**Participant 1 – Interview 1**

So can we start off with your experiences of football in general, from an early age. About maybe your background is football, any kind of family interest in football and just your earliest memories?

Yeah, okay. Earliest memories of football broadly would be going to a football match. Yeah, with dad and my pops. Pops being my grandad, we call him pops. Yeah, they used to have season tickets, so we used to go every weekend and that sort of stuff. And then playing-wise. We'd moved house, not a new area, but do you know where <Town X> is?

Yeah, yeah.

Yeah, so we've moved in <Town X> from one end to the other sort of thing. And then right next to our house was like three lots of playing fields. So, we went over the field one night and then there was a team training, which was my age, and then I just started training with them. And basically, it transpired that the next year, the coach didn’t want to do it anymore, and my dad volunteered or helped out.

Yeah. And then then that was that really and then played grassroots for maybe four years? Three or four years? Just sort of local team, that sort of stuff and then probably around the secondary school age they did like a reps team, a representatives team where the coaches of the league would nominate two or three players to go trial for the reps team. I don’t even know who took the reps team looking back on it, but yeah, there was our representatives and then you play the Isle of Wight representatives’ team and other counties that sort of stuff, which is quite cool.

And then I got scouted from there into, well on trial for <Club X> and then, yeah, say the rest is history, but then yeah, so that was age 12s or the 13s. Yeah, then stayed there until I was under 18s so.

So before you went to the Southampton Academy, did it feel particularly serious or was it just kind of fun, just more about the social side of it?

Yeah, it's a good question. I think. I had about maybe half a year a year with that first coach... and I guess that was quite social because I didn't really know any of the kids and that sort of stuff. After that, it probably got a bit more serious because my dad was in charge if that makes sense? You're not representing your dad, but your dad wants you to do something so you’ve gotta try and be the role model in the team informally or formally. So it's still social, but you’re probably taking it a bit more seriously than you would if it wasn't your dad.

Yeah, yeah I’ve never really thought about it before? But it's a natural consequence if your dad’s taking the team then you’ve probably gotta be, well, you don't have to but I assumed that role, had to be a bit more responsible, a bit more role modely, that sort of thing, because otherwise… seems a bit silly doesn’t it. So yeah, that was an interesting thing yeah.

So almost like higher standards because it’s your dad?

Yeah. And I think… yeah, probably… not a responsibility to sort of be good, but just be… Yeah, you're probably right, higher standards than, yeah, make sure the rest of the team’s following instructions or… yeah, I dunno…

So, is that how you saw your role within that team? Were you the captain or the leader within that?

You know, I think I was captain for a while. I'm trying to remember now. So I played centre-back as well. So thinking… going back then, tradition was normally your centre-backs were captain as well? So I think it was a by-product of that, and I like to defend, so that was a natural thing for me, but yeah, it's probably not just a happy coincidence, but those sort of coincidences, you know? That my dad was the manager, I was one of the better players in the team, but also the captain who played centre back. So I think there's a few natural by-products of what's going on there, but I think as a result, it probably was a little bit more serious for me than maybe others?

It's interesting to look at those different factors that then influence how you feel about it and taking it more seriously at that age. So would you say you found it easy in terms of the age to be that role model, as one of the better players?

I'm not sure if it came easy, but I was just one that worked really, really hard. Yeah. So lots of determination. Lots of… I guess old school football in British culture, sort of, so worked hard, be brave, those sort of things. I’d do the hard stuff, basically. And then when I was… so I’d say that I was an early developer as well, so I started to… 11, 12, 13… well especially 11, 12, I was probably slightly bigger than the boys, a bit stronger. So then it becomes a bit… not easier, but you can you can do it a bit easier than the rest of the lads can so…

Would you say you were aware of it at that age, that you were more developed or bigger?

Yeah, I was aware I was quicker and probably stronger. Um. Yeah, yeah, I’d probably back myself against most people if that makes sense just because, yeah, being a bit more developed I guess. Yeah.

So that was a conscious thing that you knew that you could play to those strengths and you were confident in your ability there?

Yeah. Yeah.

And would you say that you were more competitive than others and that was a driving factor that made you want to play football more compared to others?

Yeah I’d say that I would have been one of the more competitive people, yeah. Which is weird because I wouldn't say that so much now… I am really competitive, but I guess I can dial it down loads now, like I'm not that worried… yeah, like whereas when I was younger, I would be… all in like ‘Well, this is going to make or break my weekend if we don't do well here.’ So yeah, I was probably over-competitive when I was younger, but.

So, winning was everything, losing was like the end of the world?

