



Something in the Water

The Story of
England's Football
Talent Hotbeds

Callum Murray

Something in the **Water**

The Story of
England's Football
Talent Hotbeds

Callum Murray



Contents

1. The Beginning of the Journey	9
2. A View From the World	18
3. The Talent Development Environment: Population Size, Population Density and Facilities	35
4. The Kids From the Estate	46
5. Football as a Way of Life – To Get Out and Get Up	69
6. The Melting Pot	78
7. The Role Model Effect	92
8. Football Culture in England and its Talent Hotbeds	111
9. Street Football and The Cage	137
10. Community Outreach	166
11. A Hotbed Creating Resilience.	184
12. What Lessons Can We Learn from the Makeup of Hotbeds?	204
Acknowledgements	215
Notes	216

The Beginning of the Journey

ON A wet March evening at the Estadi Olímpic in 2007, England clinched a 3-0 victory against Andorra as Steve McLaren's men fought for UEFA Euro 2008 qualification. I say England, but as West Ham United fans claim that they won the golden Jules Rimet Trophy for the Three Lions in 1966, the three points on that night in 2007 were won by Huyton – a relatively small town on the edge of Liverpool, the birthplace of England's goalscorers Steven Gerrard and David Nugent. In fact, Huyton's Bluebell estate may stake a claim to the victory, as both the Gerrard and Nugent families lived in the same small, rough council estate in the heart of L36. It was certainly a night to remember for two sporting sons of the suburb, but also a night for all young working-class council estate boys up and down the country to savour. It showed that dreams can become a reality.

How can one deprived council estate in a relatively unknown town in north-west England raise a group of international footballers? Maybe there is something more to this.

The intimidating barrios of Rosario. The compact and dense favelas of Rio de Janeiro. The concrete *banlieues* of Paris. The shanty-like Spartak tennis club of Moscow. The running 'tracks' of Itan, Kenya. All hotbeds of talent in their own right, producing some of the greatest sports stars ever seen. But what

is it that makes these places tick and just how do they do it? These small factories of talent somehow manage to create, develop and nurture elite athletes at an unbelievable rate, while seemingly the rest of the world sits back wishing they could be in on the secret of how to produce elite-level talent.

To have a special talent is something that every single one of us yearns for. For this gift to take us to the lofty heights of stardom is something that a lot of us dream of – our childhoods often hanging on such dreams and aspirations as we played football in the playground, sang loudly in the shower, practised magic tricks at family parties or danced behind our closed bedroom door. As American novelist Erica Jong claimed, everyone has talent. Jong could well be correct. Maybe we do all have a special talent within us, and that people just have their talent manifest in different forms, of which there is an endless list. I'm inclined to go with that.

Perhaps it is the self-discovery of the talent you've been blessed with, and then the nurturing and use of it, that is in fact the special thing, and what sets us apart from average people. People who in fact probably aren't that average at all, but more than likely are those who have just not discovered and nurtured their gift yet. There are so many different talents to be appreciated and shown off to the world. Your talent could be baking, playing the piano, being a maths genius or even having the voice of an angel. Or it could be the one that nearly every young child in England goes to bed each night dreaming of as they get tucked in: to be so talented that they make it as a professional footballer.

But what if your talent – or at least your chances of becoming a professional football player – was already determined before you even started kicking a ball, or maybe before you even started kicking inside the womb? While you may be reading this and thinking about the genetic lineage, this is not totally where we are heading. Think about this: by sheer coincidence or the decision of your parents, you were raised in a certain

city, town or estate. It is quite possibly the case that your birthplace, the area you grow up in, your childhood, your friends and family, and other environmental and sociocultural circumstances (and potentially even some added good luck) all play a major role in deciding whether or not you develop to be a talented individual. Or more specifically in this case, a talented professional footballer. Whether you were born in the north or the south may have had an impact. What happens to your chances of making it as a talented player if you grew up in a major city in the north-east or a rural village in the south-west? How would this impact your talent development?

The theory behind all of this leads us down the path to the investigation of the somewhat mythical talent hotbeds. Daniel Coyle has written and spoken as someone who has travelled and witnessed many of these talent hotbeds throughout the world and studied recurrent themes from these seemingly miracle-working talent-making machines. Coyle put forward his findings, suggesting how the wiring of our brains can help to create and nurture ability leading to elite-level performance and results.¹ The case studies upon which this conclusion was founded would show some good evidence. However, there are still questions to be asked and lessons to be learnt from these special places. What are talent hotbeds and how exactly do they work? What does a footballing talent hotbed in England look like? Can we help to create a talent hotbed? Maybe you're in a hotbed right now, as you read this very sentence. Look around. In fact, take a minute to think about the street, estate, area, town or city that you grew up in. How many footballers, athletes, musicians, political leaders or actors grew up in the same place? There are some small towns that would boast all five.

