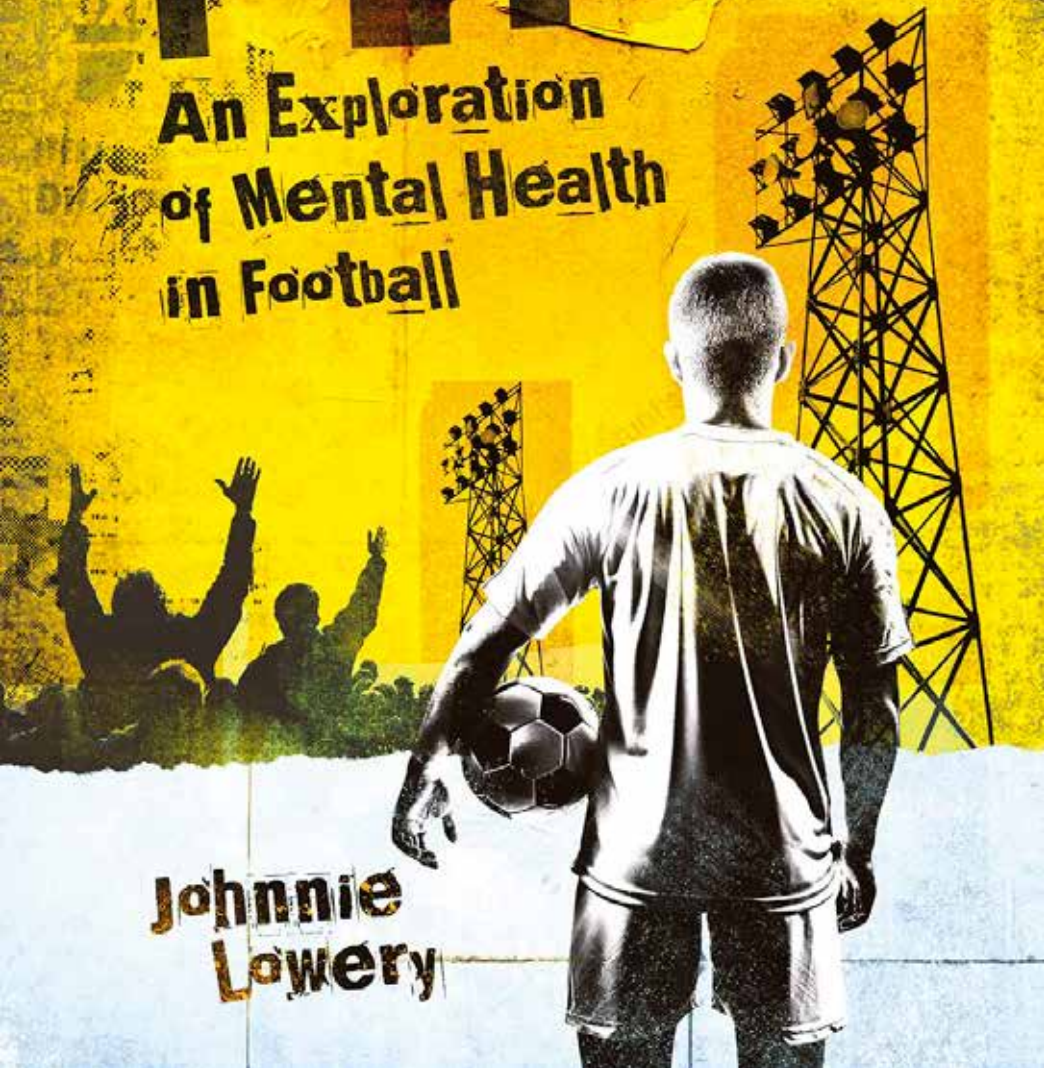
MATCH FIT

An Exploration of Mental Health in Football



Johnnie Lowery

MATCH FIT

An Exploration of Mental Health in Football

Johnnie Lowery

pitch

Contents

Chapter 1

The Player

IN MANY ways, Gary Speed appeared to have the world at his feet. Having won the final edition of the old First Division in 1992, the Welshman went on to play 535 games in the Premier League for Leeds United, Everton, Newcastle United and Bolton Wanderers. Always viewed as the model professional, Speed was a likely candidate to go into management once he eventually retired and so it proved. After a brief spell in charge of Sheffield United, he was appointed manager of his country in December 2010. Such was Speed's initial success, it surprised nobody when Wales were awarded FIFA's Best Movers title the following year, having gained more ranking points than any other nation. Away from football, Speed was married to his childhood sweetheart Louise and had two loving children. His own parents later reflected that to someone looking in, it appeared that Speed had everything going for him.

When Gary Speed took his own life in November 2011, the football world was shocked and saddened. Nobody saw it coming. A terrible tragedy, Speed's untimely passing

forced football in the UK to open up to its relationship with mental health. The default position was one of ignorance – footballers can't suffer with their mental health; their lives are perfect. Who wouldn't give their right arm to get paid hundreds of thousands of pounds a week to live their dream?

The reality isn't always so straightforward. In John Richardson's book, *Unspoken: Gary Speed: The Family's Untold Story*, former Wales team-mate Neville Southall describes Speed as a 'perfectionist' who would always be frustrated after defeats and perhaps may have found it mentally tough to uphold the incredibly high standards he set himself throughout his career. Matt Hockin, Speed's good friend at Bolton, mentions that he felt as though Speed used his football career to define his whole life and was particularly worried as he looked ahead to the end of his playing days. Tellingly, Louise Speed explains that her husband himself couldn't understand that people who seemed to have everything could experience depression, and so never associated himself with it. The recent rise of mental health awareness in football sadly came too late to save him.

Though mental health was effectively an afterthought within football ten years ago, Speed's death wasn't an isolated case. German football had its own tragic awakening in 2009 when one of the leading contenders for the number one jersey at the 2010 World Cup, Robert Enke, died by suicide. Throughout his career, Enke had struggled with the pressure of the spotlight, with a diary entry published in Ronald Reng's biography, *A Life too Short: The Tragedy of Robert Enke,* showing how the goalkeeper

was 'paralysed by fear' during his time at Barcelona. The death of Enke's young daughter added further pressures to his mental state, but Enke felt unable to open up to anyone within the football world about his depression, feeling it was incompatible with playing at the top level. As things spiralled, the Hannover 96 captain felt ashamed of taking time out and missing games, thinking of himself as a failure. Seeing no way out, he stepped in front of a train. Prior to Enke's death, the only notable player in Germany to have spoken about their mental health was former prodigy Sebastian Deisler, tipped as the saviour of German football as a teenager in the late 1990s. However, Deisler had retired from the game by 2007, perhaps amplifying Enke's fears that his depression would not be compatible with playing top-level professional football.

