**Participant 1 – Interview 2**

Okay, so I thought I'd just start off with any reflections on the first interview any areas of the first interview that you found yourself thinking about afterwards or found quite interesting to go into and your thoughts on the topics from our first discussion?

I don't think there's any definitive areas I think it's just interesting going back and exploring that kind of pathway, and the experience. So that was interesting and thinking about how it started and that nonlinear journey through that space so that was interesting… it's a bit like a trip down memory lane in some ways, you know going through that sort of stuff that's quite nice in some ways.

Did you think about how it affects your working practice today and who you are today?

Yeah, I mean… it’d probably be different for different people but because i'm still involved in football, i'm still with the same club it’s probably a little bit different because I was like a by-product of that system if that makes sense? Which is good in some ways and not so good in other ways, because I’ve not experienced other things and know what the other world is, what the other clubs do and how they do it… we get a little snippet here and there, but you don't get to experience it unless you leave the club so yeah I guess you're culturally brought up in that environment because I’ve not really left and then continued in that area, so it’s interesting to think about.

Yes, I remember, we talked about before when you left the club and tried different things, and it was more about trying to find a fit in terms of the standards and finding a culture that you felt like you fit it into. Would you say that was the hardest part of leaving the club and potentially why you ended up back at that club?

Yeah I think it was just it's more of a culture shock you get so ingrained into the way you do things there or at that particular time of your life and then… you’re so far removed from that nvironment it's unbelievable, you know your routines gone, your structure is gone, your support network for the last seven eight years or six years is gone and then all of a sudden you've got to think by yourself… not that I wasn't independent but not being like you have to do everything by yourself… and then yeah the expectations of you or the people around you are just so different so that was a bit of a culture shock for sure.

Yeah, I've had experiences of being in the same organization for quite a long time and then decided to leave and it's quite a big deal… I can appreciate that you get institutionalized in a way. Not there is a positive or a negative side of it, but it makes it hard to then find another culture where you fit, I think. When did you first start thinking that you might want to be a footballer as a career path so to speak?

I remember playing in the playground and that sort of stuff, and just playing recreationally really. There was like, three different houses when I was younger so like one place there was like, a basketball court like a concrete basketball court we’d go down there and just wack a ball around then we moved to another place where there was a big green so then we played on the big green and then we moved to our current house if that makes sense, and then there was a three tiered field, and so that was quite nice. But then I don't know how old I was, maybe eight/nine, I don’t even know how I got spotted cos I don’t think I was playing then, but it would have been like a pre-Academy, or like a Talent Centre sort of thing where you essentially try to get in at the <Club X> Academy, I used to go down there. I don’t remember too much about the football, I remember the sports hall that we were in, and I remember the journey, I don't remember too much about what we did in football… and then yeah I didn’t get in which is… I can still see the letter actually, it’s a little bit weird, but I can still picture that letter and it said no, which is fine.

So what kind of age was that eight/nine?

Yeah I think it's, eight, nine, maybe… and then I probably just started playing football I don’t remember where or if I got scouted or if I got invited in I don't know… and then my dad obviously took the team when we moved to that house that had a three tiered field if that makes sense. We literally saw a team training over there and just went over and said can we join in basically… then a year later my dad took over etc… and then it was just football really, I think we trained Saturday morning played on the Sunday, and that was it really until 12. I went to see <Club X> play when I was a kid, my dad supported them and we had season tickets, so that was probably quite a big influence, I used to go with my dad and his dad, my Pops we used to go every Saturday or whenever it was to watch <Club X> play at this stadium so used to do that, but that's probably where it started and then, I was probably about 8/9 same sort of age really… and then I kind of went from there, got into the academy at 12/13 sort of age and away we went.

So it was basically football is life from that age and there wasn't any other hobbies or other passions or maybe directions, where you thought I enjoy playing football but that's not necessarily my career path and I'm going to do this or do that?

Yeah, I mean, I think… so I was quite good at school, you know in Primary school was good, Secondary school was good. Probably could’ve been better to be honest and pushed harder on certain things but generally quite good, and then… I think when you're in the system, it's really difficult to think outside of it… was just in it all the time, you know you have day on, day off, day on, day off, day on, day off for more or less your whole life and then you have like a six week break, then you have a week and a half off and then you need to start thinking about your fitness again so like it's… you do have time to think about that but you probably don't think about it, because you're thinking about football really. When I was a scholar we just got the option to do a BTec Level 2 or whatever it was and this is a bit annoying because I would have done A levels in Maths and Business probably but that wasn’t an option, you had to do the BTec stuff which is fine, but just meant you missed out on other things. But then I remember when I was 16 and I knew I got the scholarship like college were asking what are you going to do at college and I thought well I’m not doing college here so that's irrelevant to me and I’m going on a different path so… and then the education was more to get it done so you can get your football done… it was so you can play football, rather than needs to get it done because that's what you're going to need so… I think the narrative has changed, but if you ask most boys in the academy about education they'll say ‘Oh, we need to get it done oh yeah it's good for my overall development but I'm focusing on football.’

