding the back of the net on 90 occasions in just 24 games. **City** and **United's** records finished almost identical, both losing just one game all season, however, a dramatic 4-4 draw at **Everton** for **United** in late April proved costly as the Red Devils fell short by two points.

In the U18 Premier League South division, **Aston Villa** were crowned champions, pipping **Southampton** to the league title by just two points.

As a result of the final standings in the two divisions, **Manchester City** and **Aston Villa** faced off in the U18 Premier League National Final at Villa Park. After beating **City** in the FA Youth Cup final just two weeks prior to the encounter, **Villa** went into the crunch clash full of confidence.

The young Villains survived a first half onslaught from **City** and found their groove in the second half which resulted in them scoring the only goal of the game in the 72nd minute through defender Leon Routh, crowning **Villa** U18 Premier League National champions.





# DEBUTANTS

A selection of talented young apprentices who made their EFL debuts during the second half of the season.

## Theo Carroll

Preston North End

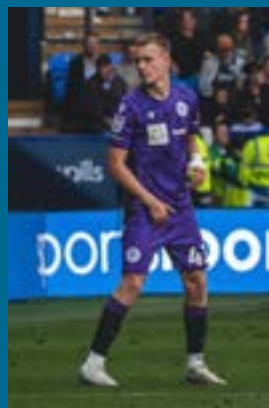
At 17 years of age, attacking midfielder Theo Carroll made his league bow for Paul Heckingbottom's Lilywhites in a Championship clash at Norwich City in April, playing out the final three minutes plus stoppage time.



## Emmerson Sutton

QPR

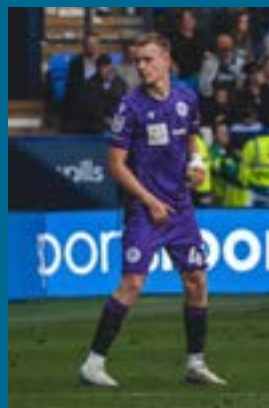
Young forward Emerson Sutton was handed his first minutes for the Hoops by manager Marti Cifuentes against Swansea City at Loftus Road in April, with the second-year apprentice given half an hour to make an impression.



## Ellis Bates

Stevenage

Central defender Ellis Bates made his league debut for Stevenage on the final day of the 2024/25 campaign, seeing out the final minutes of a 1-1 draw away at Bolton Wanderers.



## Harrison Rice, David Abimbola & Daeshon Lawrence

Bolton Wanderers

Three second-year apprentices were handed league debuts by Wanderers boss Michael Schumacher during the second half of the season. Harrison Rice and Daeshon Lawrence's first minutes came in a League One trip to Peterborough on April 26th, whilst David Abimbola milestone moment came a week prior in a home fixture versus Wycombe Wanderers.



## Zane Okoro

Lincoln City

Second-year apprentice Zane Okoro made his Imps league bow during a 1-1 draw at home to Shrewsbury Town in April. The Connecticut born attacker saw out the final 20 minutes as Michael Skubala's side pushed for a winner.



## Andre Changunda

Peterborough United

Young striker Andre Changunda was handed his first opportunity by Posh boss Darren Ferguson at Rotherham United on the final day of the season, playing out the final 25 minutes as Ferguson's side searched for an equaliser.



## Josh Taroni & Jack Newall

Burton Albion

Brewers' boss Gary Bowyer handed out league debuts to both Josh Taroni and Jack Newall in the closing stages of the season. Full-back Taroni was given his maiden run out in a 3-0 win over Huddersfield Town in April, whilst Newall's first opportunity came on the final day of the season at Charlton Athletic.



## Henry Brown

Grimsby Town

Henry Brown made his first league appearance in Grimsby Town colours during the Mariners' March clash with Salford City. The central midfielder came on in stoppage time as his side hunted for a leveller.



## Harry Tustin

Cheltenham Town

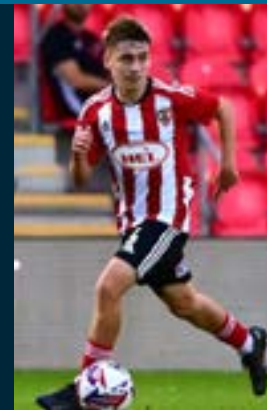
Second-year apprentice Harry Tustin was thrust into League Two action for the first time in Cheltenham's away trip to Bromley, playing out the final half an hour at Hayes Lane Stadium.



## Liam Oakes

Exeter City

Second-year apprentice Liam Oakes came on for the Grecians in the closing stages of their loss at Mansfield Town on the final day, replacing Joel Colwill in the 87th minute.



## Will Wright

Salford City

Young striker Will Wright earned his first run out for the Ammies during their trip to Port Vale in February, playing the best part of an hour following an injury to Cole Stockton.



## George Alston & Owen Foye

Swindon Town

Swindon Town duo George Alston and Owen Foye both made their League Two Robins debuts in the back end of the season. Alston came off the bench on the final day versus MK Dons, whilst Foye was introduced in stoppage time away at Fleetwood Town a month earlier.



## Ollie Dewsbury

Bristol Rovers

First-year apprentice Ollie Dewsbury was introduced in the final minutes of the Pirates' 1-0 home win over Huddersfield Town in March. The 17-year-old went onto play another five times in League One before the end of the season.



## Luca Moore

Crewe Alexandra

Midfielder Luca Moore was handed his League Two debut in stoppage time of the Railwaymen's 3-0 home win over Barrow in February, replacing former apprentice Matus Holicek.



## Ibrahim Fullah

Charlton Athletic

Ibrahim Fullah has been scoring plenty of goals for Charlton Athletic's under 18s and was rewarded with his senior debut in a clash with Burton Albion at the Valley in May.