How many more people will have suffered in silence, feeling they couldn't open up and seek help within football's ultra-competitive and hyper-masculine environment? In February 2012, only a few months after Gary Speed's untimely passing, the career of a footballer once the subject of a documentary entitled *The Man Who Will Be Worth Billions* was coming to an end. Rather than wrapping up with Champions Leagues and World Cups under his belt, though, Vincent Pericard played the last of his club football at Havant & Waterlooville in the Conference South. Having made his Juventus debut in the Champions League ten years earlier, aged 19, against an Arsenal side containing the likes of Patrick Vieira and Thierry Henry, Pericard was unable to progress into the elite of the game and spent the majority of his career in the second and third tiers of English football. Reflecting on what might have been, Pericard's lightbulb

moment came when he realised it was his mental health, rather than the injuries that had plagued him throughout his playing days, that had caused the greatest damage to his career. But it wasn't until after his retirement that he realised he was struggling with depression.

'I think for me it all really started when I had a series of repeated injuries at Portsmouth. I didn't realise that it was taking a toll on my mental health because I wasn't aware of that or educated around it. I didn't really pay attention to it. I put it into the back of my head in an unconscious state and just pushed forwards. But unfortunately, what I was doing was just accumulating that feeling of frustration, feelings of "why me", and that feeling of "there's nothing I can do about it". It was dragging me into that dark space. That's what I remember now – going home and feeling the frustration, feeling like I had low value, having low energy, not having any motivation. Those were the early symptoms. If I knew that at the time, I could have started taking mitigating measures for it not to escalate.

'It was quite scary, because I woke up in the morning and I would put on a mask. I would put on a brave face, saying, "you know what, I'm going to training" and I only needed to wear this mask for two to three hours, then go home and remove it. It was really about psyching myself up, driving to the training ground and putting on a smile in order to hide my inner suffering, my pain, my frustrations, so that people didn't realise it, especially my manager. That's not a way of living. It created frustrations between what you feel and how you portray yourself to others. When you're in that state, this is when a desperate area of mental health and depression arises.'

By no means was Vincent Pericard the only footballer at the time suffering in silence without necessarily even understanding what they were going through. In the 2019 *A Royal Team Talk* documentary on mental health, Thierry Henry is asked if he ever struggled with depression in his career. His answer was that he simply didn't know. He was never educated on it, never allowed to even contemplate it, the football world almost instinctively blocking any route into what might have been seen as a weakness. Craig Bellamy was one of many players shocked into introspection by the death of Gary Speed, seeing similarities between his former Wales and Newcastle team-mate and himself. Bellamy had previously refused to see a mental health professional, admitting he saw it as a sign of weakness, but was forced to recognise his obsession with football was a significant risk factor for him when things weren't going well on the pitch. During a loan spell at Cardiff, for example, big things were expected of the former Liverpool and Manchester City man dropping down a league to his hometown club, but injuries took their toll and Cardiff were ultimately defeated in the play-offs. During this time, Bellamy was so down he rarely left the house other than for training, and his marriage broke up as a result, even though it was the first time in years he had been living with his wife and children, who had settled in Cardiff whilst he travelled the country to optimise his football career.

When Speed passed away, Bellamy saw some of the traits he thought might have been contributory factors in himself. Described as a glass-half-empty man by his wife, Gary Speed would have spells where he would effectively shut himself off from conversation at the

training ground if he was feeling down, according to Bellamy. Throughout his own career, Bellamy concedes his team-mates would know to avoid him on days he was feeling down – days which would almost always be brought about by injury troubles or even just a spell out of the side. It's clear that the pacy frontman saw football as his life and identity. This single-mindedness may have brought Bellamy a degree of success on the pitch but clearly ravaged his mental state, and it took the death of a close friend in Gary Speed for him to even realise the scale of the damage.

The consequences of Vincent Pericard's struggles were almost disastrous too. The Cameroonian-born striker reached his low point during a spell at Stoke City. Stuck in a vicious cycle of needing to prove himself and trying to come back too soon from injury only to make things worse again, Pericard started to feel worthless. On a night in which Pericard knew he wouldn't sleep due to the anxieties building up inside him, he took a sleeping pill. Something in his head snapped, however, and rather than stopping at one pill he took the rest of the packet, feeling that nobody would miss him if he didn't wake up. Thankfully, Pericard survived and finally understood he needed to seek help. He credits being referred to a performance coach, to work on the mental side of his game whilst at Stoke City, as the first step on a journey that ultimately saved his life, as it opened up his mind to counselling further down the line. As crucial as this was for Pericard, he looked to keep it a secret, with the dressing room at any of his clubs not the sort of place to disclose anything about mental health or even the general field of psychology at the time.

'Football is meant to be a team sport but really it is very individualistic. When you've got a squad of 21 players, every player is looking after themselves because they are working within a limited contract which basically depends on their performance on the pitch. My team-mates had their own challenges to go through. They didn't have the space, the capacity, the skill or knowledge to sympathise and have compassion for what I was going through and to help.

'It's very easy to feel isolated, because it's you in the centre of it with your team-mates with their own problems. You might have your family, but they don't really see behind the scenes, they see you as a star celebrity and that's it. They wouldn't understand why you would suffer from your mental health. So for me, after going home, this is when you feel very lonely. I'm sure you've heard the example of singers, who've been on stage being applauded by 60,000 people – as soon as the show is finished, they go back to their hotel room and feel very, very lonely, because there's no intimate relationship with anyone. Football is exactly the same.'

* * *

Until perhaps the last five to ten years, a dressing room of acquaintances rather than friends has been the accepted norm in football. I spoke to John Salako, most notably of Crystal Palace and England, to understand what the footballing environment was like in the 1980s and 1990s. Sitting in an office in south London in his new life in business, Salako admits the culture was 'cut-throat' right from the early days as an apprentice, when the senior pros would see you as a threat to their livelihoods. Fights in

training would be commonplace, and Salako recalls that Mark Dennis in particular would threaten to break his legs if he went past him. He might laugh about it now, but it didn't take much for a sense of bitterness to pervade and make the dressing room a very unpleasant place. The first time Salako was relegated, for example, in the 1992/93 season, he suffered a serious knee injury early on in the campaign and spent several weekends working for Sky. When it came to the end-of-season gathering, one of the senior players launched into a rant at Salako, seemingly furious at the fact he had appeared on TV whilst injured, thereby supposedly contributing to the club's fate. Salako was only trying to look after himself, worried he might need a financial backup if he couldn't get back to the level he had been at before. Yet the buck had been passed on to him for a relegation in which he played a minimal part. Though furious, he had to grit his teeth and get on with it.

