



**INSIDE THE
ACADEMY**

**The Hopes, Highs and Heartbreaks
of West Ham United's Youth**

Paul Brand and Callum McNaughton

**INSIDE THE
ACADEMY**

**The Hopes, Highs and Heartbreaks
of West Ham United's Youth**

Paul Brand and Callum McNaughton



Contents

About the Authors	7
Player Registration	9
1. Setting the Scene: ‘Nobody knows anything’ . . .	11
2. First Steps: ‘That was my introduction to seeing football with a bit of finesse’	33
3. Getting Noticed: ‘I was playing against men, actual men, at 12 years old’	45
4. Welcome to Chadwell Heath: ‘Someone threw your shoes in the shower!’	63
5. The West Ham Way: ‘It’s a family club’	80
6. An Education: ‘A tough environment for any teacher’	95
7. Highs: ‘I want more of this!’	111
8. Lows: ‘I’ve fallen outta love with the game’ . . .	127
9. Loaned Out: ‘I don’t go on loan to Braintree from Chelsea!’	142
10. Bubbles Burst: ‘You just gloss over’	162
11. After Shocks: ‘There’s no reverse. I was trapped then’	179
12. After Successes: ‘The sun will rise, and I’ll keep moving forward’	198
13. The Next Generation: ‘If I could go back to being 11 years old ...’	241
Acknowledgements	251

Setting the Scene: ‘Nobody knows anything’

IN 1999, West Ham United added two trophies to their rarely opened cabinet. Never short of an anecdote, the incumbent manager Harry Redknapp has since quipped, ‘First of all I had to find the bloody cabinet. When I eventually did, I opened the doors and out flew two bats, three Japanese soldiers and Lord Lucan.’

The major trophy being placed into the cabinet was the Intertoto Cup, which the first team brought back from France. In the days before the Champions League swelled to accommodate four English clubs, the reward for a heady fifth-placed Premier League finish in the 1998/99 season was for UEFA Cup qualifying to be dressed up as a competition in its own right. The much-maligned Intertoto Cup was secured in August thanks to two-legged victories over Jokerit (Finland), Heerenveen (the Netherlands) and Metz, who’d finished tenth in France’s Ligue 1. Academy graduate Frank Lampard was the Hammers’ top scorer, netting once in each round. The trophy had to be duplicated because the ‘finals’

were a three-way affair, with Juventus and Montpellier being the other winners that year. West Ham were duly knocked out in the second round of the UEFA Cup, losing 2-0 on aggregate to FC Steaua București and establishing a Romanian hoodoo that would be continued by Astra Giurgiu.

More fondly remembered than the late-20th century adventures in Europe is the 1999 FA Youth Cup, won in gloriously emphatic fashion a few months before the Intertoto Cup. More than 20,000 descended on Upton Park – kick-off was delayed because more sections of the ground had to be opened up to accommodate a larger crowd than anticipated – to watch a team containing future England stars Joe Cole and Michael Carrick. Appetites had been whetted by a 3-0 victory in the first leg at Highfield Road, and the wunderkinds lived up to expectations by defeating Coventry City 9-0 on aggregate, making it the most one-sided FA Youth Cup Final in history.

Thanks to youth leagues being divided by region, the FA Youth Cup is the most prestigious trophy the junior game has to bestow. Like its senior version, it attracts hundreds of entrants nationwide but the later stages are of course dominated by professional clubs. The idea of an FA Youth Cup was devised by Sir Joe Richards, one-time president of the Football League and a director of Barnsley FC. He initially tried to sell his idea to the league clubs, who were not particularly interested, so he took it instead to the Football Association, who inaugurated the competition in the 1952/53 season. Manchester United

won it in each of the first five campaigns, beating West Ham 8-2 on the last of those occasions. Wolverhampton Wanderers were the team to eventually break Manchester United's dominance, but the Hammers were back the following season, this time losing 2-1 to Blackburn Rovers in the 1958/59 final with a team containing future World Cup winners Bobby Moore and Geoff Hurst.