## Billy Whaite

Morecambe

First-year apprentice Billy Whaite was given his first opportunity by Derek Adams in a clash versus Salford City in April, coming on with seven minutes remaining as the Shrimps chased an equaliser.





Since a young age, Stoke City's Nathan Lowe has placed a huge emphasis on education and personal development.

"I've always been very academic, and my parents have always wanted me to prioritise my education," Lowe told LFE. "I can honestly say that football only became my main focus once I'd signed my scholarship and things took off quickly after that."

After completing his LFE apprenticeship in the summer of 2024, Lowe found it difficult to replace the stimulation that came with studying and decided to throw himself into higher education, despite his responsibilities as a first team player. "I was sat around last summer bored, and I didn't feel stimulated mentally. I don't like being unproductive."

"I began doing some research on potentially starting a degree and spoke with someone at the PFA Business School."

I'm now enrolled on a three-year course, and you get a Bachelor of Arts degree underwritten and accredited by Portsmouth University. It really interests me and I'm glad I decided to do it because it's given me an outlook off the pitch and keeps me grounded."

Lowe also admits that his off the pitch commitments have given him a different outlook towards his sporting career and identity. "It's made me look at football differently. I look at it very much as a job and I don't dwell on things as much. If I have a bad training session for example, I'll go home and be able to switch off from that as I'll have a lecture to do or an assignment due. It stops you from getting carried away. At the end of the day, I'm 19 years old and if I wasn't a footballer I'd be at university. ►

# Nathan Lowe

## Covering All Bases







"I don't ever want to be identified as a footballer first. I'm a teenager who lives with his parents and that is exactly what I want to feel like. Make no bones about it I'm in a very high-pressure industry and the more pressure I can relieve through other things, the better. Football is so much more accepting of the fact players have different interests now away from the pitch. You don't need to be this strong man that just lives and breathes the game and that's all you do."

"It's imperative to have something to take your mind off football, whether that be education, a new language, a different sport, anything. Football is my day job but it's not the be all and end all. I feel better about myself having a back-up plan and knowing that if one day my football career seizes to exist, I'll have something to fall back on. Even if I retire at 35 and enjoy a great career, I'm going to have to do something after."

In addition to his academic endeavours, the Potters forward is a huge advocate of community work and goes the extra mile to ensure his personal contribution is as powerful as possible. Being recognised as Stoke City's Club Community Champion in the 2023/24 season at the tender age of just 18 years old is reflective of this.



"I like to help in the community. Each player is contracted to do their own bit, but I think last year I did far more than was expected of me. People within the club know I'm willing to and want to help people in and around the area and further afield. It goes back to a question I ask myself 'who do you want to be?' and I want to be more than a footballer to people, I want to give back to the people in this city and those who pay to come and watch me."

While Lowe's continual development away from the grass is nothing short of commendable, it's his performances on the pitch that have been turning heads over the past 12 months. Following a handful of cameos for Stoke during the second year of his apprenticeship in 2023/24, the Hertfordshire born talisman was loaned out to League Two outfit Walsall at the beginning of last season, finding the net 15 times in 22 league appearances during his stint in the West Midlands.

"It's all credit to everyone at the club (Walsall). It's such a well ran club and everyone is so together. Matt Saddler has done an amazing job at creating a team of players that just want to go out there and fight for each other. I felt really wanted and valued during my time there which to me was so important. It was my first loan move, and everyone made me feel at home straight away."

"I got into the team quickly and started scoring a few goals and that helped my confidence massively. I soon felt like I deserved to be there and began to really express myself."

Despite having joined the Saddlers on an initial season-long loan, Lowe's red-hot form during the opening months of the campaign sparked a mid-season recall by Stoke manager Mark Robins, with the England U19 international scoring just nine minutes into his Championship return. "I scored nine minutes into my return at West Brom, had a run of games and that gave me a feeling of becoming more of a peer to the senior players."

"I certainly came back with far more confidence; I felt in a different league psychologically. I almost viewed myself as a new signing for Stoke when I returned rather than an academy graduate who was lucky to be within the first team picture."



Discussing the success of his loan move further, Lowe credited the EFL pyramid and detailed how it provided the platform for him to prove himself.

"The EFL pyramid is one of the best things about football in this country, it's helped me massively. From my experience it's hard to break through with no experience in the Championship, and that goes for any job in any line of work. You need that work experience to prove you can do something which allows people to trust you. I had to go and prove I could do it, albeit two divisions below but that was enough for me to come back here and believe I was good enough for this level."

Lowe's exploits with Walsall were recognised further at the EFL Awards in April, with the Stoke academy graduate being named EFL League Two Young Player of the Year. "I'm really happy with that. I was glad to come away with one of the two awards I was nominated for, a pretty good return I'd say! I'm grateful to whoever voted for me. I'm proud and my family is too, and that's the main thing for me." ►



“

**One of the biggest things for me was to not think I'd cracked it because I hadn't. I went in with an open mind and a willingness to learn.**



Reflecting on his journey more in-depth and in-particular his time as an apprentice, Lowe affirmed an open mindset and a willingness to listen and learn were major factors in his transition from the academy to the first team.

“In the second year of my apprenticeship, I was with the first team for the whole season. It was exciting but difficult at the same time having to balance all the other stuff with it like my education and not being able to spend much time with my friends in the academy who I had come through with. It was tough, 17 years of age going into a men's football environment, training with them pretty much every day.

“One of the biggest things for me was to not think I'd cracked it because I hadn't. I went in with an open mind and a willingness to learn. I was never going to get everything right and was naturally going to make mistakes almost certainly more often than the senior players but that is to be expected.