Stories of what is now seen as a toxic dressing-room atmosphere were commonplace in the 1980s and 1990s, but it's clear football's bullying culture has never truly gone away. Luke Chadwick made his senior debut for Manchester United at the age of 18 in 1999, but this exposure brought him an unwanted form of attention aside from any on-pitch fame. He was relentlessly mocked on the TV show *They Think It's All Over* for his appearance, to the point where it became what he was best known for. Chadwick has recently spoken about the impact this had on his anxiety, with the embarrassment it caused him meaning he felt unable to open up about it at the time. More recently, the story of the academically keen Nedum Onuoha having his A-Level schoolbooks burnt

whilst coming through at Manchester City came to light, told by Stephen Ireland as just one anecdote of what he described as a 'really mentally challenging' environment where the only advice he received was 'just toughen up and get on with it, stop being a baby'. As recently as 2022, Crawley Town manager John Yems was suspended and later left his role, due to bullying behaviour, including racial discrimination against his players.

Salako highlights a young Stan Collymore in particular as someone who was 'eaten up and spat out' of the dressing room at Crystal Palace, the striker having to leave the club for Southend in 1992/93 as he found it so tough. As Collymore notes himself in his autobiography, he flourished at clubs where he was cared for but often struggled at places where his wellbeing was further down the agenda. Take Aston Villa, for example, where Collymore's manager, John Gregory, publicly derided him for taking time away from football due to his depression. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, having been prolific at Nottingham Forest and Liverpool, Collymore struggled at Aston Villa and was allowed to leave just a few years after signing for his boyhood club. The sport's reluctance to acknowledge the significance of the mental side of the game for so long was not only damaging to individuals but also to clubs themselves, with Villa having paid at the time a club record £7 million for Collymore's services in 1997.

Conceding that he comes very much from football's old school, Salako admits he would have scoffed at the concept of mental health during his playing days, seeing any admission that you were struggling as a sign of weakness in an environment where strength was paramount. He

wouldn't have been the only one. It was expected that players would leave any problems they had at the door, be it bereavement, divorce, or even just mental struggles with no obvious cause. The sport was, and to an extent still is, a results business, and anyone not performing would be unceremoniously cut and cast onto the scrapheap. Counselling is part of the game now, which is undoubtedly a positive thing. However, it was life after professional football rather than the macho culture of the sport itself that eventually opened up Salako's eyes to the realities of mental health.

'Certainly for me, it's only been later on in life that I've discovered what it feels like to have depression and anxiety. That's been hard for me to comprehend because I've spent so long going "no, no, no, this doesn't happen, I've got to just deal with this". I'm a classic throwback and I still struggle to go and speak to someone and say, "I need help". I don't think we thought like that back then. I wouldn't think players would admit to it. We were a lot more insular. But there must have been a lot of people who felt like that and that's when you realise – there must have been people at some stage that were dealing with stuff and just couldn't talk about it. You couldn't bring that into that environment.

'Life can become depressing really quickly after you stop playing. You miss the lads, you miss the games, you miss that buzz. You had somewhere to go and someone to be with, something to look forward to. When that stops, I think that's quite hard to deal with. Often, lads have to deal with divorce, alcohol, substance abuse, bankruptcy, financial hardship. It can just become chaotic. You were always aware that you were one bad tackle away

from ending your career. Your career is short-lived as a footballer. I always hate actors and musicians and other sportsmen and sportswomen like golfers. They can play until they're about 60 and keel over, so it's always a shame with footballers that you have a shelf life.'

The fear of what life after football might look like can be a significant issue for players. This was brought home in devastating fashion in March 2021 when Yeovil Town captain Lee Collins took his own life. Collins's widow, Rachel Gibbon, explained at the inquest that her husband, aged 32 at the time of his death, had been struggling with the thought of what to do next when he had to retire from playing. Coaching and management didn't seem like a good fit with all the pressures involved, but the man who had been a professional footballer since February 2007 couldn't see himself transitioning into an office job. Feeling that as captain he couldn't show any signs of weakness, Collins instead turned to alcohol and recreational drugs to self-medicate, causing his mental state to further spiral until his death. Gibbon has called for more proactive mental health support for lower-league footballers in particular, and Salako agrees that more support to help footballers transition out of the game is essential. There was little in the way of transition advice and support in the early 2000s when Salako retired, and even after finding his new career in business, he admits a lot of clients will want to talk more about football than how he can help them financially. It has been hard to shake off that footballing identity.

It was this identity conundrum that played a large part in Marvin Sordell choosing to get out of professional football early and on his own terms. Sordell is a former

professional footballer but would be more likely to introduce himself to you as a businessman, a producer, or even a poet. These certainly aren't pursuits that were encouraged during Sordell's time in professional football – in fact, quite the opposite. During his time at Bolton, the striker's mother received a phone call from the club chairman, declaring in no uncertain terms that Sordell needed to concentrate more on his football and less on other hobbies, including cooking and playing the piano as well as the regular therapy sessions he was having at the Priory site in Altrincham. With this resistance to developing any other side of his personality, football became all-encompassing for Sordell, who struggled as the game established a stranglehold on him, suffocating him into submission, particularly during spells out of the first team.

'My whole identity was wrapped up in a game and performance which at times you don't even get the opportunity to participate in. Being a footballer and not being able to play football is one of the hardest things. Every single moment I did have on a football pitch was a reflection of what my mood was going to be.' He likens it to an office worker's emotions plummeting every time they made a typo or sent a bad email. 'It's very unhealthy for your emotions to go from high to low a lot in such a small space of time. And for me, it got to a point where I began to stop feeling the highs and started to only feel the lows, and as they became lower and lower, the highs became lower too, so as opposed to living in this whole spectrum I was only living in the lower parts of it.

'I think it's difficult really to describe because there are so many things … that come across your mind around

that period of time if you're feeling low. Anyone who suffers from depression will say the same thing: they can't necessarily point to a single thing or a single moment and describe it in great detail. It's just they understand that they don't feel good at all and that's the best way I can describe it. That led to me attempting to take my own life because I was at a point where I didn't see a future, I didn't see how life could go on beyond where I was at the time. I felt like I was in such a dark place that the respite and the light and the freedom and the release would come from just not being here and not existing anymore.'

Sordell's suicide attempt came just seven months after he had been told to concentrate on his football by Bolton Wanderers. By this point, he had been moved out on loan against his wishes to Charlton Athletic, struggling to cope with the pressure his £3 million price tag brought. Sordell admits he struggled to cope with these external pressures, with nobody to support him at the club and his family living away from him. I ask Sordell if he ever received any support for his mental health in his football career. He thinks about it for a while and comes back with a bleak answer. All the way from his time at Fulham's academy to an injury-fraught spell at Northampton immediately before he retired, nothing was ever provided.