The first victory for the self-styled Academy of Football came in 1962/63 against Liverpool. The first leg at Anfield ended 3-1 to the home side, who by half-time of the second leg had stretched their lead to 5-2. The 13,200 in attendance at the Boleyn could have been forgiven for heading to its namesake tavern but those who stayed until the end were rewarded with a remarkable comeback that saw West Ham win 5-2 on the day and 6-5 on aggregate. All of the victorious 11 except for John Dryden – who had scored the significant consolation goal at Anfield – went on to make their first-team bow. This included future manager Harry Redknapp and Canning Town-born John Charles, who became the first black player to represent England at any level with the under-18s and the first to play in the top division when he made his first-team debut soon after. The star of the show, Martin Britt, who scored four and still cherishes the match ball, made 26 first-team appearances with a respectable return of seven goals. However, Britt left east London for Blackburn Rovers in 1966 after finding his opportunities limited by Geoff Hurst and Johnny Byrne; he would play even fewer games for Blackburn, with his career ended at the age of 21 by a knee injury. Returning

to his native Leigh-on-Sea, Britt instead found success in the textiles industry.

Trophies adorned with claret and blue ribbons are like London buses. After the maiden FA Youth Cup victory came senior FA Cup success (1963/64), closely followed by the European Cup Winners' Cup (1964/65). Similarly, with the age groups inverted, a temporary dominance over north London was secured with FA Cup glory against Arsenal in 1980 succeeded by an FA Youth Cup victory over Tottenham Hotspur in 1980/81, made all the more exceptional by Paul Allen (born August 1962) becoming the only player ever to collect an FA Youth Cup winners' medal *after* climbing the steps at Wembley to be presented with the genuine article. In the meantime, another double was narrowly denied in 1975, with the first team doing the business against Fulham but the youngsters falling short in a one-sided final against Ipswich, losing 5-1.

* * *

Then came the summer of 2023, which was an astonishing echo of 1999.

Kicking off the celebrations was the under-18s' 5-1 thumping of Arsenal. The biggest winning margin since the FA Youth Cup Final was changed to a single-match format in 2018/19, it was perhaps even more satisfying for overturning the home advantage gifted to the Gunners, with most of the 34,127 attendees proving bad losers and leaving long before substitute Josh Briggs added further gloss to the scoreline in injury time. The pick of the goals

came from captain Gideon Kodua, who latched on to a loose ball in the area of the Emirates pitch now patrolled by Declan Rice and lobbed goalkeeper Noah Cooper from distance.

Rice gatecrashed the boys' post-match revelry and in hindsight it's hoped that the club captain was at the Emirates Stadium to offer unadulterated support rather than to scope out his future home. Before swapping allegiance, Rice's West Ham career climaxed with the lifting of the UEFA Europa Conference League trophy in Prague. Not as esteemed as the Champions League or Europa League, UEFA's third-tier competition nevertheless places the Intertoto Cup in the shade and gave West Ham fans under 50 the best night of their lives.

The success of the juniors is one reason for hoping that it won't be another quarter of a century until the next trophy lift. It had been an even longer wait for the party scenes that greeted the returning heroes from Prague, with the streets of Newham having not witnessed an open-top bus parade since 1980. One month prior to this balmy June evening, the under-18s had enjoyed a parade of their own, showing off both the FA Youth Cup and the U18 Premier League South Division trophy to the London Stadium crowd in advance of the Premier League match against Manchester United. For several, it wasn't their first time setting foot on the Stratford turf; a hat-trick of players – Kaelan Casey, Oliver Scarles and Divin Mubama – had already made their first-team debut, with numerous others featuring in matchday squads. Hotshot Callum Marshall had even made his

senior international bow, entering the fray for Northern Ireland in the 85th minute of a Euro 2024 qualifier in Denmark and scoring an injury-time equaliser, only to have it cruelly ruled out by VAR.