So that's recognizably changed from when you were there, you can see that. It sounds like it was more of a distraction really back then?

I mean the club valued it… but I think the coaches didn't value it as much, their job is to get plays through and education was a by-product of that, and also the players that I was with didn't really care about it. So, like, there were a couple that could have been fairly academic but just didn’t care and the rest were probably average. So, as a group they didn’t really care about it, coaches didn’t massively care about it and then I did okay and obviously I went to uni in the end but I had to play catch up, because I didn't get the qualifications that I needed to get in straight away but… that was probably the drawback of the system, when I was in it.

How did you find going into uni in terms of focus on studying compared to focus on football, is it different even though you’re still focusing on one goal base?

So, I got released, did a year top-up essentially and I did a bit of coaching on the side and then went to uni plus doing coaching on the side. So, I did football and business studies, because it was local I could still coach, I could use the money to get my UEFA B and all that sort of stuff… the other learners at university, well, a lot of them are just come out of college and hadn't you know… my journey from 16 to 18 couldn't be any different to most people's journey from 16 to 18. And so, then you go to uni at 19 years old or 18/19 years old, whatever it was probably 19… and yeah completely different people… and I lived at home, I lived away from home, since I was 16 and then you’ve got kids or people coming in that’ve never even coached or been around football so then I was thinking I don't fit in really. Like socializing I didn't really do a lot of because I was just not really… it's just such a weird environment when you've been in such a professional environment or perceived to be a professional environment you come out of there you I think this is probably common for most academy boys, they come in with their life skills or their social skills all that stuff is so far advanced than most of the average kids because they just don’t get exposed to that sort of stuff. So coming out of that and into uni… and I remember getting annoyed at uni, thinking why are we doing this sort of stuff you know, because I don't think Year 1 counts for anything? With the weighting for Year 1 that you could literally do what you want really it doesn't count for anything, whereas Year 2 and 3 it's weighted… and I’m saying what's the point in this year then? I get it now because it's a transition year, you learn how to learn essentially you get used to uni and it doesn't kill you if you get it wrong. I was like ‘well this is rubbish because I've been putting in all this hard work for what, I'm not getting anything out of it apart from learning about stuff’ so I found that quite difficult and… like I said the socializing thing was difficult because everyone just wanted to go out and have a good time really, looking back on it would probably be a bit different now, but at the time I just didn't get it, don't get this world because I've never been in it sort of thing so that was a bit weird but… Still enjoyed it though, I enjoyed the learning, I enjoyed I guess the hard work of or the challenge of understanding things trying to make sense of it, try to get all the evidence and then support what you're trying to say so, I enjoyed that challenge, and that was a different kind of way of working sort of thing that was quite nice and in the end of Year 2 and Year 3 I did really enjoy it and I still do really enjoy academia really and find it really interesting.

Was there any thought process about doing anything beyond football, or was it that you still wanted to try and get back into football at some point?

Not massively no even now, I sometimes look at jobs and think ‘that’s interesting I could probably be quite good at that’, and I probably would if I wanted to or needed to. But I think what was really difficult well what was really difficult for me when I was younger, is that you’ve invested so much time into football, as a player and even doing your coaching badges to then to leave that world and to spend in another industry… not the transition but more a sense that ‘What was it for?’ you know, what was the purpose of that if I'm just gonna leave it behind you know I've obviously got some skill sets in there that are going to be useful. So it just feels quite alien to go and do something completely… I know some people do some people drop out and say ‘yeah okay fine’ and then move on absolutely fine, but I find it really difficult to do. I think you know it might be like a pride thing, as well as like family commitments my commitment to it, you know it’d be quite disappointing if I didn't get something out of it if that make sense? Maybe it's like a fear of failure part of that maybe like it's going to fail completely, if that makes sense?

I think you’ve talked previously about not having a tangible thing at the end of the Academy journey so maybe that's all part of it, and like you say holding on to football in some way, shape or form. I guess you must know people that have just gone ‘I don't want to do that anymore’?