Well, yeah, it wouldn’t be a great weekend if we didn't you know… I think in a grassroots level, yes. I think when you go to an academy, I think winning is desirable, but more importantly, how did you play? Yeah, like when we’d go into the academy it’s like, well, I don’t wanna lose clearly, that's why you're very competitive…But if we lose and I've had a really good game then I'm not overly worried as much because that's what I'm there for there to do well. So, if I do well but the team haven't played great, and I'm not going to take it as hard as if we won and I've played rubbish.

So, would you say that it shifts from the team to the individual in a way, in terms of development?

Yeah, definitely. Yeah, it does… and you think from my background, so my dad was the manager responsible for the team, which I was responsible for helping with that, I guess… and then when I've gone into the academy, that's been removed and it's all about, I guess, my own development within the team, and I guess the focus has naturally changed as a result.

But then, yeah, like when you're going to a more professional environment, it's more about you and the individualised approach.

That's interesting, so it sounds like within the academy it’s more about the development and it's more of an investment, less about team success I guess, as well. So, could you talk a bit about that transition between going from grass roots to the academy? Maybe think about how that affected how you thought about yourself or how you compared with others inside and outside of football?

Yeah, I think that's a good question. So, the transition is really interesting because I moved from grass roots to the academy and I was on trial for a fair amount of time, or it felt like a long time, maybe six weeks. I was pretty aware I wasn't as technically or didn’t understand the game as well as the other people in the group. So I knew that I was was pretty behind a number of people in that group and especially with that sort of age group the under 12s, most of them had been together for a long time, so 8s, 9s, 10s, 11s, 12s. So I was coming in fairly fresh and I probably spent a while trying to get used to what they’d been learning for 4 years.

So you joined the academy quite late compared to the others?

Yeah. Generally speaking, the academy start at under 9s. Well nowadays I say we'd have pre academies seven, eight and start at nine, so they would've done the same thing when they were younger. But then on trial back then you didn't really come in for trial at 12, 13 ,14… now you've got lots of different routes and you've got like different academies, more academies, and they've also got like elite training centres where you've got professional organisations are going to try and fill that gap whereas we didn't have that back then, so coming in what 12s/13s didn't really happen.

And then obviously when I did get in I was, you know, really happy, but then also you also realise that I'm still quite a way off it and I've got loads to learn! So it is a mixture of feeling really cool that you're in, but also you've only just begun,so… That was that. But then also when you went to school, it was like, OK, well, probably an appreciation that they don't really get what you're doing as well. You know, we're training like a grassroots team training maybe once a week Saturday morning and played Sunday, then obviously gone from doing that to training two or three nights a week and then a game away to Arsenal… two-and-a-half-hour journey then you come back in. Yeah, mad. So yeah, it’s a big I’d say it's quite a big transition, quite a jump from the grassroots to a professionalised environment yeah.

Which one did you prefer? Or were there positives and negatives of both?

Well, I loved playing for <club> so I enjoyed… Yeah, the different challenges over time and as you get older, you've got different styles of play that you try and, you know, you start to get a feel for what different clubs are good at doing… So it’s just a different challenge… And I think when you do get older, so maybe 14, 15, I’d started to make a couple of good friends in that group. So we’d go on day release, which is where you’d go in, take a day off school or two days off school to train all day. So my parents could never drop me down the club at that time in the morning, so I used to get the train to one of the other players’ house and I used to stay overnight, and so that used to be quite fun, etc. So then you start to go through that with them together. So that was quite cool. Yeah so, that was quite fun.

Yeah, that sounds like an adventure at that age.

Hmm. It's crazy, right? It's crazy, but I was only 13, you know, getting a train somewhere, getting a connection somewhere else and getting picked up and getting back home. Yeah, you had to grow up quite quickly.

Did you have any thoughts about the future that is this something that you wanted to do, or was it just something that was just happening at that time and just going with how it was at that moment? Yeah… I think it was a bit of both. There’s a natural aspiration to want to be in the first team or to do really well, but then at the same time, just trying to get through the next year. So if it’s under 14s, you know it’s decision year, under 16s, you know it’s decision year. Most of the time, it was a yearly thing. Bigger decisions were made every two years, but if you're not playing very well, then you could potentially leave, which is, I guess, it's weird because when I was playing, you'd see potentially players go every year and new players start to come in and that sort of stuff. So you're always a little bit on edge about what exactly is going to happen.

Would that be like people that you knew?

Yeah, I mean, there was. Yeah, again, it was probably harder for some of the other players, because they would have been there for a lot longer, but yeah, there was a couple. Especially when you get to under 17s age group because you get scholarships as well and you maybe play with them for four years or three years and you probably have a gut feeling that they're not going to be there as well, so that's kind of hard.

Did the players talk a lot between themselves about that, inside or outside of the academy?