Taking a worldwide view of football, it is the biggest sport by some margin. According to FIFA.com, the 2018 World Cup held in Russia was viewed by half of the world's population – around 3.5 billion viewers – with the final between France and

Croatia hitting peak viewing figures of around 1.2 billion.² Bear in mind that these two countries only have a combined population of just over 70 million, and you can see just how big this sport is.

England, however, is what many would describe as the spiritual home of football, founders of the professional game with the Football Association in the late 19th century. Since then, England has produced some of the best players and stars in world football across many generations, including William Ralph ‘Dixie’ Dean, Stanley Matthews, Bobby Moore, Bobby Charlton, Bryan Robson, Paul Gascoigne, Michael Owen, Steven Gerrard, David Beckham, Frank Lampard and Wayne Rooney. The list could go on. And so, while the proud Englishman would declare his country the birthplace and Mecca of the game they love so dearly, there is still one debate that is ever-present among English footballing circles – where is the home of *English* football?

Many would say the north-west, given the titles and domination of its clubs, but also its production of some of the best professional football players. The statistics would go some way to back this up. Of the 1,200 or so players who have represented England, just under 300 were born in the north-west, the largest crop by some way, although other areas such as the north-east, Yorkshire and London would also have a right to stake a claim for the accolade. The capital appears to buck the trend for the south, having produced just under 200 England internationals.³ You can also look at the mining towns of the north for some stellar production, given the number of English players that have been born from these regions over the last century.

That being said, it would be unfair and too simplistic to broadly claim that it is the north-west and London that produce England’s real talent. It is not a deep enough analysis. It goes further than that, into smaller pockets of these regions in this football-obsessed country that is now teetering on the edge of

glory on the world stage, blessed with some of the most exciting young stars currently playing this wonderful game.

By scanning the statistics and numbers, you could generally work out that the majority of good players come from the big cities, and that would make sense. According to Scott Sellars, former professional and current technical director and academy manager at Wolverhampton Wanderers, this can be put down to two simple factors. Firstly, there are more players to choose from in a big city. Secondly, there is better competition from a younger age. It is possible to go even deeper into this, though. There are other powers at work within these cities and regions that create the greatest possible environment to develop and nurture talent – creating the best players in the country, and quite possibly the world. And so, where exactly are these hotbeds and talent factories and what is happening beneath the surface?

That very question takes us to my living room, almost every Saturday at around 5pm. Most in England will know what this time means for any football fan. Results are flying in from the afternoon's fixtures up and down the country. It is either jubilation or heartbreak. The alternative is that your team has drawn with their opponents, which helps nobody. But beyond the emotions from your team's result, you sit there and listen to the full-time scores, some brief analysis and then the interesting part – or at least it was for me and my dad – the post-match interviews that followed. Short and usually snappy summaries of how the game went by those who were on the pitch. Often starting with 'erm', 'you know' or that remarkable phlegm-clearing snorting action that football players seem to love, these wonderful 30 seconds are the very start of this journey into the footballing talent hotbeds of England. My dad and I would sit there, and no matter what, there would always be a good number of players interviewed every weekend – from League Two up to the Premier League – that would appear to be from Liverpool or London. It intrigued us. And then, the

more you would watch these interviews and do a few online searches, the more you would notice that in fact a lot of the players appear to be from a cluster of areas within these cities. Is this coincidence, or is there something behind all this that needs to be investigated beyond a quick Google search? There is maybe something special occurring.

Having grown up in Huyton – a small town with a big heart on the outskirts of Liverpool – I always had an idea of what a hotbed was, without maybe fully understanding it. Huyton has been a breeding ground for elite-level footballers for many decades, although the town itself is a strange place. Seemingly untouched by outsiders, it is a very proud and historical place that was mentioned in the *Domesday Book*, boasting 25 Grade II-listed buildings – including the medieval Roby Cross. It also has some very famous and talented sons and daughters. On the one hand it is a typical working-class northern town; some rough council estates, schools performing below par, a high crime rate and what would seem like a lack of opportunity. Although, on the other hand, it is home to some of the kindest, most generous and authentic people you could ever wish to find.