Yeah, there’s loads and there’s some that maybe are going through that transition. So I've got a mate who went to Australia and he’s been there around six or seven years playing football out there and he said to me a few years ago that now he doesn’t want to do it anymore and has just had enough of it really. He’s got some trade out there as well, to top up his money… but then there’s others, you know played it for a year or two and then that’s it they're done and now they’re doing all sorts of different things. But probably I would assume that’s driven by money as well… so you become an ‘adult’ in that sense in that all of the other social or societal pressures of being an adult, get money and get a house in terms of getting a partner, getting a wife, etc… the cultural norms of our society would probably drive that sort of stuff so how long can you keep playing non-league football and getting paid 100 quid a week it's just not sustainable so, yeah maybe that's a by-product of that as well.

So, going back to when you were playing football around that 8/9/10/11, you mentioned you were playing centre half and enjoying being a defender. Was that always the way, how did you end up filling that role in the team?

I don’t know specifically why defending, I used to enjoy the challenge so not just physical tackling that sort of stuff but just stopping people and that's what started, did you listen to it, and I do like that side of it, I guess. But I think the influence so again, I used to go watch <Club X> play when <Player X> used to sit so the left-back was always in front of me… and I used to like the number three because of <Player Y> because of the passion he had for the game, etc, even though I didn't really know who he was, I’d just been told about him. So I used to like the number three, <Player X> used to wear number three and was a left back and where <Player Z> was playing right-back. But I guess, I think, maybe because I was an early maturer I could see the game better, maybe that's why I played centre-back to begin with, but then moved out to right-back… um, yeah I just enjoyed… I think if you’ve got to be really organized and a good team player as a defender cos you need to be so aware of what's going on around you whereas the others are potentially a bit more individual in that you have to be more creative etc, but yeah maybe but I don’t really know to be honest apart from those things.

So it was something that you can always remember playing in that position, you didn't move around or start further up the pitch and move back?

When I was maybe 11 or 12 I did play centre-mid for a little bit and again, it was probably because I was fairly quick… because when we played as well it used to be when you turned 11 or 12 you played 11-a-side goals, so you had to be able to you know be big, quick, strong, strike the ball well etc. So you're probably playing in the core of the team and then naturally that the less strong players get moved to the side a little bit so that, their not out the way, but they are out the way a little bit. So maybe that was an influence, but I never really played as a striker, I was more centre-back at the back, little bit of midfielder now and then really.

So, you were happy to do that and it was your thing.

Yeah, I never remember not playing there… and then, weirdly though after I stopped playing, you know I haven't played as much, I play centre midfielder now. If I could choose a position to play it’d be centre-mid because you get on the ball lot more, influence the game more, so I think I’d probably play there now if I could.

So you like to keep playing a bit?

Only staff football once every couple of months or so… yeah nothing overly structured really but yeah if I’m playing anywhere, I’d probably play there it’s more entertaining than staying at the back half the time, especially when the level gets less and the ball stays in the middle more doesn’t it so you'll get more of the ball then.

Would you say you're one of the better players when you play amongst a group of friends or like you say staff? Are they generally from the Academy or have they come from different places?

Yeah both really, we have some staff here that play. Some from the Academy staff play, and yeah normally I’m up there with some of the better players… but that doesn't really mean anything to be honest, it can be pretty dreadful so.

Yeah it's interesting getting a snapshot into how football stays with people and some people just leave it alone. Did you get that feeling from anyone coming through, that you really enjoyed playing football whereas some of the others were good at football but it wasn’t everything for them.

Yeah I think I was probably more serious than most of the players in the group to be fair. I’m not sure if it was overly competitive or where I just really cared I don't know really, maybe it’s a blend of both. Yeah I just used to hate losing, I used to hate losing so much and then, when people didn't try that was… it comes down to your beliefs and your values I guess, but when people won't try and you're losing, no, it's not for me so… yeah there probably were boys throughout that kind of 12 to 16/18 period where they were good but probably just didn't care as much or maybe they didn't realize how far they could get potentially. But I guess… it's really interesting, so I've got younger brother, but he's seven years younger than me or six years younger than me. So, like, I don't know whether it’s being the firstborn kid but… and the expectations on me, maybe you know dads a keen football supporter, Pops was, got a younger brother. I’d probably take a lot more responsibility for it like this means a lot to me and to the family, whereas other boys might have had, I don't know, I’m make assumptions here, but might’ve had other circumstances a home which means they don't care as much or it's more off, you know, little Jonny is good at football but we're actually… parents who don’t care about football in a weird way… and we have some at the Academy now where their son plays football and the dad’s in marketing, the moms in something else, and they don’t really care about football to be honest but their son’s good at it, so it’ll be interesting to see how that pans out but yeah maybe it's because we were more ingrained in it, probably cared a bit more.