Since the turn of the decade, a further 15 first-team debutants have emerged from the academy or the Premier League 2 breeding ground: Jeremy Ngakia, Harrison Ashby, Aji Alese, Emmanuel Longelo, Mipo Odubeko, Oladapo Afolayan, Nathan Trott, Jamal Baptiste, Daniel Chesters, Sonny Perkins, Keenan Appiah-Forson, Freddie Potts, Armstrong Oko-Flex, Kamarai Simon-Swyer and Levi Laing. Seven of them featured in the Europa League dead rubber against Dinamo Zagreb in late 2021, which might be seen to strengthen the bond between European football and youth success were it not for the fact that all the young starters have since departed. As 2023 ticked over into 2024, only six of the 15 remained contracted to West Ham United.

* * *

It is a common cry from the terraces that youth should be given their head. Having a successful youth team only strengthens this claim and when bright academy prospects depart without having made an impact on the first team it is seen as a systematic failure: the Academy of Football is feted and damned in equal measure. Fans scoffed at David Moyes's claim, 'There's a few boys that have left here who have made incredibly wrong decisions. They're in a great environment here. We're a football club who want to put young players in.' Yet it's worth noting

that the highly regarded Harrison Ashby and Sonny Perkins had more minutes on the pitch with West Ham than they managed in their first year with Newcastle or Leeds United respectively and both have subsequently been loaned out to lower-division clubs.

Footballers move on for a whole host of reasons but the stark reality at Premier League level is that only a handful of players have what it takes to make it to the top. Statistics released in 2023 show that a staggering 97 per cent of former category one academy players now aged 21 to 26 never made a single Premier League appearance, 70 per cent weren't given a professional contract at an English Football League club and only one in ten went on to make more than 20 league appearances in the top four tiers of English football.

Declan Rice grew into a £100m player and the joint most expensive Englishman in history during his decade with West Ham, but it could have been a very different career path for a 14-year-old told he wasn't good enough by Chelsea. His first reaction when his father Sean told him he had been released by his boyhood club was to cry. But the rejection spurred him on and there were other avenues open to him. Rice opted for West Ham after rejecting an offer from Fulham and training with Tottenham and Reading. *The Times* reported of his resilience, 'David Moyes would challenge Rice as much as any [other player] because the manager knew he would use the criticism to improve.' By this point he was heralded as one of the best defensive midfielders in the world, wanted back by Chelsea, and obviously

made of the right stuff, which is rarely apparent at an early age.

Moyes can take some credit for Rice's development but many different coaches and mentors moulded the player before he came to the Scot's attention. Moyes's predecessor, Manuel Pellegrini, converted him from a centre-back into a midfielder and first handed him the captain's armband, a month before his 21st birthday – this match, against Leicester City on 28 December 2019, proved momentous for both as Pellegrini was sacked the same day as the 2-1 home defeat. The reign of Pellegrini was sandwiched between Moyes's tenures and it was another predecessor, Slaven Bilić, who gave Rice his first-team debut, away to Burnley on 21 May 2017, the last day of the 2016/17 season.

Rice had been integral to the under-23s achieving promotion to the top division of the Professional Development League, which has undergone a series of changes since usurping the Premier Reserve League and Premier Academy League in 2012/13. Promotion came five days before his Premier League debut. Yet he was no more earmarked for greatness than Reece Burke, who was one of several youngsters thrown in at the deep end by Sam Allardyce in the infamous 5-0 FA Cup third-round defeat at Nottingham Forest in January 2014, which made explicit the manager's implicit point that there is a considerable gap between hardened professionals and callow youth. Nevertheless, Burke is part of a trio of resolute Hammers graduates, alongside Dan Potts and Pelly Ruddock-Mpanzu, to have returned to the Premier

League with Luton Town. Indeed, Ruddock-Mpanzu epitomises the Luton fairytale having made a name for himself as the first player to go from non-league to Premier League with the same club.