I think it is but I think a lot of it was done by parents because obviously they just want their boys do well. But I don't remember having too many conversations about it internally if that makes sense about whether we think we're staying or whether we’re gonna go, I can’t remember that ever really being discussed so. No, not massively, no.

Did you talk to players’ after it's happened and talk about the emotional aspects of it, how they feel about it?

No I think when they did get released, I can't remember too many people staying as well. So then that was more or less the end of contact and I think again, I'm trying to remember if Facebook or social media… Facebook maybe was something we just started using properly, but not really like how it is today. So I think it would be a lot different now because everyone would still be chatting to each other on whatever, but probably didn’t have that then.

Yeah, you forget how the world's changed in a short space of time. Do you see that now, like with the younger kids and the scholars?

Yeah. Well, the team I coach at the moment, they've got a WhatsApp group. A good example is last year with the under 11s we’ll make decisions on the under 12s and they all have a Whatsapp chat, and you can ask, do you know how Player X is getting on? And they’ll say yeah he’s doing this or that you know, so they are more connected than we were, for sure. Or even a game like playing FIFA or Minecraft or whatever they're doing on their, you know, networks, that's the stuff they do. You know, I guess a lot more mediums to stay in touch now, which is cool in some ways.

It's interesting to think about how that's changed over time with the new technology that comes in and ways to stay in touch, essentially a support network.

So you stayed in the system and saw others dropping out along the way and kept going, and focussed on how far you could get on this journey? Or did you ever think about ‘what happens if I don't make it through next year’ or what kind of feelings do you have around that?

Yeah, you did. I think I remember thinking I need to get fairly good GCSEs like, I need to know if I can go to college, but the whole applying for college thing was like, it's always in limbo because a lot of the time you’ll be thinking ‘Yeah, I'll find out if I’m through just before or after GCSEs but then I won’t have to worry about that because, well, I'll be training at the training ground every day for two years’. So that's that. And then when you were a scholar… it's different now because you'd have the 21s now because we didn't really have the 21s but you did have a bit of reserves football, but most of the time it was predominantly if you're professional then you're in the reserves/first team ready to go. Yeah, so when you were 17, 18, you knew that, not safe yet, but, you know, because it was a two year scholarship, you know, we were just learning how to be on our own or because we had a lodge, we all stayed together and then learning to compete against the older age groups as well, because it was a two year age group. Normally, the second years got played ahead of you anyway, unless there was a spot because… well in my age group there was a lot of pros as well as with maybe four or five people they already signed professional contracts.

Okay, so that was around age 16/17?

 Yeah. So when they turned 17, they'd signed a contract for three years or whatever. So the first year was really difficult because they'd always get played because, well they’d signed professional so, you're always against it. And then the second year was probably the year you’re thinking I really don’t know how it's going to go because… I’d started well, and then I had a muscle injury, which took me out for a few months at a poor time because I was playing some really good football and then I never really got back into the swing of it. So I think. I think I was hoping for like an extension to really get fit and ready to give it a go, but that didn't happen. So. It was like I'm not sure what to do. And I think as well, because it's a difficult balance because you want to be fully invested in getting yourself this professional contract and you think that if you don't put all your efforts into that and think about alternatives then you’re not giving everything or you’re doubting yourself… so there’s the balance between believing in yourself and then, actually I better be prepared just in case… So what, you don't believe in yourself then?

It must be difficult to find that balance as well, because from a footballing point of view, I guess you want full focus on that but you know you do have to think about a fallback, potentially.

Yes, that's when it gets pretty challenging.

So would you say that was that was completely different for the players that had signed pro, so they potentially had an advantage there?

Yeah, they've got more security. And it also becomes like a… almost like a self-fulfilling prophecy as well, because they’ve been signed it’s confirmation that they're that good or good enough… they probably have their own biases from the coaching staff as well because they need to play them etc need to get them good and need to get them ready. Yeah it probably relieves the stress a bit, because you know you're in, just need to crack on now. Whereas for some of us and the other boys, it's probably a tough act to follow, but yeah, that probably doesn’t help your stress and that sort of stuff.

So looking back on that, did it feel quite stressful at the time? Did you feel under pressure or are you just in the zone and focussed?

Yes, I think you’re always under pressure, I think whether you realise it or not. I think you're always under pressure. Especially the first year… it was in a lodge, a big house. So you've got both groups in the same lodge. Naturally, there's a hierarchy because the second years have been there for a year already… second years’ half of you probably have pro contracts as well. And so you're coming in as the newbie and you’ve got lots to prove. So, yeah, especially that first year that pressure was going on. Second year wasn't as bad. I think because you are now leading the group again, so you could say, well, there's pressure but in a different way because you've got the pressure of performing I guess and you know it's your year to hopefully step up and get what you want, but you're in control of that. I guess that's quite nice.