So your dad didn't play, but he was still really big into football.

Yeah I mean he played when he was younger but not… he only played recreationally, so not a role model in that respect for that sort of thing he just used to play a little bit.

What about your brother, did he play?

Yeah he plays a little bit. He was, I dunno, a bit more free than I was maybe, wasn't as good. Maybe he didn't really get into any academies or anything like that so, I dunno. He was fairly good, he was good at other stuff like gymnastics he was pretty good at for a while and… yeah he was good but not great sort of thing, I wouldn’t say that I was great but… just not where he needed to be really.

So going back to that time around 8/9/10, when you were playing football but not in the Academy. I remember you talking about a lot of the other players would have gone into the Academy a little bit earlier, do you think there were reasons why you didn't go in at that age and it took a little bit longer or is that normal that it happens?

I genuinely don’t know to be honest, or I can't remember anyway… the boys in the academy now if they're going into the under 9’s need to be obviously really good, really good at 1 v 1’s etc, passing and receiving, understanding of the game. I think the reason that I got in was because I was fairly early maturing when I was 12. So physically I was quick, strong, tall, struck the ball well, needed to work on my technique but I think they took a punt on me getting there… and then also supports the team, in a weird way because if you've got a few big players in your team, then the smaller one's can get on the ball and you can keep the ball a bit better, so maybe it was a bit of a balancing act for me getting in a bit later but, yeah the boys that would have gotten there at a fairly young age would’ve had all of those experiences before really, which is interesting.

So, you are aware of the Academy at that time, but do you remember whether not getting in had an impact on how you felt about it?

I remember being disappointed yeah definitely when I was 7/8/9, I do remember being disappointed because I thought I’d done alright, but… I think I thought I’d done alright I don’t know. But the hardest thing for me, is when I did join I knew the other boys have been in for three or four years, so I always felt like I was playing catch up. Probably knocked a bit of belief in some ways because you’re always second guessing yourself but. I’d compete, because I knew I had to compete because I knew I wasn't as good as them technically or tactically because I just haven't had the experience. Yeah so I always felt I was kind of playing catch up, really.

So even in that period of 2/3 years are you thinking ‘I can still get in there, and this could still happen’, are you working towards that or are you just still playing football and if it happens, it happens?

Yeah I can't remember specifically thinking ‘I just wanna be in the academy’, I can’t remember that. I remember just thinking about playing football and enjoying it, but taking it seriously because I cared about winning or losing, rightly or wrongly. I think what’s different now as well, is that a lot of kids outside of the academy get to see the Academy now, so our games programs will include a lot of grass roots teams locally or or training centres which wasn't around when I was playing. So they probably do get exposed to that a bit more. So that was a little bit different now than it was then because I wouldn't have ever had the opportunity to see what it was like and to understand it, and maybe if I done it now, I would have a better idea of what it is and what it feels like… because again, the first things that… I don’t think I did a training session or maybe I did one training session… I can't remember training, the first thing I remember, is playing a game for <Club X>, an away game, and it was just weird because we were wearing the kit which blew my mind, actually playing in the kit against another team that's not a grassroots team played on some really good pitches, the speed of the game, the quality of the football just felt like a different world. But yeah when I waa 9/10/11 I don’t think I really appreciated what that actually looked like or was, you just don’t know… and also again over the last 11 years, it was a different system back then the awareness of what academies were was completely different or maybe it's not, but maybe because I've been in it for so long I think it is. So yeah I think it's becoming more… and again technology has probably impacted that over the last 10/15 years as well, so yeah I think there's been loads of changes but back then you didn't really know and, in some ways because you didn't really know then you didn’t go for it, but you knew that it did happen, but you didn’t know how it happens.

So you didn't have any friends that had gone into the Academy before you?

No, we did have a player who used to play for a local rival and he used to be really good striker, and then, when we used to play them it was really cool because you can see how many goals he's got and I was a defender so I used to think ‘Okay, this is gonna be really interesting’… so I do remember that match up and then that player ended up going to a different academy, but it wasn’t really friends with him I think we both played in the same development squad at around 11/12 and then he went to his academy at the same time that I went to <Club X>, so he's the only one I knew locally that had got in… the only other thing is, there used to be another guy from the year above and he went to my school, but I don’t know whether I knew that before or after I joined if that makes sense. But he was another local lad that I knew had been there.

So there were a few around but not best mates.

No, no, and I don't think I knew really what was going on until I joined so yeah.

Then it's ‘wow this is this is real now’, especially as a fan as well so you must’ve been really proud.