The honesty with which Sordell speaks about the depths of his depression is crucial in opening up the conversation for those currently still playing professional football. In something of a vicious circle, Sordell struggled to rationalise his mental health issues, feeling guilt at the fact he knew he was in a privileged position, not understanding why he could feel down when there were

so many people in the world in far worse positions but seemingly happy. This in turn made him feel lower still, until he eventually came to understand that mental health can negatively affect anyone, regardless of who they are and what they do. Sordell's openness means this learning process will hopefully be swifter for anyone suffering with those feelings now. It is an openness that is still rare in football. Tellingly, one of the most honest accounts of a mental health battle in football comes from 'The Secret Footballer'.

The Secret Footballer is a now retired former Premier League player who has anonymously written a series of books and newspaper columns about his life in the game. It's the threat of being sued that prevents him from revealing his identity, but there's no doubt anonymity would have made opening up on severe depression and suicidal thoughts easier whilst he was still playing at the top level. Amongst other things, the Secret Footballer talks of automatically defaulting to measuring his life based on his on-pitch performances as opposed to 'real terms'. He feels that any enjoyment gleaned from playing football is negated by the pressure and expectation of the game at the top level, with this pressure acting as a 'poisoned chalice' and a major factor in his depression. His work-life balance was so skewed that the Secret Footballer missed important weddings and funerals throughout his career, probably losing friends as a result. Some of the most powerful comments come from his wife, who says there were days where she went to bed not expecting to see her husband again, such were the depths of his low points. She reflects, 'The most impressive thing is that he got out alive.' Her

husband feels he wasted his life as a footballer, she muses, and feels he should have quit after reaching the Premier League, as he couldn't top that achievement. The general experiences talked about are so similar to Sordell's that you might think my interviewee was the Secret Footballer, had the dates of their careers aligned. The reality is that many footballers will surely have felt the same way, but very few feel able to admit it.

Despite his dislike of large parts of the game, the Secret Footballer has admitted more than once to returning to play after having previously decided to retire, being drawn back in by a simple love of the sport that stems from childhood. Marvin Sordell too has always loved football itself, but even this was not enough to keep him playing professionally beyond the age of 28. Lessons in the cut-throat nature of the sport were delivered to Sordell from as early as seven years of age, when his mother was told he would not be signed for a Sunday League team he trialled for, as he was 'shit'. Though dedicated to making it professionally in his teenage years and training hard accordingly, Sordell admits he questioned this desire when playing at under-16 level for Fulham, as he found the culture whereby authority was never to be questioned restrictive. This feeling only ballooned further as Sordell progressed to the top of the professional game until it became overbearing. Football stopped being enjoyable for the kid who had spent his entire childhood with a ball at his feet.

'It's just part of being a football player now, unfortunately, that because you're paid a decent wage people just assume that's licence to do and say anything they want to you, which is sad really because at the end

of the day football players are still human beings who are doing their job. But this is the case and it definitely had an impact on me. There were things in the media which obviously came out as well whilst I was playing, talking about my use of social media and things like that. I didn't have it much actually, because I knew when to just keep myself to myself and stay away from all that, because you can add fuel to the fire purely by being in the presence of people. Sometimes, you just stay away from everything and it allows the media to sort of ease off.

'I remember coming up through the academy and speaking to senior players and they would say, "You need to do what you need to do just to survive." Not many people come into the football industry as players and thrive. People might read that and go, "well, they earn so much money". But only some do, the majority don't. So, mostly, you get to a point where you realise that it's not about trying to have everything perfect, it's just about trying to keep your head down and just survive. At the end of the day, it does become a job and it does become about setting yourself up for your future and looking after your family. I learnt as I got older how to fit in. Something that everyone always says in football is just "play the game" with your team-mates, with your coaches, laugh at the jokes and get involved when you need to get involved, dip your toe in, but you can still keep yourself to yourself. It's what you have to do to survive in the game because at the end of the day everything is based on how people perceive you.'

After ten years in the professional game, Sordell eventually decided he'd had enough of just surviving. Being treated poorly by his club Burton Albion was the

final straw for the man who had represented Great Britain at the 2012 Olympics, and the 28-year-old announced his retirement in July 2019. The story made headlines due to the unusual nature of a professional footballer actively choosing to quit the game at what might be considered their typical peak age, but Sordell isn't the only one to have made that decision. World Cup winner André Schürrle retired aged 29, stating that he no longer wanted to face the loneliness that came with top-level football's inherent competition. Dutch midfielder Davy Pröpper followed suit in January 2022, frustrated with an overly crowded schedule of matches to please sponsors and TV cameras, exacerbated by a lack of contact with his family due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Now free from the shackles of regimentation that come as part and parcel of professional football, Sordell's creative side has been able to flourish. He runs a couple of businesses and is the co-founder of production company ONEIGHTY, whose work includes feature films with the likes of John Stones and Raheem Sterling. Sordell maintains a keen interest in the football industry, sitting on the newly established PFA Players' Board with a view to bringing about greater awareness and support for mental health issues in the game. He talks of having many goals in life, with one of these being to bring about a change in the culture of professional football. Nobody is better placed to understand the problems that currently exist, and Sordell has no shortage of ideas and enthusiasm.

'One of my biggest goals is to change football for the better and make it a more positive working environment. That comes down to wellbeing first and foremost, changing

the culture of football, the relationship between football and clubs, players and fans. A lot of the relationships are not necessarily healthy.

'I'm dedicated to changing [it] because at the end of the day a lot of these people are just human beings, normal human beings, and this is an industry that is very, very unique in that you have a high level of emotion and a high level of money. So you've got big business and big emotion. There is no other industry I can think of that is like it – it's either one or the other. It's about understanding how to manage that, how to navigate that, how to really get people on board with the fact that it's very different.

'The first thing is to unlearn. You have to get people to understand that the way we see things in football isn't right, the way football is isn't right, the culture of bullying isn't right. We have to do that first and foremost, because if you don't, people will just think, it's fine because it's always been like this, why is it a problem? But you have to understand that it has always been a problem. Then you can re-educate people in understanding what it is really like and why it's wrong, and then you begin to put things in place to make things better.'