“Another thing I told myself was that they have all been in my shoes and have been just as nervous as me. Back when I first broke through, I used to get nervous to train with the first team, but now it feels normal. I also made sure that no one could have a bad word to say about me when it came down to my attitude, that is one thing you can control.”

When asked about the main differences between academy and senior football, Lowe insisted pressure is what sets the two apart.

“The demands placed on you are so high. You make such a big impact on people's lives. If you give the ball away in the Championship on a Saturday and the opposition go down the other end and score, thousands of people could go home less happy and that is pressure. However, I like to look at it a different way and think that when I get an opportunity, I have a chance to impact the game and the fans in a positive way.” ■





# THE 11

League Football Education has recognised eleven apprentice footballers for their outstanding efforts on and off the pitch in the latest edition of 'The 11.' The accolade acknowledges performance on the pitch and in the classroom, as well as assessing other factors, including involvement in community or charity-based initiatives. 'The 11' for April 2025 is as follows:



## KAIDON ROBINSON BIRMINGHAM CITY

Birmingham City's Kaidon Robinson began his apprenticeship in a difficult position due to a disrupted experience educationally as a schoolboy. After underachieving in his GCSE's, Kaidon was enrolled onto the BTEC certificate and was required to undertake Functional Skills in both Maths and English.

Over the past few months however, Kaidon has come on leaps and bounds in the classroom, with his BTEC work of a distinction standard consistently. Due to this, the academy staff have moved him up to the diploma. Functional Skills wise he has already passed English and is very close to completing his Maths qualification. Kaidon has also "significantly contributed" to the club's Citizenship Programme by attending local primary schools and supporting the Buddy Reading scheme.

"He is a real credit to himself, his family and the academy" said Tim Smith, Academy Head of Education.



## ADAM LETLAT WEST BROMWICH ALBION

First-year apprentice Adam Letlat has enjoyed a successful year to date on the programme. On the pitch he contributed with some great performances in the U18s' FA Youth Cup run, with a tremendous individual showing in their win against Stoke City. His good form led to a call up to the Morocco U17s squad, for whom he recently represented in Turkey.

In the classroom Adam has also shone, studying hard and is yet to drop a grade in the BTEC programme, achieving distinction grades for all his submissions.

Carl Craner, Adam's LFE Regional Officer said: "Adam has performed well in the classroom and has coped well with having to 'catch up' with work missed when on international duty. He is self-motivated and has had a solid season."



## RUEBIN SHEPPARD BRISTOL CITY

Robins' midfielder Ruebin Sheppard has experienced a real change in fortunes this season after a heavily disrupted first year on programme due to a long injury lay off. This year he's played lots of football and has been integral to the success Bristol City's U18s squad have enjoyed. Ruebin is one of the top goal scorers, with his eye for a goal evident from the two LFE Goal of the Month awards he has won this season.

Ruebin is flying high academically too. He's working at a D\*D\*D\* in his BTEC and is targeting an A grade in his A Level Maths. He recently achieved an A in a mock test which will give him confidence going into the real thing.

Will Morford, Ruebin's LFE Regional Officer, said: "Ruebin is a great lad. He never complains and has lots of personality."



## JAKE RICHARDS EXETER CITY

It's been a whirlwind season for Exeter's Jake Richards, one that has brought much success. On the pitch, Jake has excelled massively, making almost 20 appearances for the Grecians first team and registering three goal contributions in the process. He recently started for Gary Caldwell's side against Nottingham Forest in the FA Cup, a game that was televised.

Alongside his fantastic footballing progress, he's excelled in the classroom too. Despite not being able to attend college consistently due to his involvement with the first team, Jake has kept on track with his work, achieved distinctions in all his assignments and is set to achieve a D\*D\* grade.

The midfielder also takes part in lots of work with the Club's Community Organisation, such as visiting hospitals with presents and attending kids' clubs throughout half term.



## JOSE MARQUEZ FOREST GREEN ROVERS

Jose Marquez is a third-year scholar at Forest Green Rovers after having his apprenticeship extended due to suffering an ACL injury during his first year on programme. The young forward successfully completed his SEP and BTEC last year but still makes the effort to undertake Life Skills sessions with the first- and second-year apprentices.

On the pitch, Jose has really excelled this season and has seen his hard work to get back fit after his injury rewarded, most notably with a first professional contract. He made his debut for the first team in January against Blackburn Rovers U21s in the National League Cup and topped that off with a brace.

THE 11 CONTINUED ON THE NEXT PAGE





## JOE HATCH PLYMOUTH ARGYLE

Argyle forward Joe Hatch experienced a terrific start to the 2024/25 season, netting nine goals in his opening six games for the U18s. This red-hot form led to a first team call up from then Plymouth boss Wayne Rooney. Joe made his Championship debut as a late substitute in an away match against Burnley. He notched another two goals for the U18s following his maiden first team appearance but agonisingly saw his season cut short in October after injuring his knee.

However, Joe has used his time on the sidelines to work hard on his academic studies, attending 11 compensatory education sessions and achieving a D\*D\*D\* in his BTEC. He was also the first apprentice at the club to complete his SEP, achieving a Distinction overall.

Gary Menzies, Head of Education at the club, said: "Joe has shown great resilience while injured, working hard on his rehab in the gym and educationally to keep himself occupied."



## JASPER BRIGGS CAMBRIDGE UNITED

Second-year apprentice goalkeeper Jasper Briggs has endured setbacks with injury during his time on programme but has always kept a positive mindset towards both his football and education. He's achieved far above his target grades in his BTEC and earned a Distinction in his Sporting Excellence Professional End Point Assessment. He's also shown a real proactiveness with regards to his transition, setting up work experience and networking with other people.

On the grass Jasper has displayed real resilience to recover from injury and earn himself first team recognition, being named on the bench for the first time against Shrewsbury Town at the beginning of April.