Yeah I remember that mum and dad came to the game and they were both really emotional because, you know… they were just really proud of me really, of where I was… and then I just felt really cool, that was cool I guess for me yeah very cool, I'm enjoying this, you know you’ve got to work hard and take it really seriously, because you want it to be a thing don’t you so… crazy.

Yeah, like you say it’s something that a lot of people don’t get to experience and it's hard to describe that, just such a unique environment really. So, would you say you're in a bit of an academy bubble where you felt different to people that are on the outside of that bubble?

Yeah you feel different anyway because, I think I've said this before, but about your identity changes, ‘this is the kid that plays football’, and also yeah your world is so different the training… like they go home to whatever they're doing, playing the X-Box. You're going home, I had to walk home, make my own dinner, I get picked up, I'd go to train and I'll come back whatever time 9/10pm… try and get a shower get some sleep and then back up again, walking in to school or getting a lift to school… and then you're absolutely knackered the next day because you've just done, basically six hours’ worth of traveling and training, and prep stuff three times a week or twice a week… and then like I’d finish school and then walk to town, get the train down, get picked up, get changed, all of that sort of stuff by myself, and this is at the age of 13 or 14, when you think about it there’s quite a lot going on there… and that was just like, your thing… and then, because no one else is doing it you are different aren’t you because, it's a different world. But even like when you go out about 14/15 your mates’ are going out on a whatever day, Saturday night or you know, maybe start drinking at parties all that sort of stuff. I just can't do that it's just… I’ve got a game Sunday, it's not, it's not gonna happen, I can't, I can't even if I wanted to I can’t do it so. Yeah you do feel, I wouldn’t say isolated, but you do feel either in the bubble or outside their bubble I’m not sure.

It sounds like you’re making sacrifices that other people don’t have to make, but you're on a different path I suppose. So, coming back to the transition when you left the Academy, does that make it harder to come to terms with? Do you think about all the things that happened along the way?

Yeah I think one of the things, I wouldn’t say it’s hard but one of the things that was a bit weird was once I’d finished at the Academy, not that I didn't have a friendship group, but the friendship group was in a different world as well, because they’d obviously gone to college together a lot of them, they're now going to uni together, whereas I’ve been living at the academy for two years and maybe seeing them if I'm lucky on the weekend, for a few hours, and then I went back down for a week and then… so then when you finish playing your friendship groups aren't as strong or they’re doing their own thing so, then you probably are a bit isolated because you don't have your academy group and you don’t have your friendship group, you’re living in a different area… and then you’ve got to, in some ways, reinvent what you're going to do? So that was quite challenging. Like you said when you’re… especially those ages 16 to 18 you go to college, you meet new people, it’s a new experience, probably starting to find a bit more about yourself and that sort of stuff… and then you know I probably didn't go through that sort of experience that they did, to be fair. So, it's a bit of a weird one. Interestingly some of the best mates I’m with are probably with my primary school friends. So I've got maybe a couple from secondary school, but not loads maybe one, but the core group of my friendship, apart from work mates now, would be 1/2/3 or 4 from primary school. I think, because you are yeah, because they went to a slightly different secondary school but you're still in touch with them more because you are friends with them, and then they're the ones, yeah, my go to’s now.

So they are the ones that knew you before the academy and then now afterwards as well.

Yeah, I’d never really thought about it like that before but yeah. Probably the most consistent… because they went to a different school and I went to a different school as well, so they didn’t see exactly what that was like but… yeah interesting.

Did you have any discussions around those kinds of things and the way the way that made you feel, and your feelings around that time? Did you have that with family, friends, was there aftercare from the club?

Yeah I think, the door was always open, so if you wanted to go back in be around it, then, absolutely you're welcomed in… and it always has been, which has been good… the Academy manager at the time was really good, he tried to help me out to go to uni and he said that if I wanted to do my UEFA B that they'd fund it etc, and they did in the end which was really good. But I think it's just difficult obviously, not a failure thing but like I was saying, you get institutionalised, and you’ve stayed around the club it’s difficult because you've gone from being a player, to then not being a player to potentially being a staff member. It’s a bit like, I don't just want to be given something because I was an ex-player sort of thing, or I don't just want to be known as just the ex-player, I want to be known as a really good football coach or a really good, whatever I’m going to do… and even now it’s like ‘yeah he’s got really good experience, he was in the Academy blah blah blah’. Yeah, but you know, I'm not that person anymore. I wouldn’t say, I’ve not changed, I’m the same person, but I’ve developed you know, I'm not just a footballer anymore, whereas I was back then, and that can be quite difficult sometimes. So, it's a drawback of staying where you went isn’t it, so it's a drawback and an advantage, because you know everyone so they’re happy to help out but at the same time, they sometimes see you as the ex-player, rather than what you’re doing now.