So you embraced it, embraced that aspect of it?

Yeah.

Would you say that you put pressure on yourself or were there outside influences?

I'd put myself under a lot of pressure. But then again, like, I appreciate what the family, our family have done for training that sort of stuff. They want me to do well, but I wouldn't say they… I wasn’t overly bothered by that sort of stuff, is it like I've got this for my dad and for my mum… I'm doing it for me above everything. I mean, if it works out then cool, if not then it’s obviously a shame… I did feel like I… not let them down, but… It would have been nice to say thanks if that makes sense, because you don't feel that you've really… you've got a great experience out of it but you've not got anything tangible… which is probably the hard bit, because you can't really say ‘cheers, look where we've got’ sort of thing, but. Yeah.

I guess it’s difficult because there’s always going to be someone that's made it and someone that hasn’t, that’s the nature of it.

Indeed.

It must be a difficult environment to perform well in, not necessarily for yourself, but did you see the impacts of such a pressurised environment on others around you and was that talked about?

I'm not sure if you saw it. I think people. Well, maybe it did. Yeah, I think again, throughout the academy, there'll be some boys that once they stop playing football for <club> they didn’t play ever again. Yeah some not even involved in football, which seems a bit mad considering you spent more or less your whole childhood doing it, then not to be involved in it, sort of crazy, but I guess that's another by-product of the system is that you can't always get back into football, and if you feel like you're giving everything for it and it's not really worked for you, then you don't want anything to do with the system because in your opinion it’s chewed you up and spat you out and you've got nothing to necessarily give back to it, so I can I can probably see how some people are ‘nah, I'm done now’. I think I'm hoping that now with everything we have in place now that development in… especially within England, around the country, that's not the perception. But I can still see how it could be.

So do you see that from a coaching perspective now? Have things moved on and are being coached differently or the players are reacting differently to that?

Yeah, I think, like you said, there's much more awareness around it and the EPPP has helped massively because it's made everything a bit more standardised, and there's targets around education. There’s targets around making sure players have got pathways. Play care is now more prominent than it ever has been. So there's loads of developments that have happened now. So I think that's good. And I think you're right, coaching has changed and the environments within <club> has changed loads as a result of that and just general football development. So I hope now that it wouldn't be as hard. Maybe I don't know, I guess. Yeah, hopefully they've got more support now and a little bit easier in some ways to do that, to move on I guess.

So would you say there’s more communication in terms of why certain decisions have been made and things that are influencing the players, they're more involved in that or they have more understanding about how they’re being coached?

Yeah, I think there's loads more data, especially when you get to the under18s. Now they have so much data on all the players and their performances and contact time is pretty high as well. So I think the rationale for the decisions is a lot more informed than it ever has been so that makes it easier to process… If you want to know, here are your performance outcomes, here’s your data, here’s your performances, here’s your clips, here’s X-Y-Z… based on that, this is where we think you're at. That's a lot more easier to understand, I guess, and to understand compared to other people. Whereas even when I was released, it was maybe four people in the room… three people in the room plus me. And it was. Yeah, I can't remember it. It was maybe a 20 minute chat and that was it. And I can't even give you like a main reason… apart from ‘there’s a five year plan and unfortunately, basically you’re not included in it’. There wasn't a cut. I don't know if it's one of those things where you've heard the first thing, you forget everything else because that's all you’re listening for. But I can't remember in terms of any ‘you need to get better at this or we need more of this’. I can't… like if you asked me what the main reason you got released I’d say, well, it wasn't part of the plan. That's all I can remember. But there was no video analysis, there was no well, there was probably videos, but no analysis, if that makes sense. Yeah, we had S&C (Strength and Conditioning). But again, there was no S&C outputs. So I guess what I'm trying to say, hopefully now if they are released or moved on, they've got a lot of I guess due diligence behind it, which is good.

Yeah, easier to process the decisions and understand them. So, you mentioned that you were an early developer and that you were stronger and faster for your age group. Have you got any memories of how that potentially changed when you joined the academy and whether you were bio-banded or maturity matched during your time there?

No, not intentionally. No, it was you were coached in your age groups and stay in your age groups… the only time you moved up was if you're doing well or they needed a player… and again, that wasn't really communicated particularly well. So I played up. Sporadically, I guess. Every year. So like under 14s, I'd go with the under 16s for a game or two. When I was 16, I'd go with the 18s for little bit or even when I was with the 18s, I'd go and do bits with the 23s every now and then. Yeah, but there was no real… apart from maybe being a bit bigger or maybe a bit quicker being able to handle it… I think looking back, I don’t even know if it's because I was good or just because I was big? You assume when you're younger, that it’s because you’re good, you know, think, I remember thinking, Oh God, they must think I’m doing alright’… because I’m playing for the 16s or I’ve gone away to wherever… so yeah, but there wasn't… ‘oh you’re going to spend a period of time here because you're actually growing more than your age at the moment’, that wasn't ever communicated, whereas we do that now quite frequently, which is good.