## LUCAS BARNES HARROGATE TOWN

Lucas Barnes is an apprentice who sets the standard both in a sporting and academic sense. Educationally, Lucas was the first apprentice to complete his BTEC and achieved a distinction in his Sporting Excellence Professional End Point Assessment. His attitude and behaviour have been described as "exemplary", and it's said he is the "first one in and last one to leave".

Lucas has been offered a one-year professional contract for next season after an impressive campaign with the U18s. He's transitioned from a right-back to central midfielder and this change has seen him excel even more. Academy Manager Richard Jones said: "He is the driving force of the team, and this season has made big strides on his technical skills, awareness of space and his pressing ability – a large part of how we want to play at Harrogate. He has already earned a bench appearance in the league, but we are excited to see what next season brings for him being in a full-time environment. He has certainly earned and worked for the opportunity that has been given to him".



## JOKUBAS MAZIONAS IPSWICH TOWN

Second-year Tractor Boys apprentice Jokubas Mazionas experienced a slightly different route into the academy system, joining the club from a college where he was studying Film Studies. He almost immediately went into the U21s where he has played most of his football for Ipswich, before a recent loan move to National League side Woking which he is said to have thoroughly enjoyed and is hopeful of a return before the end of the season. The loan move, however, meant Jokubas had to adapt in order to stay on track with his education and he certainly did that. Elliot Tyler, Head of Education at the Club, said: "Jacob has managed his studies effectively throughout the course, particularly whilst being away on loan and working remotely from home. Despite a recent setback with injury, he has certainly made the most of his time by catching up on both his BTEC and SEP work to complete on schedule to his target grades."



## HARRY HINDLE HARROGATE TOWN

Harry Hindle has shown "excellent and professional attitude throughout the whole of his apprenticeship" according to Academy Manager Richard Jones.

The second-year apprentice already has his transition plan in place and is keen to study at university from September. He's been offered a conditional place at York St Johns University and has a keen interest in physiotherapy. Harry has put time into learning about physiotherapy in detail, specifically rehabilitation having experienced periods of this himself after a challenging time with injuries. Despite his setbacks he has shown great determination and resilience to get back fit and make himself a key player in the team.

He's also acted as a model apprentice away from the pitch and classroom, making an impact on a member of the community who has experienced times of adversity. "He has been recognised by the club at the very top level for his great representation of himself and Harrogate Town AFC."



## KAI MARTIN COLCHESTER UNITED

Kai Martin has been described as an apprentice who "shows a winning mentality every single day" by one of his coaches Elliot Ward.

Educationally, Kai has really gone the extra mile this year. "Kai achieved a distinction in his Sporting Excellence Professional portfolio, presenting professionally and intelligently throughout the end point process. He demonstrated a strong understanding of the holistic programme, which is testament to the relationship that he has built with all MDT staff. He achieved his target grade in BTEC but his biggest successes this year have come more from the studying that he has completed outside of his formal education through reading books and showing a deeper level of understanding. He has then been able to apply these to everyday challenges."





# New Verified USA Scholarship Providers For LFE

League Football Education is delighted to announce it has partnered with both U.S Sports Scholarships and Varsity Nine to provide apprentices with unique opportunities to continue their playing careers, whilst studying a degree overseas.

Anthony Cato, LFE's Transition Officer said: "LFE is thrilled to have secured these partnerships with US Sports Scholarships & Varsity Nine. American Scholarships have proved to be a popular pathway for many academy footballers over the years and the ability to work two organisations of such quality is fantastic for us.

"It was vitally important for us to bring the expertise of both U.S Sports Scholarships & Varsity Nine on board to facilitate this transition route for those who intend to continue their playing experience while also gaining an education over in the States. We look forward to working closely with the organisations and helping to offer exciting opportunities to our apprentices."

Established in 2008 by four members, U.S Sports Scholarships have successfully secured over \$30 million in sports scholarship awards and sent over 2,000 athletes to the United States and Canada across a variety of different sports including soccer, rugby, golf, track and field, hockey, volleyball, tennis and basketball over the past 17 years.

Managing Director Liam Barrett said: "The whole team is extremely excited to be officially partnering with the LFE to help provide various pathways and worldwide sporting opportunities to the student-athletes they work with.

"Having been an LFE academy scholar myself, I realise how important it is to educate players on life outside of the professional game – whether that is in the UK or overseas.

"LFE helped support me throughout my time playing and studying in America, so it is a real honour to now be working alongside them to help support the next generation of players."

Established in 2022, Varsity Nine was founded and designed by sports experts with over 35 years of combined industry experience, with one simple mission in mind – to innovate how sports services are formatted and delivered to high performing athletes.

From their time working in the industry, and having experienced professional sports services themselves, Varsity Nine identified the need for pathway focussed programmes and services. Therefore, they have created a transparent service model that places pathways possibilities at the core of their services, ensuring that their clients are placed on an unstoppable trajectory. From elite scholarship placements to performance development at its Soccer & Education Programme, Varsity Nine has been designed to help athletes optimise every stage of their sporting career.

Director Vivion Cox said: "We are proud to partner with League Football Education (LFE) as a verified partner. This collaboration will open vital pathways for players pursuing academic and athletic success in the U.S. Through our unique approach, which includes data and analysis innovations and elite showcase formats, we will enable college programmes to connect with the exceptional talent from the EFL. We are excited to build a long-term relationship with LFE, ensuring players have the ongoing support they need to reach their full potential."

**For more information, contact LFE's Transition Officer [ACato@lfe.org.uk](mailto:ACato@lfe.org.uk)**

## 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.



# THEO KNIGHT • FULL CIRCLE

At 18 years old, Theo Knight left Shrewsbury Town after not receiving an offer of a professional contract. Now, just two years since his departure as a player, he's back at the club in a coaching capacity.