So, in a way you’re still trying to prove yourself and show what you’re capable of.

Definitely yeah.

How do you feel like your experiences coming through the academy have shaped you as a coach, in your philosophy and how you treat the players and that kind of thing, perhaps compared to other coaches who haven’t had those experiences?

I think I can empathize with the players better. So, I coach the 12’s this year, and I was thinking ‘that's pretty much the age I joined’… and I know the world's completely different from when I was 12 and they’re 12 so I get that but, I guess what it means to be a footballer and to want to be a footballer doesn't really change… the experience, the expectations, the challenges at school or I guess, the lifestyle around it is very similar, and you know it's going to be different for everyone clearly, but I get it. So, it’s like when I’m talking to parents it's really helpful because I can say ‘I know exactly what you're going through’. Like I know it's really tough traveling or I know it's really tough getting your kid to training and then they’re knackered and they're moody or whatever, because I can imagine exactly what that’s like because that's how I felt as a player, let alone how my parents felt, you know. I completely get it that it’s really tough, so I think that helps… and they kind of get that I get it… and also like, when I’m speaking to the boys I can say ‘you don't realize how lucky, not how lucky you are, but how great an opportunity this is’. You know, whatever happens, go and smash it, go make the most of it, go and enjoy it, rather than have any regrets. Because that's probably the one thing is I, maybe because I always felt like I was playing catch up, I always worked really hard, because I felt I had a lot to catch up on, so I had no real regrets when I left. Do you know what I mean, I feel like I've given everything I think I can, so be it. Even if I disagree with the release, I know I personally think I've given this a fair, fair go. So when boys aren't doing that I'm thinking ‘come on boys, I know it's difficult to appreciate time and all that sort of stuff but you need to enjoy and maximize everything you can while you can’, so I think that helps.

Yeah, I guess you can maybe think back to when you were there and maybe some of your teammates that were similar to that, not taking it all as seriously and how you felt about that at the time. So, would you say that makes you a better coach, not necessarily better technically but you see that it's a positive thing to bring to the table in terms of young players.

Yeah, I think this year, in particular, because we’ve worked a bit more 11 a-side, previous to that I’d been working foundation phase, 7 a-side, bits of 9 a-side, this year has been 11 a-side. So that’s probably where I can draw on my own experience a bit better because that's exactly what I did. Whereas when it’s 7 a-side 9 a-side it’s like ‘well I've never been in their shoes, I don't know what it's like to be that young and play you know these hours’. But whereas this year I can say ‘I get this um, I understand or I can see what you see, I can… not necessarily my coaching’s better, but I can just empathize a little bit better which probably does make me a better coach in that sense. Also I feel like, I feel like, I don’t wanna say it's energized but it's just like ‘Okay, I get it, I completely get this I get what you're going through, I get what you need to do, I get where you need to go, some of the things I think will help you to go where you need to go, let's really go after it, because I'm with you lets do it together sort of thing… whereas the other age groups is a little bit more challenging because they're a different age groups, their understanding of the game, their behaviours, just where they’re at in their life is different so yeah, I think it's probably been quite a good year in that sense.

You can see how your experiences are now having that impact, relating to the players, and helping them.

Yeah definitely.

Is that more specifically around players that are developing faster than others and you're able to use your experience of far as a player who’s been through that process to help them or know how best to challenge them, coach them specifically to their needs?

Yeah, I think so, I think understanding what it feels like when you've got… I was probably in a unique position where I felt I was always playing catch up like I’ve said, but there were times that boys were doing better than me and boys were getting contracts or whatever, where I felt behind, and then all of a sudden I was training up again so I understand that swing a bit better, and obviously my coaching education now is a lot better than it was back then, but. I think yeah it's… I try and explain to the boys that you can't control what other people do, you can only control what you do so, you know if someone is playing up two years then it’s cool, it’s cool be happy for them. If there’s boys that are playing lower down and they're absolutely smashing it be happy for them, but just get on with what you need to do and focus your energy on yourself because you've got a pathway, keep believing in yourself that you're going to get there in the next, however many years it takes you. But having that understanding I think is helpful.

It sounds like having an awareness that things can change and things can change pretty fast and someone that wasn't doing so well all of a sudden can be the best player, and understanding that and putting everything into perspective.

Again, this is a good example. So I was with <Player X> in my group and he played down a year for a year… and so, you know, this kid is not bad you know he’s probably not had the best career that he’s still pretty good, he's performing in one of the best teams in the world right. I think he played down for a year and then 17/18 he really kicked on through and he's done pretty well for himself so… trust the process but trust yourself that it's going to work out, you just need to keep plugging away and actually, if it is tough that's a good sign, because it means you’re changing or challenged to your level so, yeah that's quite useful.