So now you're coaching you have a much better understanding of all the different aspects of size and strength and how players mature at different times, but back when you were coming through, you just played and went where you were told that was that.

Yeah, yeah. Yes, that's one thing that’s changed is the communication… You think of the communication we give our boys… and also we have like six weekly reviews as well, and they can review their performances and we can have chats with them. Yeah, that's crazy compared to how much it was back then. Yeah, to think about it's just is mental how football has developed over that 10 or 11 years, it’s crazy.

Do you think it would have been different, with the knowledge you have now, how you experienced it in terms of your idea of self and how you felt around your body and development at that time?

Yeah, I mean, I think if I knew what I knew now, I would’ve been a lot more relaxed in the fact that, you know a bit more about why things are happening if that make sense and where you're at and what you need to work on. So that probably would’ve took the pressure off a little bit and recognise that… Yeah, I think like anything the greater your understand, the easier it is to process I guess, so… or ways to develop as well, so yeah, I think if I knew now or if it was the way it was now I'd find it… I would have found it a lot easier than I did. But that's life, I guess.

Yeah, it's good that it has developed. So, talking about the bio banding, did you feel like you were an early developer coming through or did others catch up? Was it predominantly early developers in your age group, was that noticeable at the time?

Yes and no. I mean, there was a few that were early developers and did well. But then we had quite a series of, um, we did have some late developers, so there was some players I can think of now that would have been classed as late developers in our age group as well. So, we had X in our age group… he was sort of the one where… he was under 14, and he was struggling but was struggling to compete, so he played with the 13s for most of the year. Yeah, and that's probably the one occassion I can remember effectively being bio-banded? You probably wouldn’t have said they were probably would’ve said… I think the perception at the time is that he was not doing very well, from the player's point of view I guess, or he's struggling to compete. But then when he was 16 or 17 or 16, but nearly 17, he just seemed to get real quick and really strong… he didn’t grow massively… but he just got really quick all of a sudden and then really durable and then… Yeah, he just kicked on, because technically he was always pretty good. He always saw the game really well. Ball came into him, you know, he’d flick it round the corner or try and dribble and take someone on… But yeah, just couldn’t get past people. But then all of a sudden he’d start to run past people and deliver the ball and get goals and assists, and we were like you know ‘where’s that come from?’ But yeah, this is a great example of late developers, yeah. But weirdly we also had <Player Y> as well. So he got released at 16… and even looking back now… He struggled, we used to play back three and he'd play left-sided centre back and he’d just get run all the time because he wasn't very quick… he's still not particularly quick now, but he's OK, but basically now he's a giant, isn't he?

So he was a late developer then in your group?

Even though he was quite tall, he wasn't very strong and he wasn't very quick. So he would have been one of the tallest people in the group throughout the years, but he wasn’t very strong… and then wasn't overly impactful because… You know, a tall, weak, slow centre back doesn’t make a very good centre back! Now, he's an absolute giant and he's strong and can handle the speed a bit better… So yeah, that's when you think at the time the decision probably was right. But if they’d carried it on a couple of years and they would… <Player X> peaked just at the right time really, if they had carried that on the next year we might not have lost him, so… it's all fascinating isn’t it.

So it is about timing, but technically they were up there, otherwise they would have been let go too.

Yeah, no <Player Y> is able to strike the ball, particularly off his left foot really well. He struggled with his right foot and probably still does now. But he had a good enough range and ability on the ball to play, but yeah, he just struggled.

How would you say that you fared in comparison, did you have those peaks and troughs or were you fairly steady?

I would say I had a peak when I was around 13 because I was probably one of the quickest in the team… I think looking back, probably because I started puberty earlier or muscle tone earlier anyway. So that probably stayed til around 16/17, I mean, physically, I was alright... I guess 17/18 my speed didn't really go any more, so I was still fairly quick, but not rapid anymore, I was just, you know, their voice when I was playing, there were boys that were quicker than me so I wasn’t the fastest anymore, but. Yeah, I could still compete… so I didn’t go from really fast to really slow, so I was really fast to just okay. Yeah. So yeah, probably the same in school I used to do athletics and the 100 metre sprint and all that sort of stuff… even at county I used to do that and then when I did football I didn’t do any of that stuff anymore. But it would have been interesting if I had done that… county athletics every year to see what was happening just to compare. So when I was in Year 8, I was top two but now I’m in Year 11… I don't know because you don't know, because you're not racing against the quickest anymore.