Of course, it is also sport-obsessed. Even though it only has a population of around 30,000, in terms of football, you could select a squad of players from only Huyton that would probably give many professional club sides (and international teams) a run for their money. It would include players such as Steven Gerrard, Peter Reid, Tony Hibbert, David Nugent, Lee Trundle, Clint Hill, Joey Barton, Jay McEveley, Steve McMahon and Craig Hignett on the team sheet. Bizarrely, a few of those players grew up on the same estate. In 1971, Huyton Boys – including a young Peter Reid who 15 years later would be starting in the Mexico World Cup – became the first non-city representative team to win the English Schoolboys FA Trophy.

There are many potential reasons as to why Huyton is able to produce so much footballing talent. The effects of the

environment, the upbringing, the culture and the competition all have something to offer. 'Football isn't just a game in Huyton. It's something different in this area. It means something more,' suggests Michael Corless, founder of Michael Corless Soccer School, the largest and most successful organisation of its kind in Huyton. It's competitive, combative and hard. There is no room for weakness, and you've got to be the best or get swallowed up whole, no matter what you're trying to achieve. Even more so when you also factor in the other talent that has been nurtured from this small population, including The La's, Space, Stan Boardman, Sir Rex Harrison, Freddie Starr, Philip Redmond and Carol Decker, to name a few. It is a talent hotbed worth further investigation. As mentioned, a strange – but special – place.

Similarly, there are other football talent hotbeds across England – but not too many. The landscape is ever-changing. It could be argued that Huyton and the talent powerhouse of the archetypal northern town is slowing down, and that the players are now coming from new areas; fresher, cooler and more vibrant parts of the country, none more so than south London – producing some of the most talented and continental-style football players that England has seen in recent years. At the beginning of the 2019/20 season, south London had three players in the England senior squad, and six in the Under-21 squad. An impressive feat given that south London only accounts for somewhere in the region of three per cent of England's population.

South London's football scene is creating a real buzz, which is reaching much further than just the shores of England. It's also a buzz that isn't just relevant to football, but music and the arts too. South of the river, for the most part, gets a hard time from politicians and the media, with gang culture and discriminatory negative stories usually filling up the news platforms. It is much better to focus on the positives, though. This area is having some sort of renaissance when it comes to

talent in the arts and sports, with people from all backgrounds working to achieve their dreams.

Having spoken with those at the heart of south London football and after being able to see it with my own eyes and feel it with my own heart, it is clear to understand why this place is unique. There is just something about it. It is different. The footballers coming out of this area are different. The football they play is different and not of the usual old-school English football mould. In fact, the old school probably don't like them too much, but that is just jealousy. This is the new England. It's new football. It's what we have been crying out for. They're cool, athletic, brave, resilient, quick, powerful, skilful, technically gifted and boy do they have confidence by the bucket load to match. It is home to many of the great and exciting players around today, such as Jadon Sancho, Tammy Abraham, Callum Hudson-Odoi, Wilfried Zaha, Joe Aribo, Ruben Loftus-Cheek, Joe Gomez, Emile Smith Rowe and Aaron Wan-Bissaka. It is a list that could go on and on. It is quite unbelievable. On the opening day of the 2019/20 Premier League campaign, south London accounted for just over ten per cent of all English starting players – with two more south Londoners coming on as substitutes in that first round of games, too. These players are unique and the very best produce of south London.

There is an exciting trend in English (and European) football of players coming out of this area and making it to the elite levels of the game. According to the spring 2020 CIES Observatory's *Most Valuable Youngsters in Football* (born after 2000),⁴ south London was represented by three of the top 20 most valuable players, with Jadon Sancho taking the top spot. Somehow, Lambeth, Croydon, Camberwell, Lewisham, Kennington and the other boroughs in south London are creating this extraordinary and unique breed of talented players taking on Europe at the highest level. We are going to delve deep into that to discover just how it is working and what we can learn.

The journey that led to this book being produced is one that looks to investigate these special hotbeds and see what it really is that has allowed them to create such unbelievable talent in England. What is at the heart of these areas that makes them hotbeds? What are those secret ingredients? How have the regions and council estates across the north done it over the past 30 years, and what is south London doing now that is revolutionising English – and European – football?

So, get your big coat on, it's grim up north; grab your wallet, it's expensive down south. But first, get your passport and boarding pass, and let's explore the footballing hotbeds of the world.