So, I guess it's just a focus on the things that they can actually affect as opposed to thinking about the things that are just going to happen, they're either going to happen or they're not going to happen. Is that something that you had to think about when you were a player in terms of where you frustrated that you couldn’t do certain things or as an early developer were you potentially worried that they might catch up at some stage?

Not really, I mean. No, no, not massively. I mean, I thought my strength in the end was just ‘no one's going to work harder than me’, one of those sort of things that, you might be technically better, you might be whatever but I'm going to be smarter than you on the pitch, I'm going to work you out quicker and, I'll grind you down basically I'm just going to keep going until I win, was my thing because I think that's one of the things you can control. I think it probably became a bit more difficult when I was getting injuries and whatnot because I was like ‘well that really does impact my ability to do those things because I can't compete as much as some other people’. But yeah in terms of being caught up in that sort of stuff, that's probably a lack of awareness really… I knew I was big and strong at the time, I knew I’d been playing up a few years, fairly regularly probably because of that, looking back on it. I dunno maybe 16/17 I started to realize other boys were getting a bit quicker. But yeah not, I don't think it was massively consciously, I think your focus is just around what can I get better, what can I get better, what can I get better as opposed to maybe the other stuff that’s going on.

So, it's mainly just around the injury that there was a negative connotation on how you felt about yourself physically, because you’d been working so hard to get physically as good as you could, with nutrition and working hard and all that stuff. How do you deal with that, compared to other coaches that maybe don’t have the same empathy having not been in that situation?

Yeah I mean it's I think it's different now… so we've had a boy this year who had a growth-related injury. He’s had it for nearly two seasons, and the physio said this is either the rarest case in the world or he's not doing what he’s supposed to be doing…. and then he went for a scan and it kind of confirmed that he wasn't doing what he was meant to be doing, so then you kind of lose empathy because I know I’ve not been there, but he should be doing, he should be listening to us. Like if we say don’t play football at break, because it's going to hurt you and means you can't train, then don’t play football at break, why are you still playing football at break or why are you doing PE? And it came down to, do you want to play here or not? Because if you do, then you can't do those things. I know it's annoying and it’s a sacrifice, but it's a sacrifice for a couple of months and then you’re good… um, so the empathy would be different based on a case by case, but yeah there's a difference between if there’s a lad who’s generally looking after himself when he's got an injury, I think that's probably a little bit different than if there’s a lad who’s not looking after himself. Yeah, we’ve not too many with a serious injury so it's been alright.

Would you say it affects people more in the later stages of the Academy, because there’s maybe more pressure on it? When you had your injury you're coming into the last period, whereas if someone had an injury earlier would that be looked upon differently in terms of their development and how critical that is at that time?

Yeah I think there’s… because, I dunno if you've got a longer time, but you’ve got your scholarship and you’ve got the potential of being a pro for three years, so depending on the situation, you know there's a bit more of a pathway. Whereas when I was playing at under 18s you then turned professional, and then you're in it… you need to be ready for first-team potential football. There was reserves but there wasn't anything properly, and they’d just started the 21s the following year or the year after, the year after… and so, I think the pressure would be different now, for most people… and I think normally as well if you're going to be pro they would sign you fairly early now, so you know you'd have a good understanding of where you’re at. Whereas again with us we've got told April time or May time, March, April time and then you didn't really have a chance to get somewhere else. So yeah, because of that, because the pressure probably was different I think, you know it’s probably higher now… and don't get me wrong, the boys were putting themselves under a load of pressure to get back in if that's really what they wanted to do, but from a club point of view or from an external point of view now me looking in rather than being in it, there’s probably more holistic development going on there so there’s probably less pressure.

That sounds good in terms of development and not putting as much pressure on the players as you felt at that time. So, looking back on your time at the academy, did you find it easy playing with older players or was it quite difficult integrating? Because an 18 year old and a 16 year old will be talking about different things because they’re at different stages of their life I guess. How were those experiences for you and does that still happen now? How do you approach that as a coach?