"I joined the academy at under 15s and soon after began training with the under 18s. That was really good as it helped me understand what I needed to do to achieve my dream of getting a scholarship," Knight told LFE. "I did a whole pre-season with them, and I did well. I took what I learned from that experience back into the U16s for the upcoming season."

Just weeks into the season as an under 16, the club indicated their intention to offer Knight a scholarship due to his impressive performances. "I was verbally offered a scholarship early and to hear that was great, but in my mind, I had only verbally been offered it and not yet signed anything, therefore I ended up putting quite a lot of pressure on myself and my performances that season, but eventually I did sign it."

Discussing his apprenticeship in more detail, the ex-Salop midfielder praised the influence of LFE and in-particular the role that Regional Officers play. "The connection between LFE and the clubs they work with is great. My Regional Officer, Claire, was great. She would always be checking in on us, not just about our education and coursework but about us as people. She'd always ask how we were, how our families were and check we were ok. She really showed she cared."

The biggest moment of Knight's young career to date would come in the second year of his scholarship, making his debut for Shrewsbury Town's first team in a Papa Johns Trophy clash versus Wolves Under 21s.

"It was fantastic, just surreal. It wasn't at Wembley in front of 90,000, but it felt like that to me. One of the stands was full, it was under the lights, and to get 30 minutes was brilliant."

"I trained with the first team the day before alongside some of the other under 18s and wasn't even aware that I was going to play in the game. We just got told to bring our boots and I walked into the changing room to see 'Knight 41' on the back of a shirt, and I didn't believe it was real."

"I have both the home and away shirts from that season with my name and number framed in the house and no matter what happens I'll always have them to hold onto. I earned those shirts." ►





# “ I REALLY WANT THE PLAYERS I’M COACHING TO FEEL FREE AND GO OUT THERE AND EXPRESS THEMSELVES.”

Despite some first team involvements and a successful period as an apprentice, Knight wasn't offered a new deal at the conclusion of his scholarship. "It was tough, you can never really prepare for something like that. You feel numb, you just don't know how to feel. However, Natalie our Player Care Officer was there with us when we received our decisions, and she was amazing. She helped us all clear our minds and reassured us that it was fine to be upset. Cry if we wanted to cry, go on a walk and talk with her, she was brilliant.

"I didn't have any coping mechanisms really. My friends knew me as 'the footballer' and I carried that label around during my younger years. To then be released and have that identity taken away is hard."

Reflecting on his release and the difficulties that came with it, Knight reaffirmed his admiration for LFE, highlighting the support he received. "LFE helped me a lot with my transition out of the academy when I was released. I attended the Assessment Trials and enjoyed that. They also kept me in contact with me to ask how I was and to offer help and advice. It was nice because football was all I'd ever known really and when I was released, I was down in the dumps, but the support during that transition was second to none."



In the aftermath of leaving the club, Knight spent some time trying to navigate the next steps of his career and attended a summer camp for free agents called 'Behind the White Lines.' "It was set up by former Liverpool player Steven Caulker and it was so eye-opening. We stayed at a university in London, trained every day, and attended loads of different workshops.

I came back from that camp with a different mentality and mindset. It was like a new start for me and found that love for football again.

"Whilst I was at the camp I got on well with the girl running the media side of things and gained an interest in media from that. I did an interview that was aired on Sky Sports and that was great too.

"Amy the media person got in contact with me after the camp and offered me some work experience which I really enjoyed."

As part of the LFE Apprenticeship Programme, all apprentices complete their UEFA C coaching licence, a qualification that eventually became very useful to Knight. "Liam Eaton who is the Head of Academy Coaching at Shrewsbury invited me to do a bit of coaching at the club. He said it was a good opportunity to do a few hours, earn some money but also still be able to focus on my football career.

"I saw it as a chance to learn more about the game from a different perspective. I also liked the idea of trying to help others achieve what I did and hopefully go even further. I never really had much interest in coaching until I gave it a try. When we completed the UEFA C badge as an apprentice, I just looked at it as something I could put in my back pocket and fall back on, but it wasn't something I wanted to do in all honesty.

"However, since I've taken the opportunity to come back to the club and coach, I've really enjoyed it and understand it so much more. It's great to learn off the other coaches and see the game from a different perspective as to when you are one being coached.

"The feeling you get when you are coaching and have tried to teach the boys something or give out a specific instruction, for example telling a player that when they get to the byline to fizz the ball across the six-yard box instead of floating a cross in and a goal comes from it, is amazing. It's a real sense of satisfaction.

"I really want the players I'm coaching to feel free and go out there and express themselves. I don't want to put any pressure on the players, because when a player feels pressurised, they don't play freely. I told this to one of the young players I was coaching at Shrewsbury before a game and just asked one thing of him, that when he loses the ball to work as hard as he can to get it back and give everything.



"Apart from that, play your own game with freedom. It was one of the best games he'd ever played, and he told me afterwards he felt great out there on the pitch. That was nice."

Looking back on his journey so far, Knight is adamant that the life skills he cultivated during his time in the academy have helped him excel in his coaching endeavours. "It's the standards I learned during my apprenticeship and how I hold myself which have helped me a lot with my coaching journey. People from the outside think that if you're growing up in an academy that you're just learning how to become a good footballer, but you're learning to become a good person. Communication, taking care of yourself, time management, being polite, dressing correctly and representing a badge, these are all things you develop as a young footballer that can be transferred into the outside world."

