

Thatcham Town Harriers Football Club



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Academies

This note has been prepared by Thatcham Town Harriers Committee to provide information and guidance to parents and players about Academies run by professional football clubs. It does not refer to private academies run on a for profit basis by private individuals or organisations as they are less likely to significantly impact on the child.

Introduction

A number of professional football clubs regard Thatcham as being within their area to recruit players. These include Reading, Southampton, Portsmouth, Wycombe Wanderers, Queens Park Rangers, Chelsea and Fulham. Academies are permitted to sign children under contract for the beginning of the season when they are Under 9. In order to sign a player the home ground of the club must be within 1 hours travel time from the player's home address. They may take children younger than Under 9 on special training or other activities but there is no contractual basis for this. Nowadays it is less common for children older than Under 11 to be invited to join an academy but it can happen. Academies are now also starting to recruit girls in the anticipation that the woman's football will develop as a professional game. There is intense competition between the academies to recruit and retain the most talented children.

If your child is in the "A" or "B" squad for age groups up to and including Under 11 it is certain that they will have been watched playing in a game by a scout from at least one academy. Sometimes the manager of the team will be aware of this but on other occasions he or she will be unaware. The most favoured time for scouts to see players is at tournaments when large numbers of players can be watched. If the scout is interested in a player he will normally make himself known to the team manager and seek a discussion with the parent. While the academy scout deals with this situation daily it is most likely that the parent will only encounter this once or twice in their lifetime and it is possible that the team manager also has no experience of dealing with academies. However within the club we do have a collective experience.

The purpose of this note is not to encourage or discourage our players joining academies, it is to provide information and guidance to parents.

Some Questions To Ask Yourself

If your child has been invited to join an academy normally this is viewed in a positive light by the parent, the player and the scout. However there are many hidden aspects which may only become apparent after a period at the academy. Whatever you decide this is probably one of the single most important decisions that parents will make about their child's future. Perhaps the best starting point is to ask some questions such as:

1. Do you believe that even at this very early stage of your child's development he/she has an outstanding talent for the game and that you wish him/her to have the opportunity to become a professional footballer?
2. Is your child a significantly better player than their peer group and does he/she consistently perform at a higher level than them?
3. Does your team manager/coach share your opinion?
4. Are you clear about the weekly time and travel commitments that are required for academy players?

5. Are you prepared to remove your child from Thatcham Town Harriers and the friends he/she currently plays with?
6. Are you satisfied that your child's main sporting activity will be football and not for example rugby, cricket, tennis, swimming, rowing or golf.
7. Are you prepared to accept the consequences for your child's future education? Apart from any disruption to schooling caused by the travel during weekday evenings, academies will not permit players to remain in full time education after the age of 16.
8. Can you and more importantly, your child handle the consequences of rejection in the event that the academy decides not to renew their contract at any stage?

If the answer to all these questions is an emphatic "yes" then it may well be the right decision for your child. If the answer to any of these questions is "no" then almost certainly your child should not join an academy irrespective of the views of the recruiting club.

Thatcham Town Harriers Perspective

Our view is simple, if the child is good enough, has the potential and the parents are fully committed to this course of action then it has our support. However as a club we do feel the following is relevant:

1. Nowadays academies provide a high level of coaching and care towards children.
2. However we do not believe that children at primary school (i.e. under the age of 12) should be in an academy. This view is shared by many within the game at the highest level.
3. When academies recruit young children they are well aware that it is impossible to assess how they will develop either as personalities or footballers. The 8 year old "star" may well be less than average at 18! The converse can also be true. To counter this they recruit many more children than they expect to retain in future years.
4. This is a "numbers game". If an academy has 12 players at each age group this adds up to around 120 children. The chances of more than one or two from each age group succeeding in the professional game is remote. In other words 95% of children don't "make it" and are either rejected or simply drop out, often giving up football altogether, particularly if they are unable or unwilling to rejoin their original club.
5. Parents need to appreciate that the aims of an academy are completely different to that of a community football club like Thatcham Town. As one parent said "Never forget that a professional football club is a business – if the child does not cut the mustard – he is out".
6. The child's emotions are immaterial to the academy's retention decisions.
7. Once a child has signed for an academy they are no longer permitted to play for their local club. Academies are not permitted to restrict children's school sporting activities but there have been instances where an academy has made it clear that they do not wish a 9 year old child to play for his primary school team leaving the parent and child with a dilemma and a potential dispute with the school.

Summary

We hope this note give you a flavour of the issues involved. There are coaches and managers within Thatcham Town who have a long experience of dealing with professional clubs as well as other parents who have had to go through this issue. We can put you in touch with them if you would like to discuss a particular situation.

In our view the decision to transfer a child to an academy will be correct only for a very small number of children and certainly not the numbers currently being solicited and recruited. However in the final analysis this is a parental decision and like the parents the club only seeks the outcome that is in the child's overall best interests.

Thatcham Town Harriers Committee
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