There is hope. As we bring our discussion to a close, Sordell admits he was afraid that the reaction from the public and his team-mates would be overwhelmingly negative when he first spoke about his mental health struggles. This didn't turn out to be the case: far from it. The conversation that sprung from his tentative first steps helped Sordell, and surely many others still keeping their mental health struggles secret, realise they weren't alone. It was the medium of writing that allowed Sordell

to feel comfortable in expressing his feelings. Sordell's poem *Denis Prose* (which I have included here with his kind permission) is particularly powerful in explaining the emotional conflict Sordell was going through. It describes him at his lowest, going into training with both himself and passenger Denis Prose (an anagram of depression) in the car, representing two sides of his consciousness. As the passenger takes charge, the poem ends in suicide – so nearly the fate that befell Sordell himself, before he spoke up about his mental health and sought help. Sordell's message is urgent but assertive – Denis Prose could be the passenger in any footballer's car.

Along the road I start to drive,
With Denis Prose right by my side.
He's only small, but I notice him,
As I gaze and watch the sun come in.

The birds are singing,
The flowers bloom.
It's all so beautiful,
Until you give him room.

As the sky clouds over, he starts to grow,
But the car is still in my control.
Swerving anxiously from lane to lane,
Whilst the glorious sunshine, turns to grey.

This drive's becoming ever so tough,
And Denis Prose has had enough.
Big enough now to master the wheel,
Says, 'I'm in control, just trust me, deal?'

A passenger on my very own journey,
Reduced to watching raindrops so large it's unearthly.
I have no power but no longer afraid,
Since Denis Prose took over, I've just obeyed.

He tells me, close your eyes until I say,
On this journey, you cannot stay.
I'll take you to where there is peace,
And above all, a place to sleep.

. . .

Now you can open.
But he's gone, as my eyes have just awoken.

I look into the distance,
See pearly white doves,
And the youngest to oldest,
Of all my loves.

This place is so peaceful,
But the silence is deafening.
Don't weep for me though,
I'm free! I'm in heaven.

Michael Bennett had a football career that will be relatable to many in the game. Showing plenty of promise in his childhood, he was fast-tracked through to Charlton Athletic's first team at the age of just 17, being involved in the England youth set-up as he began to feel as though the world was at his feet. However, as is the case with so many

promising young players, a serious injury stopped Bennett's progress in its tracks and he never truly recovered. Left to mourn what might have been, the winger from Camberwell spent the rest of his career flitting between sides in all four divisions of the Football League before finishing up at part-time Canvey Island whilst he planned for life after football. After initially planning to stay in the game as a coach or agent, Bennett's head was turned by his careers officer at college who told him his strong active listening skills would make him a good counsellor. Becoming a qualified therapist in 2004, Bennett has gone on to obtain a master's degree in counselling from the University of East Anglia and in July 2021 qualified as a Doctor of Education.

Throughout this learning curve, Bennett has applied his skill set to the world of football. His playing days were in the same era as John Salako's, and the former Crystal Palace and England man's comments on the toughness of the dressing room and stigma around mental health at the time are reiterated by Bennett as we chat over Zoom. He emphasises that whilst he experienced mental health challenges throughout his career, he never had any form of support. Keen to change that, Bennett set up a company called Unique Sports Counselling in 2005 to provide anonymous support to footballers who felt they might need help.

When approaching clubs to offer his services, though, the vast majority said there was no issue with mental health in football and their players did not require Bennett's support. The idea was evidently ahead of its time and in 2007 Bennett was forced to pursue an alternative path as education adviser at the Professional Footballers'

Association (PFA). Initially, his role was focused on delivering practical options to players who were about to retire from professional football so they could move seamlessly out of the game and minimise the mental impact of that transition. It wasn't long before the role became significantly wider-ranging.

Reflecting on events that led to the formation of the dedicated PFA Wellbeing Department in February 2012, Bennett pinpoints two key catalysts: the release of a mental health handbook the PFA distributed to its members in 2011; then, just as this started to normalise conversation around mental health in football, the tragic news of Gary Speed's suicide. The shock that reverberated around football prompted many to contemplate their own mental state instead of pushing it to the side. So many more players started to ask for help that it necessitated the foundation of an entire new department to cater for that demand. That department has gone from strength to strength in the years that followed and continues to provide a vital service for professional footballers in England.

Dr Michael Bennett has been head of the PFA Wellbeing Department since its inception. The department's remit is wide-ranging, with no two days being the same. Bennett and his team will regularly help professional footballers with issues from addiction to loneliness, from financial hardship to low mood with no obvious cause. Whatever the issue, and there is no single theme that dominates, Bennett holds one key principle front and centre to his work. It stems from his own experiences as a player and closely relates to some of Marvin Sordell's most prominent comments.

'In my own experience, I felt we were treated as footballers rather than a person who played football. You're labelled as a professional footballer. Your identity, your self-worth is all around being a professional footballer. When that's gone, who are you? And so when I go and do my talks at clubs and I speak at seminars or do interviews, the first thing I say is, I don't deal with footballers. I deal with a person that plays football. It's the person I'm interested in, not the footballer, and that's key. Without the person there is no footballer. This person at this precise moment in time is going through a difficult time, whatever that is, and requires emotional support and empathy. My work is to put football aside. What I'm trying to do is get clubs and organisations to understand that you are dealing with a person that plays football for your football club.'

Everyone who has played professional football in the English league system is eligible for PFA membership. There are currently around 55,000 members, with 4,000 of them active players and the rest retired. The mental health support available to these members takes two key forms, the first being one-to-one help provided on an ad-hoc basis. A 24/7 wellbeing helpline is available for any player to access immediate support. From this, players can be referred to a nationwide network of counsellors for 12 free sessions or could enter a residential rehab facility run by Sporting Chance. The number of players accessing this support has been on an upward trend, albeit briefly reversed during the pandemic as players struggled with finding somewhere quiet for a confidential conversation. Bennett stresses that there's no overestimating just how important that confidentiality is to the success of the PFA's

wellbeing provision. Though attitudes are changing across the board, many players still fear being seen as 'weak' or 'a liability' by their managers if they openly discuss their mental health, and so are keen for anything they say to be kept secret from their clubs. This may or may not be the case and will of course differ from club to club, but the peace of mind offered by the PFA being independent and confidential is vital in ensuring players feel comfortable in coming forward.

The second pillar of the PFA Wellbeing Department's work looks at ensuring that players are educated on the topic of mental health and can pick up early signs they are struggling. Bennett's colleague Jeff Whitley delivers mental health workshops to clubs, with ex-players such as Whitley (who suffered from addiction throughout his career) sharing their own stories of mental health for the current crop of professional footballers to relate to. The aim, as Bennett explains, is to outline football's 'industry hazards' to players so they are prepared for what they might face throughout their careers.