So, what were the connotations of playing down with the younger age group at the time? You mentioned it was a negative thing, as in ‘he's not doing very well’ but is that generally how the other players’ saw it?

I think so. I mean, again… It was fairly rigid back then, and I felt like when I say back then, it's like, it's a lot longer… Yeah, no, it's not that long ago, but I think it was very structured so you had the 13s and the 14s, a bit like school is in the fact that, you know, you have year five and if, you know, if you get told that you can do the year above work you probably think ‘oh they must be doing well then’… and likewise if they need to stay down a year you think, oh, ‘they’re not as developed as they should be’. So yeah, I think it's the same sort of perception in football, or it was the same sort of perception in football… If he's playing up or playing down, it means that they're doing alright or they're struggling… and it's a lot more informed now within football in particular, and the players know as well… So we had this last week we had like two or three of the under 13s came down… came down or played with us… and likewise, we had two under 11s come up. You've got like three different age groups playing each other there… Year 6 to Year 8 playing with each other… which when you think about it like that it’s crazy. You know, some kids just about to do SATs, you know, others that have been in secondary school for two years in the same team. So yeah, but I guess it's not really weird for us because it's like, well, this is where you're at, let’s play some football so. Yeah, that's changed loads compared to when it was my age group where it was just like if you’re playing up you’re doing alright, if you're playing down you’re not doing so well.

So do you think that at that time the coaches knew why they were doing it, but I wasn't communicated to the players or maybe even the parents and the family?

Again, I can't remember ever being communicated specifically with us or with the parents like that. But I think the coaches probably thought ‘let’s play him in the 13s’ (Player X) because he was a lot smaller than most of us. But I’m assuming it was a deliberate effort because it didn't normally happen.

It's interesting to know how that's then changed today, that potentially you wouldn't get the same connotations and people wouldn't necessarily think, Oh, he's he's doing really well because he's being played in an older age group because this is for his development. Would you say that there’s a better understanding of that throughout the club… the coaches and the players and the family and everyone… these days?

Yeah, I think so. I think it's getting there. I still think if you play up, people think you’re better… and you might think if you play down, I suppose… it's a more appropriate challenge, so I think, yeah, it probably does still exist to some degree… because of the education system in general, I don't think you’re ever going to get rid of all of those biases, but I think as a coaching staff now… I think as well, you know, play up, play down, see how you get on… there is probably more expectation though that if you are playing down then you need to do better… so if you’ve got 13s playing down you think ‘come on, you’ve got a year on these boys’… maybe not physically, but you’ve got a whole training year, especially when you've trained so much now you've had a lot of time doing stuff that you know, so we should be doing better really… and likewise, when they play up, you think we'll see how they get on because… for example, we've got an under 12 that's playing in the 14s because he's six foot now… so physically he might be alright, but he still got lots to learn, cos he's still 12… so there’s probably less expectation that he's going to do well there, but hopefully he’ll be alright… but from a parent's point of view and especially when they start comparing to each other ‘this player’s playing with the 14s, my boys playing with his own age group, he's fine’… No, not necessarily, we’re just trying to give them a different challenge.

So, I guess that's changed quite a bit since you were coming through the academy. When you were in that age group, did you feel like you were happy with how your body was developing and doing the job that you wanted to do? How did that change when you got injured, and how did that affect you?

So I took it quite seriously… so my diet was really good… I’d basically work my socks off all the time. So I was fairly happy with my body, in a sense… I was really tired all the time though. So looking back on it, I would have given myself… just been a bit cleverer because I think I went full tilt every day. You know, you can't do that. You need to be… Again, it is different now, but your data was starting to come in maybe our age group, so 17, 18, you start to look a little bit about high performance but it wasn’t really shared with you or the reasons why… If I had that knowledge then I would have been a bit more clever with the level of intensity I was training at all the time also which might have helped with the injury… and again, I can't really remember too much about the injury. Apart from that obviously, it was painful… but it was just like a muscle niggle in the groin, so it sometimes would be fine and sometimes it wouldn't be fine… and then the weirdest exercise would cause me pain and I’d just think I can get through it, I think because it's not really stopping me do anything, it just hurts when I do stuff . And so, yeah, that was that… then I went for scans and that sort of stuff. It took a while to really understand what was hurting and why I couldn't train and… well, that sort of stuff and that took ages, probably about four or five months… I still don't really know if I'm back to what would have been full strength. I'm not sure if you're completely, you know, 16 or 17, 18… if you know enough about the ins and outs of your body in order to fully prepare it, whereas you get older and understand to a greater extent or do degrees or do courses that teach you about it to help you understand it a bit more. So, that was probably challenging looking back on it.