If Rice was initially no brighter a prospect than Burke, then he was considerably dimmer than the other Reece. Reece Oxford became West Ham's youngest-ever player when he started against Andorran side Lusitanos in a sold-out Europa League qualifier at the Boleyn Ground on 2 July 2015. He was 16 years and 198 days old and should have been having a relaxing summer post-GCSEs. Bilić let Oxford know the work was only just beginning by telling him, 'You're in the first-team changing room now, so work for your spot.' He impressed sufficiently even in the disastrous Astra Giurgiu tie to be trusted anchoring the midfield away to Arsenal on the opening weekend of the 2015/16 Premier League season. He had matured a further 39 days since his competitive debut but perhaps wasn't entirely ready to be thrust into the limelight of Sky Sports' *Super Sunday*. The pundits salivated over his taming of World Cup winner Mesut Özil, and Bilić was equally gushing, telling the BBC, 'People were asking, "Are you sure he is 16?!" It was going to be a risk [playing someone so young] but he has got something. I thought we needed someone to sit in front of the defence who is cool and can be a third defender, but who can also play on the ball. I am very proud of him. Only on paper he is 16. He is a part of this new generation. Put it this way, if Lionel Messi was in front of me, I would be more fazed than Reece.'

There is something inescapably tragic about a career peaking at 16. That man-of-the-match display was as good as it ever got for Oxford, who was last seen playing for FC Augsburg II, the B team of the Bundesliga minnows he joined in 2019 after loan spells with Reading and Borussia Mönchengladbach. Germany has been the making of various British youngsters in recent years, not least Jude Bellingham, but it has yet to work its magic on Oxford, now 25. The reasons for his demise are unclear but rumours of a big-time attitude persist, semi-validated by a relationship with *X Factor* winner Louisa Johnson and blingy Rolexes causing dressing-room unrest. Evidently he may have been too cool for school. Speaking to *The Athletic* in 2023, fellow trainee Lewis Page recalled, ‘Reece was the main talent at centre-back and I’m not sure if the club thought Dec was good enough to play in midfield ... He got released by Chelsea and he was worried it was going to happen again.’ It’s often said that you can’t write the script in football and the impossibility of accurately identifying who’s destined for the big time substantiates screenwriter William Goldman’s Hollywood dictum that ‘nobody knows anything’.

* * *

Fans certainly aren’t the best judges of young talent. Take Frank Lampard. Supporters typically like to speak of academy products as being ‘one of our own’ and they don’t come with a much richer claret and blue bloodline than Frank Lampard Jr. His father, Frank Lampard Snr, was

born in East Ham and was with the club from the age of 14 to 36, his 670 appearances putting him second on the all-time list, before returning as assistant manager to brother-in-law Harry Redknapp, born in Poplar and with a relatively paltry 175 appearances to his name – the pair married sisters Pat and Sandra, making Lampard Jnr Redknapp's nephew. If anything, the bloodline was too rich, leading to accusations of nepotism. A heated debate at a fans' forum, in which Redknapp was charged with giving opportunities to 17-year-old Lampard that had been denied to other promising midfielders, namely Matt Holland and Scott Canham, led to Redknapp's prophetic statement, 'I tell you without any shadow of a doubt there will be no comparison with what Frank Lampard will achieve in football and what Scotty Canham will achieve in football ... he will go right to the very top.'

Tony Carr, the long-time academy director tasked with nurturing generations of talent, makes the claim in his autobiography that both sides of the debate were charged by nepotism, with the dissenting voice supposedly belonging to Canham's uncle. Nevertheless, it was not a lone voice and Lampard's eventual departure, hot on the heels of the sacking of his uncle and father, was less mourned and less controversial than, say, the sale of Grady Diangana for a comparable fee, once inflation is taken into account. Had Lampard taken an entirely different route to success, similar to cousin Jamie Redknapp who apparently opted against signing schoolboy forms with West Ham because he was put off by the aggressive and blunt approach of chief scout Eddie

Baily, then he undoubtedly would have been viewed differently by West Ham supporters and classified as one who got away.