Yeah, I mean, I played up every now and then so I played for the under 14s when I was 13 and played for the 16s when I was 15, played for the under 18s when I was 16 etc. So it is different because you probably… different people have different experiences and expectations of themselves, but I think, again it was like another judgment day for me, I was like ‘right now I really need to step up my game now, because these boys are older, quicker, etc. That was probably always the case, and then I knew it was an opportunity to impress… and to show what I can do and see where I’m at. But again, I remember, I was probably a scholar and we had an under 21s game or reserve game away, and our normal right back was injured and they said ‘you’re playing’ and I was like ‘oh, bloody hell, I'm like 17 here playing against 26/27 year olds… because I think this guy had been playing X amount of pro games at the time for a Championship team, and then I remember going up 1v1 and he just bumped me just like I tried… I thought I was fairly strong but he just, not swiped me away, but I just thought wow, different level here, completely different. So that was interesting, and then, yeah I think it was a mxture of things. That integration with the group, what do they think of me? How can I, not impress them, but how can I get them onside, from a coaches or the players point of view, and a mixture of saying ‘this is an opportunity as well’. So how do you take that chance? Yeah I mean I was lucky to train with the first team a couple of times in my second year and that was, yeah that was just unbelievable, you know. Again, depending on who the manager was, a different opportunity to do stuff… yeah pretty cool.

So you've relished that challenge and saw it as another opportunity.

Hmm, it’s also scary because you don’t know if they’re going to take the piss out of you either, you know. You just don't know how it's going to go. So it’s just like, keep your head down, in some ways, and just get on with it. Like don’t do anything that you're going to get taken the piss out of really, that was part of it as well, just like, survive, do alright and you’ll be ok. Yeah, because they don't know you, you don't really know them… so yeah it’s a bit of a weird one but… I think the difference now when I'm coaching or when we're coaching is that we’ll give an explanation of what they’re doing up here, or what they're doing down there and how they can support the team, and make it feel a bit more inclusive.

So someone going in as an early developer in their age group now, effectively playing a couple of age groups up are not going to be feeling like it’s completely different or they can't relate to those other players in the same changing room. I guess integration is probably quite difficult because they’ll be at different development stages?

Yeah, I mean it happens more frequently now as well, so you have some bio-banded stuff, so we have you know 12s to 15s all mixed in, bio-banded this year. So we had a mixture of 12s and 13s, but the year above though, the 13s had a mixture of 12s, 13s, 14s, one 15, I think, maybe… and so that was more fluid… and then in the past, in the Foundation phase we did game nights where 9s, 10s, 11s all mix up as a team and you all crack on as a team, so the integration in theory should be a lot easier than it was back then. So most of the time they know, or I’d like to think that they know who's around them if that makes sense.

Yeah, and I guess that makes it more normal for the players as well to get used to that kind of training.

Yeah.

So where would you say that could potentially improve in terms of using these physical attributes and the determinants and bio-banding? As you're using it much more now and using it in different ways, is there anything that you feel could be improved based on your experiences as a player and a coach?

Yeah, I think there’s more data now, which is good. So the predicting their heights, their weight, their speed, etc. I think, with the bio-banding it’s good, but I don't think it benefits the best players as much? So, we had a boy play down and he was the best player by far, and he was probably the best player in his group anyway? So the level of challenge… whilst he probably loved it and got loads of opportunities to score goals and do well, I’d question over a six week period, whether it was the best thing for him? And likewise, we've got a boy who's 12 and is playing for the 14s at the moment because he is massive. So he can probably deal with the physicality, but I wonder, that transition now, does he stay there? Does he go with the 13s? Does he come back to the 12s now for a period of time, and what that looks like? And because we have got the data as well, we can probably be cleverer with it. So, something I’ve been thinking about recently, if you've got 12s, 13s, 14s and you've got a player that's covering similar distances or is sprinting and doing the same physical outcomes, then does it matter how mature they are? It impacts it clearly, but if I’ve got a late maturing player physically, and they’re getting better stats than the 14 because of whatever, then can we put them with the 14s? Let's see what that looks like, because we've got the data to say actually, their outputs are very similar. They’re impact on the game might not be the same, or the physical contact might not be the same, but if you've got the data there, play around with it’ be clever and see what it actually looks like.

Yeah.

And again, if it's high sprints it means they’re covering the same distance or the same speed. So, it's not like it's a maturation thing, it's a speed thing. So how quick can this player get from A to B? Well it doesn't matter… doesn't matter how grown they are then or how physically mature they are it’s how quick can they travel and can they compete or can they be pushed up or down, you know until they are developed, until they can do higher stuff. So, if you’ve got a 13 that’s not… I know it depends when they get older as well but if you get a 13 that's getting the outcomes of a 12 year old, and they're struggling, well then just put them in the 12s then because of the data, rather than because of what they look like or how big they are. But yeah it would be interesting to explore that, I’m not sure if that’s a thing or not but that would be interesting.

Well, it sounds like there could be ways to develop it going forward so yeah, it’ll be interesting to see. Okay, I'll stop recording now.