'When I ask players the question, "how do you look after yourself emotionally before a game on Saturday?" they look at me in disbelief. They've never been asked that question before and don't know what the answer is. So I say to them, it's important for you to understand what your mental health and wellbeing is like and how you can address it and make it work for you so it's beneficial from a holistic standpoint. And so our workshops are around looking at what we call the industry hazards. These industry hazards are the challenges that individual players are going to come into contact with on their footballing journey.' Bennett

says the Wellbeing Department's work is prompted by research and players' answers to surveys and covers issues like the pressures of the game, isolation, having no voice, injuries, short-term contracts, new managers making changes, gender and religion. 'These are all things that impact individuals' wellbeing. It's happening every day and they're not even aware it's happening to them.

'When you make them aware that these are some of the things players have said that have impacted their wellbeing, players can identify with it straight away. So, the key for us is making these players aware of the industry hazards they may come into contact with … [and] how to access support.'

As part of his studies with the University of East Anglia, Bennett produced a 242-page research paper that examined and described some of the industry hazards endemic in professional football. Elements of his research's four overarching themes are visible in each of my conversations with Vincent Pericard, John Salako and Marvin Sordell. One theme is 'The Mask', reflecting the defence strategies developed by players to hide their vulnerable selves, with Pericard using this exact terminology to describe his experience of depression at a time where he felt unable to ask for help. Sordell's description of his identity being wrapped up in his on-pitch performances fits into Bennett's theme on 'Snowballing Self', exploring a fragile self-perception for players, whilst Salako relates his experience with injuries to Bennett's 'Rollercoaster' theme which represents the ups and downs with extreme highs and lows that come naturally in professional football.

Being attuned to these industry hazards and the signs players might be affected by them is a key aspect of Bennett's role. It's a topic that would have been skirted over even five or ten years ago, but is starting to become more mainstream in the media. Take *Rooney*, for example, the 2022 documentary on one of England's greatest footballers. Wayne Rooney, now in his mid-30s and a lot more contemplative than his reputation from his playing days would suggest, reflects on struggling to deal with his propulsion into fame at the age of 16. Still a teenager, he carried the nation's hopes at Euro 2004, a tournament which ended in defeat to Portugal in a penalty shoot-out after Rooney went off injured. Though confident in his footballing ability at that time, he talks about experiencing more of a fear of losing than a desire to win. He concedes that as these pressures continued to build up throughout his career he developed a drinking problem, and at his lowest point worried he could have caused the death of himself or of others whilst drunk. Speaking on *BBC Breakfast* regarding the release of his documentary, Rooney states that despite all these issues he was going through, he could never have admitted them whilst playing. Bennett's job is to change that perception for players now.

The huge weight of expectation, as well as media intrusion into his private life from a young age, was the main industry hazard facing Rooney. Not everyone will be burdened by the messiah status a teenage Rooney was appointed by the English game, but there are plenty of other industry hazards out there that have recently hit the headlines. In the wake of *Rooney* being released, Chris Sutton admitted to struggling with his mental health

after his £10 million move to Chelsea in 1999. With the price tag demanding goals, Sutton netted just once in the league and became a laughing stock for the English media. At the time, Sutton felt too ashamed to speak to anyone and internalised his concerns, a move which created a vicious cycle which was only broken when he left the club to join Celtic. Only now has Sutton felt able to openly speak about the effect on his mental health, but it isn't as though English football has been oblivious to the pressures transfer fees might bring. Indeed, Tottenham famously signed Jimmy Greaves for £99,999 in 1961, as Bill Nicholson didn't want him to have the extra burden of being the first £100,000 player in British football. It might not have been the language used at the time, but this all links back to the concept of mental health.

Of the 55,000 PFA members, however, only a select few are bought and sold for large transfer fees. For the majority, the most common move is a free transfer as players are told they won't be retained at the end of the season. Michael Bennett was predominantly in this boat himself and knows the stresses and strains it can bring. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, club finances have become more stretched and so Bennett has amplified concerns over the number of players being left in the limbo of one-year contracts, worrying for half of that season over whether another contract would be forthcoming at its conclusion. He explains to me that the provision from the PFA is identical for all its members, whether they play for Manchester United or Accrington Stanley, and that one of the key aims at present is to move towards a more proactive needs-led approach. Similar to the research

Bennett carried out for his studies, this involves asking players what they need and using this feedback to optimise the services provided. In general, the idea that mental health provision needs to be proactive, rather than reactive, is becoming more and more central to the playbook. It's a concept that is at the forefront of the work the Chris Mitchell Foundation does in Scotland.

The Chris Mitchell Foundation is reactive only in the way it came about, sadly born out of tragedy after the suicide of the Scottish footballer whose name it bears. Mitchell was an intelligent child but always dreamt of being a professional footballer, leaving school at 16 to pursue this ambition. Everything seemed to be going to plan when he made his debut for Falkirk in the Scottish Premier League whilst still in his teens as well as being called up to Scotland U21. Unfortunately, injuries stunted his progression and by his mid-20s Mitchell had dropped out of the professional game altogether, playing for Clyde whilst working in a factory. His talent was always evident despite his injury struggles. His father, Philip, proudly describes to me how Mitchell won Queen of the South's player of the season award in 2013 from right-back even though the club's centre-forward had netted more than 40 goals that season.

Mitchell's persistent foul luck with injuries finally became too much for his career when he experienced complications after spinal surgery in 2015. His spell playing part-time at Clyde did not last long and by February 2016 he had quit football altogether to focus on a job as a salesman. However, Mitchell struggled to deal with the career change and his mental health began to

deteriorate. Tragically, despite having seen a doctor for his depression and having been prescribed anti-depressants, Mitchell took his own life in May 2016. It appeared that the support he had sought towards the end of his life came too late to save him.

For Philip and the rest of the Mitchell family, mixed in amongst the grief was frustration at the failings of football as a whole to spot and address the signs of Chris's mental distress in what was his workplace for the majority of his life.

'The rehabs [for Mitchell's injuries] weren't great. Teams weren't great at looking after players under rehab. If you're not playing in the first team, you're not an asset for them at that time. Everybody who was in the dressing room turned right onto the training pitch and those who were injured turned left and did their own thing. So you were sort of marginalised and Christopher didn't like that. So when these things were happening, which were quite regular, he used to get down a wee bit.

'For the next fortnight or so [after Mitchell's death] people were coming to the house, ex-team-mates and managers. We were saying, "How has Christopher got himself into this situation? Is there any support in football for when you're needing help in relation to your wellbeing?" And they couldn't say that there was anything. There was something in place but it was so poorly advertised that we didn't know about it. We could approach the SPFA, the players' union up here in Scotland, as a family but we never knew that. So, my daughter took it upon herself to do something about this. A short distance in the past there was no support whatsoever. Nothing. We don't know the

majority of the stories going back ten or 20 or 30 years of footballers who were suffering at the time.'