Moving forward in a playing sense, Knight still possesses a laser like focus on making it as far he can in the game and climbing back up the football pyramid. "I still want to play at the highest level I can. I play non-league now, but I still give everything in training and matches to try and achieve my aspirations. It's a difficult dynamic in semi-pro football because you'll have grown men who have jobs and still play part-time, but then you have people like me who are still trying to make it as high as I can and are probably called 'busy' as I'm taking it extra seriously. I'm only 20 years old, and becoming a footballer is still my dream." ■



# EFL | AWARDS 2025 ROUND-UP

## Three current and two former apprentices received individual recognition at the 2025 EFL Awards in April.

Sunderland midfielder and second-year apprentice **Chris Rigg** was named Championship Apprentice of the Season following a sublime campaign on a personal level which saw him rack up over 40 league appearances for the promotion winning Black Cats. After collecting his award, Rigg told LFE: "I'm buzzing, it's obviously nice to pick up accolades throughout the season. It's been a good season for us and hopefully we can go one more."

The attacking midfielder was full of praise for his teammates and credited them for his individual achievements. "It's the team. It sounds like a very generic answer, but they have helped me a lot individually and as a team I think we've been very good collectively on and off the pitch, that's why we are where we are."

In League One, **Jake Richards** of Exeter City claimed the second of three Apprentice of the Season Awards and told LFE commitment and confidence were the two keys to his breakthrough season with the Grecians. "I commit to everything I do, on and off the pitch, but also, I'm confident in whatever scenario I get put into. If you get an opportunity at any club you have to grab it with both hands, and I think I've done that."

Meanwhile Port Vale's **Jack Shorrock**'s progression this year was rewarded with the League Two Apprentice of the Season Award. The left-footed midfielder has accumulated nearly 20 outings for the Valiants in which has been a memorable year for Darren Moore's side, having achieved promotion back to League One. Speaking to LFE, Shorrock said: "I feel like I've just been consistent, working and training every day, also being humble and staying my age as I'm still a kid. The lads and the gaffer have given me the perfect environment to showcase my talent."



### LFE APPRENTICE OF THE SEASON

SKY BET CHAMPIONSHIP

## CHRIS RIGG



It's the team. It sounds like a very generic answer, but they have helped me a lot individually and as a team I think we've been very good collectively on and off the pitch, that's why we are where we are.



### LFE APPRENTICE OF THE SEASON

SKY BET LEAGUE ONE

## JAKE RICHARDS



### LFE APPRENTICE OF THE SEASON

SKY BET LEAGUE TWO

## JACK SHORROCK



Elsewhere, two former apprentices picked up awards on the night. **Nathan Lowe** of Stoke City was named EFL League Two Young Player of the Season following his magnificent loan spell at Walsall during the first half of the campaign. "I'm really happy," Lowe told LFE. "I'm glad to come away with this award and I'm grateful to whoever has voted for me. My family is proud and that's the main thing for me."

Former Birmingham City apprentice **Jobe Bellingham** went home with the EFL Championship Young Player of the Season Award following an impressive campaign with Sunderland.





# Player Care Q&A



**Amy Pegler**

Blackpool FC, Player Care Officer

## How did the 2024/25 season go from a player care standpoint?

The season went well. We managed to get a lot of life skills sessions booked in and delivered to the under 18s and also to the younger age groups from under 9s to under 16s.

You are the Player Care Officer for all age groups at Blackpool from under 9s to the first team. How do you balance all of those areas and responsibilities?

It sounds really complicated when you put it like that but a lot of it is just a case of applying the same methods but personalising the approach to each different age group in order to maximise their development.

## How would you describe the role of a Player Care Officer to someone who isn't too familiar with it?

Player Care's main objective is to be a support system. It's about creating an environment in which everyone feels supported so they can develop and maximise their potential. I'm not here to make someone better at football but I'm here to help them develop off the pitch and in other areas of life that are equally as important.

## How rewarding is the role?

It's a rewarding job in every aspect. You can be supporting a young player who then breaks into the first team and that's rewarding, or it can be something a little different like a player achieving a significant milestone in their life off the pitch like passing their driving test and that's equally as rewarding.

## What do you feel like you bring to the role?

I feel like I'm good at supporting the players with empathy and being caring but I'll also tell them if they're wrong in something but help them understand why and how they can do things better in the future. I love just coming in, checking in with everyone, seeing how they're doing, and being that person that they feel they can come to with a problem if they need to.

## What are the biggest challenges you face?

Football is pretty hectic in general so logistics can cause issues at times because different age groups are based at different places and obviously you need to be on hand to help when they're off site as well and all in different places. It can be challenging when you feel like you need to be in multiple places at once sometimes, but I feel like we have a good system here.

## How important do you feel the LFE Life Skills programme is when it comes to player care?

It's one of the biggest aspects to my role, definitely. It links in massively with education and also the pastoral side of education. They're all going to need these life skills going forward, whether that be in or outside of football. They really help them develop on a personal level and gather the right tools to progress in life.

"I love just coming in, checking in with everyone, seeing how they're doing, and being that person that they feel they can come to with a problem if they need to."