Supporters espouse the notion of a West Ham family but the familial relationship is certainly a complicated one. Chelsea seemingly had no qualms about welcoming Lampard into their bosom and claimed John Terry as a Blue through-and-through even though he was Barking born and bred and on West Ham's books until the age of 14, like Declan Rice in reverse. Status probably has something to do with it. Chelsea's 21st-century affluence meant that Lampard, Joe Cole and Glen Johnson could fulfil childhood dreams of winning leagues and cups while West Ham supporters could only watch on enviously. Attachments to Rice were tempered by the knowledge that practically every player would swap clubs for such riches if given the chance, as well as the fact that he was born and bred in south-west London. He was certainly never serenaded as 'one of our own', although given that the chant originated in Tottenham it's unlikely to ever be heard reverberating around Stratford. Homegrown players with their own emotional attachment to an area offer hope that they'd pass up temptation in favour of sticking around on the off-chance of winning something with *their* club, but these hopes generally prove forlorn (see Harry Kane).

Rio Ferdinand was another to live the dream after leaving West Ham for a British record transfer fee aged 22. His sale to Leeds in November 2000 is frequently cited as the moment a potential 'golden generation' was

cash in on. West Ham's only other appearance in the FA Youth Cup Final outside of those already discussed came in a star-studded encounter with Liverpool in 1995/96, featuring Ferdinand and Lampard on one side and Jamie Carragher and David Thompson on the other (plus 16-year-old Michael Owen on the bench). Liverpool prevailed but if the ultimate aim of academies is to produce future stars then it could be said that West Ham won by 187 England caps to 127 (including subs). Sadly, only 12 of those came while they were still West Ham players.

Rio Ferdinand, Frank Lampard, Joe Cole, Michael Carrick, Jermain Defoe and Glen Johnson were born barely six years apart but they never played in the same team together, save for the second half of an international friendly against the Netherlands in August 2009. By this point, they had long since said goodbye to Chadwell Heath and Upton Park; Carrick was last out in August 2004, remarking, 'It is frustrating when I see the quality of players who have left the club.' As a reporter for *The Guardian* put it, 'Imagine if [West Ham] had kept them all.' Fans can't help but wonder, though given that the Hammers somehow contrived to get relegated in 2003 with four of them still in the team, comparisons to Fergie's Fledglings and Manchester United's famous Class of '92 (David Beckham, Nicky Butt and Gary Neville were 1992 FA Youth Cup winners, supplemented by the similarly aged Ryan Giggs, Paul Scholes and Phil Neville) might be a little fanciful. However, with reality unable to prove otherwise, a mythology has taken hold of what might have been achieved had this nucleus of a

team been kept together, fuelled by Harry Redknapp's oft-repeated claim, 'If I kept those six players together I'm certain I would've won the Premier League.'

Such hypothesising in turn fuels the Cockney tendency to mythologise the potency of youth. Freddie Sears, Daniel Subuola and Toni Martínez have all been hyped as the next Jermain Defoe, and each failure to achieve the perceived potential does little to dampen enthusiasm for the next. Past academy successes encourage supporters to pin their hopes on the next prospective hit and West Ham supporters are rightly proud that key figures in the academy's history, such as Carr and Wally St Pier, the scout credited with discovering John Lyall, Bobby Moore, Geoff Hurst, Martin Peters, Frank Lampard Snr, Trevor Brooking and many others across his 47 years of service, are as well known to them as past managers of other clubs tend to be to their own fanbases. Most supporters want youth to succeed but sometimes they're guilty of wanting it too much, trapping themselves in a cycle of disappointment. Stage 1: believing youngsters are better than they are and lobbying for progression to the first team too soon or without merit. Stage 2a: realisation that a player is not as good as first believed – player falls from favour or quietly leaves. Stage 2b: player thrives and fretting begins that they will seek pastures new. Stage 3: look to the next generation to repeat.

* * *

As with the impossibility of disproving Redknapp's 'we could have been champions' conjecture, it is a footballing

paradox that not playing can heighten a player's perceived value, a phenomenon even more pronounced in youth. This could be termed the excitement of the unknown and also applies to new signings, especially those from exotic climes. Divin Mubama has been a recent beneficiary, and the young man's goalscoring record at youth level certainly suggests that he is worthy of a chance among the known packages, yet if he has half as good a career as the regularly disparaged Danny Ings then he will be considered a hit. The phenomenon overvalues the junior partner, undervalues the senior professional, and is generally unfair on both.