Set up as a family-run charity propelled by Philip and his daughter Laura, the Chris Mitchell Foundation set itself the not insignificant task of filling the gaps in Scottish football's mental health provision. It is the belief of both Philip and Laura that better mental health awareness at the clubs he played for and across the world of football as a whole might have helped spot the warning signs in Chris long before he reached crisis point, even though that came after his retirement from the game. Someone proactively noticing something wasn't quite right with Chris and reaching out to him might have stopped it. Even on the day of Chris's suicide, Philip points to opportunities to save his life, likening the bus journey a clearly distressed Chris took on the way to the level crossing at which he took his life to a World War II plane from a film, spiralling towards the ground. Even something as simple as someone asking Chris if he was OK might have snapped him out of that spiral, a parachute to save his life and bring him back to his senses. Sadly, nobody on that bus had the education or confidence to do so.

The way the Chris Mitchell Foundation has gone about addressing this shortcoming in football is simple but remarkably effective. Working with the Scottish Professional Football League (SPFL) Trust, the Foundation delivers mental health awareness training courses to staff at all 42 professional clubs in Scotland. The two-day accredited course is delivered by director of Positive Mental Health Scotland Mark Fleming and covers all aspects of mental health and how to deal with them, with the main

outcome being teaching people to spot signs of anxiety, depression and psychosis before signposting the sufferer towards professional help. With the capability to deliver it either in person or online, over 800 people have been upskilled courtesy of the Chris Mitchell Foundation. With five people on average from each Scottish professional side having already completed the course, the hope is that this increase in knowledge and awareness will take the onus off the player to come forward. It is this switching of responsibilities which is key for Philip, as he explains.

'There's a negative stigma with mental health. It's seen as a weakness within you if you've got mental health issues. And that's why people don't put their hands up and ask for help, because they feel ashamed, they think they'll be the butt of the jokes. They possibly think that Scottish football is a small pond with a lot of fish in it, and everybody knows everybody else's business. If you are brave enough to put your hand up, there's still people in football that disregard mental health, and these people could define that as baggage for years to come. When that player comes up for a new contract or a new club or whatever, they'll remember, "Well, he had mental health issues – I don't need that at my club. I've got other things to deal with."

'That's why we've got these people in clubs that can approach people in confidence, ask the question, get a conversation going and see where that takes them. We've turned it around 180 degrees. They've got all this training and knowledge; if they see a change in somebody's demeanour or whatever, they can approach them and ask the right questions. That might just be enough to help them. If they really need professional help, these people

can't fix them but they can help put them on … the road to professional help. It's been a huge, huge success.'

It is hard not to wonder how different attitudes towards mental health in football, and the outcomes associated with these attitudes, might be had this sort of training been the norm ten or 20 years ago. Perhaps, when Gary Speed was reaching the end of his playing career and wondering what was next, somebody could have put their arm around him and reassured him help was there if he needed it. Perhaps someone at one of Robert Enke's clubs could have spotted when he withdrew himself after making a mistake and made sure he found psychological support to help him through, rather than seeing him as someone who couldn't handle the big stage. It might even have helped several talented young footballers reach their true potential. Michael Johnson, for example, was seen as a prodigy when he broke through to the Manchester City first team at the age of 19. Struggling with issues of self-esteem, however, he fell away from the top of the professional game, often trying to cope and give himself a temporary high by drinking too much and frequently visiting nightclubs. Instead of this being seen as a sign that Johnson needed help, he was accused of being 'big-time' and retired from football at the age of 24, saying he wanted to be 'left alone to live the rest of my life'. One of England's great hopes for the future never made it beyond a handful of games for Manchester City.

The purpose of this postulating isn't to point fingers at any individuals at the clubs mentioned. The system as a whole ten to 15 years ago didn't do enough to recognise the importance of mental health, and each individual

was merely a part of this system, a product of the inertia rather than a cause. Steps to remediate this have only been recently introduced and there is still a long way to go. The English Premier League, for example, created new rules in 2019 that mandated clubs to have their players partake in one session annually to learn about mental health and the wellbeing support available. It's hardly game-changing, but is certainly a start. The work of the Chris Mitchell Foundation is clearly a key part in advancing the dialogue around mental health.

It hasn't all been straightforward for Philip and Laura in running the Chris Mitchell Foundation, however. Philip describes how the SPFA, in stark contrast to their English counterparts, have done little to support their campaign. At a meeting in 2019 arranged through the Scottish government, SPFA chief executive Fraser Wishart declined to work with the Chris Mitchell Foundation on matters related to mental health, but said he would be in touch about working together in 'various other fields' within a week. At the time we speak three years down the line, Philip still hasn't received any further correspondence. His biggest challenge, though, is the extreme commitment involved in keeping the Foundation going. It is family run, after all, effectively from the kitchen table. It can be exhausting for the Mitchell family to continually revisit and relive the toughest period of their lives, and Philip admits there will soon come a point where the family must move on.

At the time we speak, though, Philip and Laura aren't done just yet. Philip has called for mental health awareness training to be mandatory and to be incorporated

into UEFA training licences for coaches, to make it more ingrained in the sport. The mental side of the game has always been crucial, after all. Sir Stanley Matthews in his autobiography talks of breaking down in tears of despair after hearing fans at a train station criticising him after an appearance for England against Germany. His father, picking up on this, gave Matthews a vital lesson on the importance of mental resilience and the rest is, of course, history. Looking after your mental health is an essential part of mental strength and is an area football still has significant room for improvement in, almost 100 years on from Matthews's debut. Awareness is key, Philip Mitchell explains, and he envisages a world in which mental health and physical health are treated on a par in football clubs. Ultimately, the only way this can be achieved is to have knowledgeable people within clubs to change the culture from within.

Clive Cook, player care manager at Norwich City at the time we speak, is one of those knowledgeable people. An accredited sports psychologist, Cook has previously worked in roles related to education and welfare at both Liverpool and the English FA. Ever the scholar, he is just weeks away from moving on from Norwich City to further his studies as we chat over Zoom in January 2022. Cook explains to me that the area of player care has only started to become common in the last ten to 15 years – prior to this, professional footballers were more or less expected to just get on with things alone.

