

The project helping young players prepare for life outside of football

Published in The Athletic 01.04.21 By Matt Woosnam



By Matt Woosnam 5h ago

In the coming months, hundreds of youngsters across the country will be told that they have no future as a footballer; that all their hard work is appreciated but they won't be going any further in their respective academies.

With it will come disappointment and frustration, and, in time, the question of what happens next. For some, new clubs will pick them up. Others will fall out of the game entirely, their dream of becoming a professional never to materialise.

That brings many challenges of adapting to life outside of the bubble of football, even at academy level, and trying to navigate a new course through life and into adulthood. Football has a poor reputation when it comes to the process of assisting with that integration and transition, but it is also constantly evolving to improve.

Football Unites, a project set-up by Bev Amaechi through her community interest organisation Player Voice, aims to help clubs improve the experience of young players who come through the system, and to aid them in realising the difference they can make in their local community.

A pilot, with the support of Arsenal and the Premier League, focused initially on [Crystal Palace](#) and [West Ham United](#). The project, launched at Selhurst Park in October 2019, was designed to empower players, to get them to identify social issues in the community and establish ways to tackle them.

“We believe that enabling players to have these experiences at a young age will give them so many different life skills to help them in their future, whether they represent the club as a pro or go on to different pathways,” Amaechi, whose son Xavier came through the Arsenal academy before moving to Germany, tells *The Athletic*.

The idea, she explains, was to expand upon club-led initiatives to help players understand their social responsibility, and in doing so, assist them in developing vital skills for the future.

“We’ve heard from some footballers that are asked to see sick children in hospital and sometimes it becomes about a photoshoot. Are they learning anything meaningful about that person or what it is like for the NHS staff looking after them?”

Player leadership groups at both clubs balloted their academy team-mates and established the most important issues to them were youth violence, gangs and fear of crime. Racism and other forms of discrimination or prejudice ranked second whilst mental or physical health and wellbeing was considered the third-most important issue.

At Palace, the players interviewed two prospective community partners — Your City Says No (YCSN) and Project For Youth Empowerment — both of which aim to help prevent youth violence. “They used all the information and decided unanimously on YCSN but also gave feedback to the other organisation, which was nice as we’ve all been in that situation where we’ve not had it from a job interview,” explains Jamie Broughton from the Palace for Life Foundation.

West Ham’s group sought to assist in the transition from primary to secondary school for Year Six pupils at a local school, filming pre-recorded messages and participating in live Zoom calls, which Amaechi says helped them to reflect back on their own potential transitions and how to deal with them.

“The boys said, ‘We know our issue with youth violence but we’re in different times. Let’s ask the young people at the school what is important to them’, and they really helped the children think through what is challenging.”



West Ham youth players at the Football Unites launch with academy coach Zavon Hines, left

In actively participating and leading, the players found the experience more rewarding than they might otherwise have done. From helping those Year Six children to working with and presenting to policy advisors in City Hall on the youth violence reduction team, to determining the community partner and then having those workshops with YCSN, they were heavily involved throughout.

“Generally, we would stay within the academy and do player appearances. Someone would come to us and say, ‘This is happening. We want you to make an appearance’,” explains West Ham Under-18 defender Jayden Fevrier, who was part of the leadership group.

“This time, it was different as it was more interactive. We did it all ourselves and we felt accomplished, like we had achieved something. When someone puts their trust in you, it improves your confidence and that helped us to go and help people.”

As the West Ham players took part in the call with the primary school children, they were supported by academy player care officer Kiera Colthart, who says she felt like “a proud parent” noting the increasing confidence with which the players immersed themselves in the project.

“It’s good for the boys to do something outside of their football bubble,” she explains. “They do have an influence, no matter their age. If they’re wearing a badge, people look at them and see them as an example. I’m so glad we were a part of it.”

[The work of Manchester United's Marcus Rashford](#) is referenced by all those involved. His campaigning on social issues coincided with the running of the Football Unites project. Fevrier notes how he and his team-mates can learn from Rashford, and how this project helped him to realise he “has influence and can make an impact”.

The difference from the usual programmes and workshops was how involved the players were in making decisions but also, Broughton explains, “more focused on the wider context of the world”.

“They would have workshops with the PFA and Kick It Out, but those are much more football-led. The likes of Rashford speaking out to better understand their roles within society has had a massive improvement over the last five years.

“It’s about educating those players who might not end up making it, better equipping them without football, or, when they get older and retire, it has that longer-lasting effect.”

In allowing the players to lead, the programme’s intention was to prepare them not necessarily just for life outside of football but still benefit their development on the pitch, with leadership, communication and team-work all critical skills within the game as well as outside of it. “A lot of skills they used could also help them on the pitch,” Colthart says. “It can translate into on the pitch, as well as their personal development.”

Moving forward, both clubs are looking to integrate the project into their community work and there was a stronger link formed between the academies and their foundations. For Football Unites, the plan is to expand into involving girls and women’s teams, as well as branching out across the country.

Despite the challenges presented by lockdown, if the aim was, as Amaechi explains, to “develop something that is much more meaningful with learning and experiencing community engagement”, then the response from the players and staff involved so far certainly appears to suggest that goal was achieved.

(Top photo: Crystal Palace youngsters at the Football Unites launch, with first-team winger Andros Townsend, fourth from left, and chairman Steve Parish, fifth from left)

[Matt Woosnam](#) is the Crystal Palace writer for The Athletic UK. Matt previously spent several years covering Palace matches for the South London Press and contributing to other publications as a freelance writer. He was also the online editor of Palace fanzine Five Year Plan and has written columns for local papers in South London. Follow Matt on Twitter [@MattWoosie](#).

For more information about Player Voice, CIC, please visit www.playervoice.org.uk email: info@playervoice.org.uk