Did you have to work quite a lot on your own one to one with strength and conditioning?

Yeah. So essentially went into the physio every day and then you'd have a series of exercises to get on with and then depending on the schedule you might be doing running or jogging, or might be a gym programme or… that sort of stuff, or it might be fitness on a bike or low intensity stuff, which just drains you because you just want to go out and… you know, you got to do it, which is absolutely fine, so you just get on and do it, but… you might see the boys at lunchtime and they’ve had a worldie of a session, and you think ‘I wish I could’ve been doing that, I’ve just been sat on a bike for 30 minutes sweating ’, so… yeah, wasn’t particularly fun, but again, you appreciate that's what it is as well, so… I mean, there were some benefits… when I was injured, there were some pros that were injured and we had the same physio room, so that was quite cool, you know, talking to some of them or just probably staying quiet and just listening… so not a weird bonus, but a by-product of being injured is that you saw some of the year round professionals so that was quite cool.

So it's interesting talking about training as such with professionals. Do you remember how you felt about yourself? Did you feel like you were professional almost or in terms of being a footballer? How would you describe your identity around that time and did it change? Did you ever feel like you were a football player or academy player or you had a strong identity of who you are?

It’s a good question… um I think when I was younger, what you did was your identity if that makes sense. See I think about my parents as well, they’d be like, ‘oh, yeah, my son plays for…’ not just go around bragging, but like, you know, in conversations would be like ‘ he’s doing alright with football and playing for ‘Club X’ etc… the good ones are if you've not seen family members in ages or second cousins or whatnot, if you've got a big family like we do they’d say ‘how’s he getting on with his football’ and ‘he’s the footballer in the family, all that sort of stuff… whereas your identity personally is more ‘well that is what I do, that is what I'm known for but maybe there’s more to me than just football! But I think you do get wrapped up in it because that is what you do… and when you're younger, like even with your mates they say ‘oh he plays for ‘Club X’ and all that sort of stuff you do get… I wouldn't say I got wrapped in it, but I think your identity get wrapped in it because that's what everyone knows you for… even PE teachers would say ‘oh, yeah, ‘Participant 1’ is playing today or whatever… and it's quite cool, and I guess it makes you feel good in a weird way, but I wasn’t buzzing about it, because it was just, this is what I do. It probably sounds like I didn’t really care, I did really care but it was just like… this is what I do, this is part of my life and it is really cool and I do enjoy it, but…

It was just normal…

Yeah, you get used to it as well. At first it’s really exciting and it's… yeah, it's really cool and all that sort of stuff, but even now working in the club, like some of my friends or people that don't necessarily work in sport environments, and you’ll be like ‘Oh yeah, did that the other day’… or ‘Oh yeah I did a player interview the other day with X, Y or Z’ and they’ll be like ‘What you speak to them?’… ‘Yeah, we speak to them!’ like, yeah, when you're in that environment, it doesn't seem as big as what other people think it is. So, when I was 17/18 or whatever, we would get called on a Friday morning and normally to go and train with the first team, because they did match prep and we'd be basically the bodies for them to try stuff out on. Yeah, you're playing with or playing up against all of these famous players… and you see them around the canteen all the time or… you just… you don't take it for granted, but it's a little bit… this is just life, this is the way it is. So I think, if we go back to identity and people say that it’s amazing, and yeah, it's cool… I guess it's cool, but it is just another day for me if that makes sense. But then I guess the tricky thing with the identity stuff is when I did get released it was like ‘well, my whole life I've been a footballer… I've been the kid who plays football… the footballer in the family, your mates think you’re a footballer, and all of a sudden, you’re not. That's probably where it becomes… internally that’s probably where I found it difficult, I was like ‘what do I do now? Do I carry on playing football or do I not carry-on playing football if I don't carry on playing football, what does everyone think of me?’ Because they put so much effort into me as well. Take me to training three times a week and all sort of stuff, and yes, it's difficult to get your head around really, because again, what you do every single day is now not what you do every single day and you don't do anything like you would do every single day… and even like the culture is completely different. So that's probably something I found really difficult… when you go into an elite football environment and people value particular things like being on time, working hard, having a good attitude, getting stuff done… looking after yourself all the time and then you go and work in a different environment where they don't really care about it, because that's not their environment… well how do I deal with that?

So, you don’t then fit in to that kind of environment, you have different standards.