Nowadays, the job description of a player care manager varies significantly from club to club. Many top Premier League clubs have a Player Care department that primarily

works to ensure expensive new signings are able to settle in and perform at their best on the pitch as a result. This isn't as simple as providing them with a new car or luxury purchase on demand, but rather involves a bespoke service that strategically and proactively looks to meet a player's every need. West Ham, for example, used to have a 30-page welcome pack for new signings, put together by their head of player care at the time, Hugo Scheckter. The information contained in the document was as varied as how the stadium's parking system operated to recommending a good company for children's birthday parties. Scheckter himself would ensure he was always available on speed dial if required so that the players he looked after felt constantly supported. The difference between happy and unhappy players is undoubtedly worth points to a side on the pitch across the season, not to mention to the asset value of professional footballers. Anyone looking to force a move, perhaps simply through being unhappy off the pitch, will most likely have to be sold for a cut-price fee and the club loses out as a result.

Clive Cook's role at Norwich did not involve producing player welcome documents or being available on a 24/7 speed dial. Instead, he was tasked with getting to know the players on a personal level with conversations about their lives and feelings away from football. The result was similar to the ideal scenario envisaged by the Chris Mitchell Foundation – should any player show signs of struggling with their mental health, Cook could approach them first and take the onus off them to seek help. All his years of experience provided Cook with the perfect toolbox with which to approach his task.

'You've got to be skilled in lots of areas. One of them would be body language. You might argue we do our best work in formal one-to-ones, but I pick up a lot of cues just seeing the players around the building. I remember a player walking through the restaurant one day towards the classroom with his hood up and his earphones in. Straight away, that's not something we encourage in the academy. One of the other players said, "He's been like that all day, he's not been in the right mood." So I went up and spoke to him – he was just having a tough day and wasn't feeling at his best. We've just got to get to know the players inside out. You build that trust and rapport and connection, and as soon as you've got that it's just easier.

'We use all sorts of different tactics to get the right support to the lads. A former colleague of mine just started at Chelsea and I said fundamentally the most important thing is to get your one-to-ones done with the players. One, because they will really value it, and two, we generally like talking about ourselves. I spoke to my colleague at Chelsea today and she said this one player opened up about things he'd never told anyone else before. That's the value of actually just sitting someone down, caring for them, and saying "You've got 30 minutes with me today, I want to know as much as I can about you in 30 minutes." Straight away, you're getting fantastic information and building that connection.'

For all his expertise, Cook's role at Norwich was predominantly limited to working with Professional Development Phase players, meaning the club's under-23 and under-18 players, as well as younger age groups. With his comprehensive knowledge of the benefits, Cook is

surprised sports psychologists aren't used more commonly in senior football, particularly as there is no shortage of financial clout amongst Premier League clubs. Even Norwich – when managed by Daniel Farke – opted against bringing in a professional to deal with the mental side of the game for their first team. Given the challenges they faced on the pitch in the 2021/22 season, finishing bottom of the table with the worst goal difference since Derby County's disastrous 2007/08 season, it does seem like a costly oversight. Even looking at individual cases, young loan players Billy Gilmour and Brandon Williams faced abuse from their own supporters. Williams even alleged that he had been followed home by angry supporters after a 4-0 home defeat to West Ham. With both players barely out of their teens at the time, it can't have been an easy experience to deal with.

Cook explains a lot of top-level professionals pay out of their own pockets to see a psychologist, seeing the benefit in it even if their clubs don't. Cook's role in normalising discussion around mental health in Norwich's academy sides helps stand the game in good stead for five or ten years down the line. After all, these young players are the future of the game. Step by step, the culture is being changed to move mental health up the list of priorities and bring it in line with its physical equivalent.

'Something we do here which has worked really well is we have mental health ambassadors covering all age groups. The under-23s and under-18s are key age groups. We train them up in what we call mental health first aid. We say to them to look for signs in the dressing room or changes in behaviour and then they can deal with it

and bring us that information, but it stays confidential. They might say, "So-and-so is struggling because of this." And then I'll speak to that player but they won't know the mental health ambassador has given me that information. It works really well.

'I've given players time off before due to psychological burnout, which normally occurs around October to November when the seasons change and there's less light. As you know, through evolution we're better with light than we are with dark, and some of them get affected by SAD [Seasonal Affective Disorder] syndrome. They need that break, so I give players time off and they come back after a couple of weeks and they're refreshed and a lot, lot better physically and mentally. They say, "I don't know why I feel a lot better" and I reply, "Because you've had two weeks off resting, you've not thought about football or your work, you've just gone back to being the person you are."'

The more young players that come through the system with mental health seen as normal in this way, the more players at the peak of their game will start talking about it too. To an extent, it's already starting to happen. Danny Rose made headlines in a pre-World Cup press conference in 2018 when he admitted to having depression brought on by the combined effects of injury sidelining him from action along with having to deal with a family tragedy. At the time it was unheard of, but several more international players have spoken about their mental health since Rose helped open up the floodgates for them. In October 2020, Ben Chilwell posted a message on Twitter in which he spoke about seeking mental health support to help him deal with 'everyday life' the previous year. Sticking with the

England theme, centre-forward Dominic Calvert-Lewin claimed that talking about his mental health had saved his life after a challenging 2021/22 season. The list goes on, from legends of the game such as Ashley Cole to renowned internationals still at their peak, like Paul Pogba, who confessed to going through a spell of depression during his time at Manchester United.

Nobody wants anyone to struggle, of course, but the openness that is becoming more and more common in the game is music to Michael Bennett's and the PFA's ears.

'I can definitely say the culture has changed. I can definitely say that it's a hundred times better than when I played. We've come a long way in a short space of time but there's still more work to do. I want it to be the case where people talk about mental health as if they have a physical injury. "I've pulled my hamstring, I'm going to see my physio." "I've got an emotional wellbeing issue, I'm going to see my physio or the PFA." I want it to be that same conversation.

'The idea about working with younger players is that if we can get the younger players to think that it's OK to talk about your mental health and normalise it as they come through, it will just be a normal conversation. So the key for me is educating our players, the younger players coming through and our players that are here already. Younger players look up to senior players, so if we can get the senior players talking more about their wellbeing, younger players will want to talk about it as well.

'In 2017, we did our first PFA mental wellbeing conference at St George's Park. We called it *Injured*, and the idea behind it being called *Injured* was that if you've got

a physical injury, you're injured. If you've got an emotional injury, you're injured. They're both injuries. They should be treated the same way and we should be talking about it the same way. It has changed massively and I think the more we talk about it, the more we normalise it. It's normal. Everybody will go through and have mental health issues in some shape or form. People are on a different scale. Some are just lower, some are medium, some are high. But we're all on that spectrum.'

In a way, more players coming forward and seeking help with their mental health makes Bennett's job harder. After all, it gives his department more work to do, more demands to meet. But whilst this trend of openness continues to grow, so does the job satisfaction the head of the PFA's Wellbeing Department derives from his work. The more people who come forward, the more lives are improved. As is clear from my conversations with both Vincent Pericard and Marvin Sordell, some could even be saved.