Also on the receiving end of it, Ben Johnson is a current case study in the cycle of disappointment. The full-back from Waltham Forest was a member of England under-21s' 2023 European Championship-winning squad but in West Ham terms he is a relatively old hand, having made more than 50 senior appearances since his debut in 2019. He was on the bench two years prior to that and the clamour for him to start has been replaced by a willingness to sell. It would be difficult to pinpoint where Johnson went from being judged an exciting prospect to an average squad player – injury absences and increased competition for places haven't helped – but he no longer receives the adulation he did as a green 17-year-old, when supporters were perhaps equally as naive as he. Detractors could say that he has not developed as expected but expectations with regard to development are treacherous; it is rarely linear and, like form, often comes in spikes. Others might contend,

especially after a sparkling midfield cameo against Sheffield United in January 2024, that he's been a victim of his own versatility and that it's flaws in coaching and an inability to make the best use of his talents that have hampered his progress.

It will be a shame if/when Johnson leaves (his contract expires at the end of the 2023/24 season and there has seemingly been reluctance on both sides to renew) because he is a model to the group below. Rio Ferdinand has stated in conversation with Tony Carr, 'West Ham needs to cling on to the one percenters who will help the club maintain its integrity. The new history is not sustainable without the past. Why did I sign for West Ham? Only one reason: because I thought it was a pathway to the first team.' It is no coincidence that younger brother Anton followed Rio into the first team, because he saw that it could be done and was inspired to imitate.

Players are a better (if not infallible) judge of what makes a player. Joe Cole has said, 'The one player I've always held in high esteem was Frank [Lampard]. Being three or four years older than me, I always looked up to him ... I watched him every day – practice, practice, practice. I tried that, I tried to do that, because I saw how hard he worked and how good it was. I always put Frank up on a pedestal for any young player I talk to.'

Success breeds success. Cole and Carrick followed in the slipstream of Lampard and Ferdinand, Defoe and Glen Johnson followed in theirs. Who would academy players look to as a role model in the absence of Declan Rice and Ben Johnson? For a long time, Mark Noble was

the automatic answer and even though 'Mr West Ham' remains *in situ* as sporting director, with a brief to fuse academy and first team, the average 18-year-old will not see themselves as having very much in common with someone twice their age.

Moreover, the footballing landscape has changed considerably since Noble started out. Carr, who is arguably a more qualified judge than anyone, has opined that producing homegrown players has become increasingly difficult in the modern era because of the influx of foreigners and the financial pressure to maintain Premier League status, resulting in managers routinely seeking quick-fix solutions rather than investing in player development. Carr himself was unceremoniously ushered out of the training ground in 2016, supplanted by Terry Westley and receiving the bare minimum of thanks for a lifetime of service. If Carr was once a bridge between eras, having gone from academy hopeful in the 1960s to managing the hopes of future generations across the subsequent five decades, then the new bridge is a dual structure, with Noble's experience bolstered by that of Kenny Brown Jnr, who was appointed academy manager in early 2023. Barking-born Brown played for West Ham between 1991 and 1996; he initially bypassed the academy, instead learning his trade at Norwich City, where his famous father was manager, although Kenny Brown Snr was an academy graduate and a stalwart of Ted Fenton and Ron Greenwood's West Ham teams in the 1950s and '60s. The legion of senior and junior appellations reinforces the image of West Ham as a

family club, as does the presence of former players Kevin Keen and Steve Potts as age-group managers; indeed, Potts has coached his own sons through the system, the aforementioned Dan and Freddie.

The tail end of Potts Snr's playing career coincided with the emergence of the academy's last golden generation, which puts him in a good position to draw comparison between then and now. Much has changed in the new millennium: the facilities, the methods, the age range – Freddie Potts began as early as five. Somewhat ironically, Potts has voiced the concern, 'The boys being in the system for so long, do they just become part of the furniture?' For all the progress of the 21st century, there remain a lot of question marks around academies.