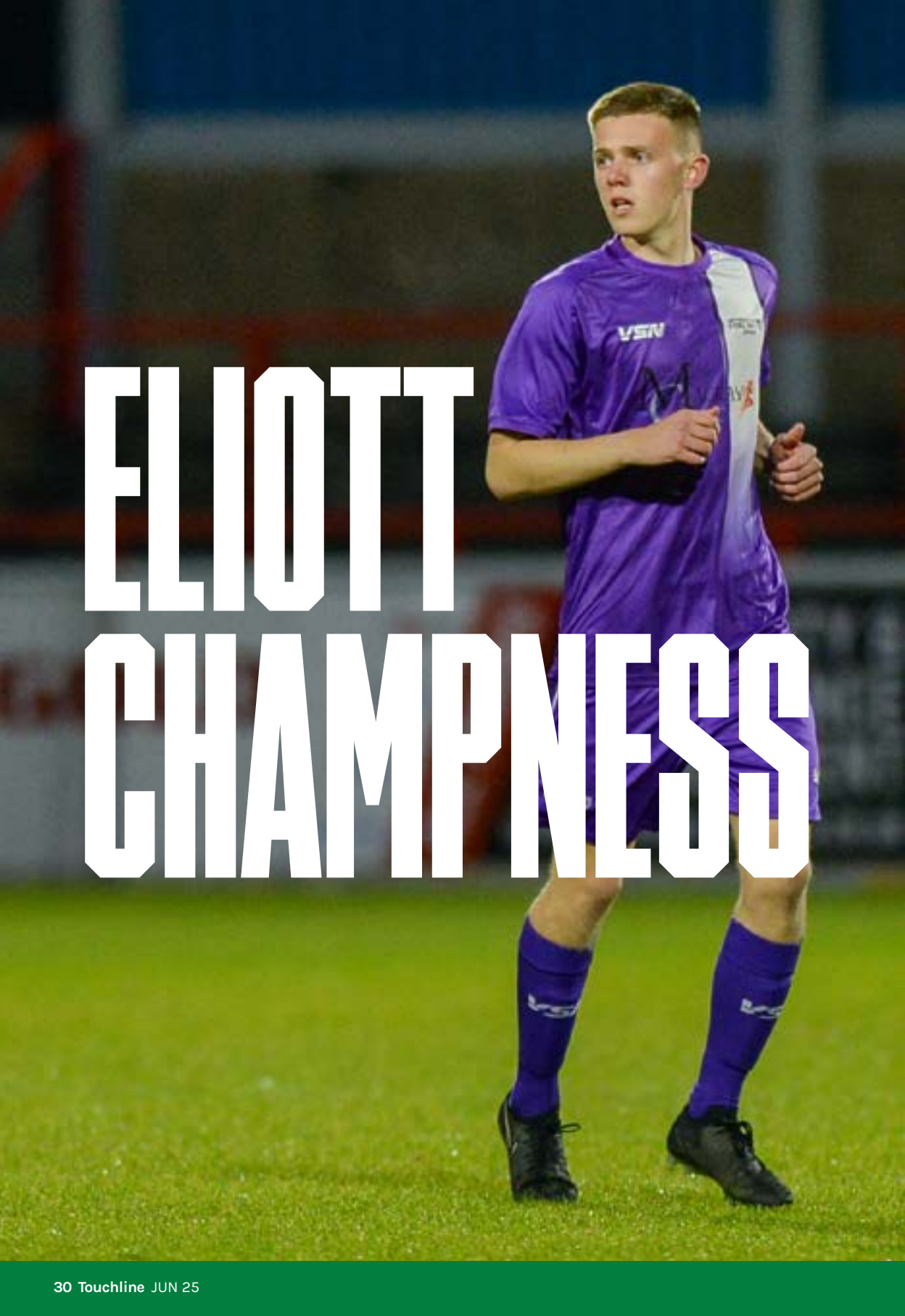
## Any particular life skills sessions stand out?

We had a really great session delivered by one of the Holocaust survivors which was centred around Holocaust Remembrance Day. The nutrition session with Marc Pugh (The Foodie Footballer) was also great and we had that delivered to all age groups as it's an important subject.

## How do you plan for each season?

We always try and plan ahead of the next upcoming season so most of everything is in place, but we also do a lot of reflection on the previous season and see what worked and what didn't. We're very conscious of not trying to just regurgitate the same stuff every season upon season and give the players some fresh and new experiences and tools. We hold a lot of player voice sessions where they can tell us what they want from us and the same goes with the parents and give them a voice. This gives us a good insight and helps us plan.





# ELIOTT CHAMPNESS

Elliott Champness, a former apprentice at Stevenage, now studies at the University of Stirling and plays for the university's football team who compete across eight highly competitive competitions throughout the season.

LFE travelled north recently to meet up with Elliott and fellow student and former West Ham United apprentice Ben Heal, to find out about their transition from academy football to university, and what life is like studying and competing the other side of the Anglo-Scottish border.

**Describe your experience as an apprentice?**

**Elliott Champness:** I think the experience was great. It's not just about football, you learn the personal development and life skills that are needed for an aspiring young footballer, but they can also be translated into another walk of life if football doesn't work out.

**Ben Heals:** I really enjoyed my experience as an apprentice. I came on leaps and bounds, not just as a footballer but more importantly as a person. I made friends with people who I still class as friends to this day and connected with people I wouldn't have otherwise had the opportunity to connect with. The whole experience was so enjoyable.

**What transferrable skills did you learn that have helped with your transition to university?**

**Elliott Champness:** Discipline and time management are huge. When you're in an academy you have a plan and a routine that you follow week in, week out. When you come to university it's very similar. You're training pretty much the same amount of time; you have to keep up with your coursework just like you do when you're an apprentice.

**Ben Heal:** Discipline is the biggest one for me. You're training every day and having to make sure you're doing everything right and to the highest standard. How you do one thing is how you do everything, that's a phrase that was instilled in me and I've taken it with me.

Time management is also massive and that has definitely helped me now at university with balancing my football and assignments etc.

Good time keeping is drilled into you from an early age in the academy system. Finally, being able to communicate well with a range of different people, that's made my transition into university a lot easier.

**How were you supported with the transition by your club?**

**Elliott Champness:** The personal development programme that LFE provide helped me in my transition for sure. Same goes for the broader education programme as with that you learn the basis of things you will study at university, and that was really important preparation wise.