Yeah, and then it’s like ‘well, if my standards up here and there’s are down there, in my perception, where do I meet in the middle here, because if I can't live with their standards… But, you know. Even in my job at the moment… because normally time is normally a big thing for me, like if we’ve got a meeting, we start on time and we normally finish on time, that's normally a big thing for me… and I guess over the years, I've put out to be a little bit more flexible because some people do not care one little bit, you know… in the academy it’s a bit different because I'm probably still in that mindset. So we have a multidisciplinary team meeting on a certain day at a certain time every week. Everyone knows it starts at that time, yet people turn up 5 minutes late… what's the point of me sitting there for five minutes? It’s that sort of stuff… I think, because it's the academy environment as well… Whereas, if we were going to go out for a coffee or a drink tonight, if one of us is five minutes late nobody is going to care… but when it's a professional work environment, it's difficult… and even right now, like when if I think about back then, it's so motivated to do well to develop yourself, so your nutrition is there as well and all, I guess all the support around that goes as well… so I didn't have to cook anything, I didn't really have to do any cleaning, didn't have to worry about too much apart from get there, work your socks off, get home and rest… whereas all of a sudden when you don't have that around you, you then think ‘I want to be the best person I can, but then that means I've got to go cook dinner, or I’ve got to buy my own dinner… plan to cook it. I've got to work out for an hour and half if I want to do what I want to do. I haven’t got time for this!’

Pay for gym membership?

Pay for a gym membership, and I’ve got to get there myself as well… it's just yeah, it blows your mind how… you go back to the identity thing it's like, wow, I'm not used to this… and then like, you go to the gym and you've got, I don't know, a whole host of people in there doing weird stuff and you’re thinking ‘what's going on here?’ It is a completely different world and you've got to get used to it.

That just happens overnight?

Yeah, well, it feels like it. Yeah. The other thing is, well, again, it is different now but when I was released, I got released in, yeah, probably around this sort of time, around May time, which is still sort of late for… well it's late now anyway, which I don't really agree with, but we used to… historically you got to told either in December at Christmas time or February time, with the thought being that if you get released then that at least you've got three or four months to try and get another team or figure out what to do. I was released in May… it might’ve been a bit later, but basically I didn't have time to get another club because the season was finished… and also academically, I had a really short window to figure out if I was going to go to university or do that sort of stuff… the academic year is more or less finished now, maybe there’s a month left or whatever for universities, I know schools are different, but most universities are more or less there aren’t they. So when I got released, I didn't really have anywhere to go. I didn't really have any plan academically, and it was like Jesus I've got maybe a month to figure out what to do. You’ve got no income, either. So you used to have a scholarship wage of however much it was, I can't remember… maybe 100, 100, 250 quid a week. So six hundred quid or seven hundred quid maybe a month, when you're not spending any of it that's quite good money… and then you've got no money coming in… and then what do you do, do you need to get work? Do you need to borrow money? It's just… it blows your mind really.

So there’s a lot of things to think about. Leading up to the point where you get released, does any of that cross your mind or is it just that overnight it happens and then it hits you?

It does. But then also for me, I was like, I was probably naïve as well. So thinking ‘Club X’ is a really good academy. ‘Club X’ is, I guess, a really good club. Maybe I'll be good enough for like a ‘Club Y’ (Lower Tier) or another team that probably wasn't as good back then. But like, OK, I know I’m at one of the best academies around. That's fine, I know I'm not going to be in the First Team here, but maybe I can try to be First Team or thereabouts for ‘Club Y’ or even a non-league club surely they can't be much better like that was that was my approach… and again, naively… and whilst some people had contacts, not loads of people had contacts. Whereas people are so much more informed now, which is good, but then you go train with a non-league club… it's not professional. You think you can do that and then you're going to get in the First Team… and it comes to the standards again so, you go to your training every single day with highly qualified coaches in a really, I guess, tough but positive environment on unbelievable pitches, in a professional club… and then you go to a non-league club where they're not training every single day, they might train twice a week, the managers… old school, potentially, yeah, old school and not as progressive as it was, and the environment is completely different… and then you go to those sort of clubs and you've got some old players in there as well, the dressing room is completely different to what you’re used to… people are plumbers, but then play because they're really good pals of the first team manager and they’re on good money, and it's just like, yeah…

Potentially a drinking culture?

Yeah, a boys club, that sort of that vibe and I do get it now. I understand why it’s like that because it can be like that…if you're not taking it professionally, then it's actually quite a good gig isn’t it? You train a couple of times a week and play on the weekend, get some good money out of it as well and then your full time job on top of that… crazy. But then to be an 18-year-old to seeing that world is miles apart, absolutely miles apart.

Especially if you’ve been in it since you were 12 that's just ingrained in your mindset now, that's just how it's done.

Also how do you think it should be done as well.

Yeah, yeah. So, as we’ve only got around 5 minutes left I don't want to start anything new now just because we might go off on a tangent and take a little bit longer so, I'm happy to leave it there.