* * *

This book sets out to celebrate West Ham's illustrious Academy of Football but also to investigate the reality from the vantage point of people who have been there and lived it. Some graced the first team, some got frustratingly close, some were thwarted by injury or personal circumstance. Unlike the big names, whose stories will already be known by most ardent fans, their narratives generally veer from the pitch after leaving West Ham, with self-harm becoming a worryingly prevalent theme. One contributor speaks of suffering post-traumatic stress disorder and this is no exaggeration. One of the reasons so many fall so far from the Premier League summit after being released is because, like Icarus, they have flown too close to the sun and been burnt in the process. In sharing

their experiences, it is hoped that they can help keep the next cohort grounded, sidestepping the hazardous glare and flames.

As well as opening the eyes of wannabe professional footballers, it also aims to offer insight to supporters who are not necessarily supportive. In all the discourse on academies, whether noisy or considered, it's easy to lose sight of the fact that academy 'products' are not produce, they're humans: children and young adults subject to stringent safeguarding policies in most other walks of life. The statistics about how many fall by the wayside make for grim reading but we need to see them not just as statistics: both the tiny percentage who become superstars and the vast mass who fall agonisingly short of making a career in the game are more than just another piece of football data.

All of these issues are not, of course, unique to West Ham; they are symptomatic of the wider game and the modern template of sports as industries rather than pastimes. Another contributor compares academies to a 'sausage factory ... there's 80 per cent of them boys facilitating the 20 per cent that *might* have an opportunity to come through. Unfortunately, that's elite football. These are the things that parents don't like to hear, or don't want to hear.' A ten-year report into the Premier League's Elite Player Performance Plan, introduced in 2012 with the objective of developing more and better homegrown players, stated, 'It is the unavoidable reality of the pathway that the majority of young people will leave the academy system without a professional playing

career. Therefore, it is important to manage expectations ... the chances of progression represent the reality of elite sport rather than a failure of the academy system.'

The report also revealed that:

- 77 per cent of parents with children in Premier League academies have moderate-to-high expectations that their child will become a professional footballer
- 89 per cent of parents believed the overall academy experience was positive
- 86 per cent of parents agreed that clubs care about their child's development beyond football

The outcomes for those who've been chewed up and spat out by the Premier League machine are being brought to the fore by a series of recent initiatives, perhaps prompted by the suicide of 18-year-old Jeremy Wisten in October 2020, less than two years after he'd been released by Manchester City. Wisten's father told an inquest into his son's death that Wisten felt 'let down' by the club. City rivals Manchester United have spent the past two years developing their pioneering Alumni Programme, providing a network of former players with formal access to support, help and advice. Similarly, Liverpool's Trent Alexander-Arnold has funded The After Academy, a project run in conjunction with the PFA, providing aftercare and job opportunities to former academy players. And BBC Three, recognising the human drama, broadcast *Boot Dreams: Now or Never*, a six-part documentary from August 2023 following a specially assembled training camp that gave players aged 18 to 26

who'd been rejected by top clubs another chance to catch the eye of scouts and earn professional contracts.

Hundreds of boys will have passed through the academy in the timespan bookended by the two FA Youth Cup triumphs and every story is unique so this book makes no pretence at being an authoritative guide to what goes on behind closed doors. What it does aim to do is provide a dash of authenticity as an antidote to some of the idle speculation that gets bandied about with regard to academy successes and failures.

Few other fanbases are quite so invested in their club's academy. The lyrics to 'I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles' should go some way to preparing West Ham youngsters for their dreams fading and dying but, as the supporters will readily attest, hope springs eternal.

Mark Noble Young Hammer of the Year

2008 James Tomkins

2009 Jack Collison

2010 Zavon Hines

2011 Freddie Sears

2012 Dan Potts

2013 George Moncur

2014 Sam Howes

2015 Reece Burke

2016 Reece Oxford

2017 Declan Rice

2018 Declan Rice

2019 Declan Rice

2020 Nathan Holland

2021 Ben Johnson

Dylan Tombides Award

Josh Cullen

Reece Oxford

Declan Rice

Domingos Quina

Conor Coventry

Ajibola Alese

Will Greenidge

Jayden Fevrier

Inside the Academy

2022	Ben Johnson	Sonny Perkins
2023	Divin Mubama	Gideon Kodua