

Should professional footballers be role models?

A look at the influence of the behaviour of footballers on children

Children's Express journalists set out to investigate whether young people really should look up to the stars of the FA Premiership.

Last season proved a low point for the football community, with the ugly side of football culture popping its head up far too many times during the course of the campaign. You couldn't open up a paper without reading about footballer's drunken antics, rape allegations or "text" allegations. Children then think they can behave like that, they get into fights on and off the pitch.

Only recently West Brom Premiership footballer Lee Hughes was jailed for six years after being found guilty of causing death by dangerous driving in his 100,000 sports car.

Last March an inquest heard that a rising Manchester United and England Under-21 star, Jimmy Davis, was nearly twice the legal drink-drive limit when he was killed in a high-speed motorway crash.

Also last season Britain's most expensive footballer, Manchester United star Rio Ferdinand, received an eight month ban when he was forced to deny drug misuse when he failed to show up for a dope test.

As we enter a new FA Premiership season how soon will the next controversy be uncovered?

Mal Donaghy played over 16 years in top flight football in England, with stints playing for Luton Town, Manchester United and Chelsea, before retiring in 1994.

The former Northern Ireland international will watch England's upcoming World Cup qualifiers with his native country wishing he could be part of the action. Donaghy was part of the Northern Ireland side, which drew 0-0 with England at Wembley in November 1985, ensuring World Cup qualification for both sides. Now coaching the Northern Ireland Under-19 side he understands all too well the pressures many young footballers in England are under.

"Young footballers have an awful lot of spare time on their hands. They train in the mornings, then they have most afternoons off, and it's a question of, 'how do you spend your time? Unfortunately one or two of them are led astray, alcohol becomes a crutch for them to lean on, to get away from the pressures of the game for a while, but it not all the young lads that are doing it, but when one or two of them fall by the wayside or get caught in headline making news stories, it's front page news, and unfortunately because of the high profiles they have, people tend to think that all footballers have a tendency to do that, which certainly isn't the case."

Donaghy also feels the current football culture is changing. "When I first went over to Luton I was told that it was very important if you've trained all week, leading up to the match on the Saturday, it's very important that you have a release valve on the Saturday night. Certainly I enjoyed one or two drinks in my time, but it's a question of knowing when to stop, knowing what your body can take, and giving your body time to recover, so if I went out on a Saturday night I knew that I would be training early on a Monday, so it was a case of not drinking too much and being capable to go and perform in training on the Monday."

Mal points to the current regime at Arsenal as the way forward. "You look at the Arsenal players and the success that Arsenal have had last season, the culture that Arsene Wenger has brought to the club, a lot of those players are teetotal now, guys who in the past did like a drink have totally gone off it during the season, and obviously you've got to hold Arsenal as the role models for young footballers today, that's what they've got to aspire to."

Greg McKeever is coach with Institute Flames girls Under-13 team. He believes the huge financial rewards in the game have spoiled the game. "I think 40 or 50 years ago they were good role models because they were playing it for the game and there wasn't the same financial rewards. I think the financial rewards that top footballers get are ridiculous and I think it cheapens life in general. Premiership footballers in Britain tend to think that because they have all this money and power they feel they can do anything."

Coaching a girls soccer team, Greg is also seriously concerned about the message currently being sent out to females who

want to be involved in the game. "I am particularly concerned about the message it sends out between male and female relationships. Publicised accounts of sexual antics of professional footballers over last season, "roastings" and so on, is a very bad message, It says they can do whatever they want with females and I think that is terrible."

He also believes clubs could be doing more to educate young players about the dangers that come with fame and money. "I think it might be too much too soon. I don't think there is enough going on behind the scenes for young footballers to teach them how to handle things. Agents are handling everything for them, all they want to know is 'am I making money?' I don't think anyone has learned a lesson from the George Best era. He was known as the fifth Beatle, the first footballer who actually turned into a pop star and his life has gone down the pan, but very few have learned from that."

Greg believes the George Best situation has led Manchester United to take a closer look at this issue. "To be fair to Alex Ferguson he has tried for a long time to learn from that and you will not find a lot of Manchester United footballers who are involved in this type of controversy. The likes of Ryan Giggs and Paul Scholes have never been involved in these types of things and I think it was part of Ferguson's strategy to protect his players from the public eye at a young age. I think the Manchester United example is one that all clubs could follow."

Aine McKeever is 13 and plays for Institute Flames and the Northern Ireland Under-13 side. She believes if young people are intelligent they can make up their own mind on how much they do look up to professional footballers. "They make Nike ads and Adidas ads and things like that, and young people look up to them. David Beckham is really popular and when he is involved in something like that young people can at least realise that it is something you should not do."

She is angry however at the negative treatment girls receive when they are involved in football. "Whenever girls play football boys say you can't play football as well as men. Girls football is getting more and more popular now. It can be annoying because whenever you go on the field to play they make fun of you and say you can't play because you are a girl."

13-year old Sean Canning believes footballers simply don't make good role models for young people. "Some of them do but sometimes they are in the papers for not doing good things and I think that's not good. Children then think they can behave like that, they get into fights on and off the pitch."

Some mindsets will possibly never change however, as Sean demonstrates. "Football can be quite sexist as women are not really respected, but not that many young girls play football, so from a playing point of view I don't think it is that big an issue because the men are better anyway!"

About the team

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