**Ben Heal:** West Ham did a great job at making us aware of the different possible routes that we could take after leaving the club.

They put a great deal of emphasis on the importance of education and that really helped set me up for what I'm doing now. The career workshops that we were exposed to and the network that we had available to us really helped me broaden my horizons to new opportunities.

**How did the opportunity to study at the University of Stirling come around?**

**Elliott Champness:** Alongside still trying to achieve my goal of becoming a professional footballer, my parents were keen for me to continue my education. I knew I wanted to go to university and LFE helped me find the best universities that suited my needs. I applied through them, got in contact with Stirling and the rest is history really. ►

UNIVERSITY of  
STIRLING





**Ben Heal:** I already had some background knowledge of the university as both my parents studied here so there was already a connection there. I knew through speaking to my dad that the football programme was really good. I still want to play at the highest level I can, and the football programme here speaks for itself and that made it a seamless transition. It was the most obvious option for me and I'm really happy I made the decision to come here.



**I THINK IT'S IMPORTANT TO NOT BE AFRAID TO MEET NEW PEOPLE. ONCE YOU DO AND YOU BUILD NEW FRIENDSHIPS BUT AT THE SAME TIME MAINTAIN THOSE CORE CONNECTIONS FROM BACK HOME YOU WILL BE FINE.**

**- ELIOTT CHAMPNESS**

**How did you find the transition that came with moving up to Scotland?**

**Elliott Champness:** I feel like it's like being in an academy in the sense that everyone is really close and you're spending time with the same people every day. I came up here last June during pre-season, not knowing anyone but very quickly felt like I was close with everyone. We all do things together off the pitch, go out, study together and I think it's felt easy to meet new people up here and enjoy myself.

**Ben Heal:** It's a bit different to Dagenham or Romford, that's for sure! It was definitely a big change, but the soft skills that I learnt during my time as an apprentice really helped me settle and adjust to life up here, and I feel like I'm thriving more than ever, off the pitch and on the pitch. I love being up here.

**How have you managed to balance your football and Higher Education responsibilities?**

**Elliott Champness:** To start with it was very challenging because you have to apply yourself fully from minute one. Having recently left an academy, naturally you want to just solely focus on football but with the help of everyone on both the sporting side and academic side you very quickly get used to it and manage the two things together. Studying is also a great way to take your mind off football by having something else to focus on and that's important.

**Ben Heal:** At the beginning it was tough. I took a year out before I came to university and just played semi-professional football, so it was difficult to get back in the mindset of balancing education and football again. However, I soon clicked back into gear and that's mainly down to the experience I'd already had during my time in the academy with doing my education alongside training and matches.

Also, the help on offer here at the university is great with people being on hand to help you balance everything. Given we're on a scholarship there's also a little more academic flexibility when it comes to deadlines and that's handy when you're making trips down to Loughborough or Nottingham for matches which can be quite time consuming.

**How impressed have you been with the facilities on offer?**

**Elliott Champness:** The facilities are incredible. I came up originally before I joined to speak with the gaffer and see what the university had to offer. As soon as I saw it all with my own eyes I realised this is where I wanted to be.

**Ben Heal:** I knew they'd be good because it's a very sport heavy university but the investment that's been made here is clear to see, the facilities are spectacular. The pitches are immaculate. The gym and strength and conditioning labs are brilliant and really help you thrive on the pitch.

Even looking at the golf facilities on campus with the driving range and golf simulator, they are incredible. You really are given everything you need to maximise your potential.

**What's the level of football like and how does it compare to academy football?**

**Elliott Champness:** As well as the first team I've also played for the under 20s and it's really good because you get to play against the youth teams of professional clubs so the standard in those games is high and helps prepare you for going into men's football with the first team.

**Ben Heal:** Compared to academy football it's a lot more intense and physical. It's very demanding on your body too.

The quality is also very high because you are playing with and against boys who have maybe come out of academies either in England or Scotland and are trying to make it back up the football pyramid to the professional divisions. You're also playing against some players who are coming back down from the higher end of the footballing pyramid, so it's a real melting pot for high quality, intense football.

**What advice would you give to someone who is thinking about taking on this type of opportunity?**

**Elliott Champness:** I think it's important to not be afraid to meet new people. Once you do and you build new friendships and but at the same time maintain those core connections from back home you will be fine. I facetime my parents three or four times a day and that helps me to not feel affected by the fact I'm not at home.



**THOSE WHO HAVE PROGRESSED THROUGH THIS UNIVERSITY HAVE ALL GONE ONTO THRIVE, WHETHER THAT BE IN FOOTBALL OR IN A DIFFERENT WALK OF LIFE.**

**- BEN HEAL**

**Ben Heal:** I would say just go for it but make sure you're fully invested, that way you'll reap the maximum benefits. Also, I can tell you from my own experience, those who have progressed through this university have all gone onto thrive, whether that be in football or in a different walk of life. It's a fantastic opportunity.

**How would you sum up your experience of life at the University of Stirling so far?**

**Elliott Champness:** I think it's a brilliant place to be and I've really enjoyed my first year here. The people up here are fantastic.

**Ben Heal:** I absolutely love it here; I've enjoyed every minute of it both on and off the pitch and I'd highly recommend it to anyone. ■





# THE PFA SAFETY NET

Helping young players with  
the challenges of playing  
academy football



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**EFL** @EFL  
As part of the @LFEonline Life Skills programme,  
EFL academy players have been gaining an insight  
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## Careers

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

Browse the range of exciting pathways at [lfe.org.uk/careers](https://lfe.org.uk/careers)

## 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](mailto: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.

View our informative guides to Higher Education or USA Scholarships at [lfe.org.uk/touchline-downloads](https://lfe.org.uk/touchline-downloads)

