

THIS IS NOT A HOLIDAY

The English love to travel abroad, but for the footballers flying the nest for pastures new in search of an opportunity to make the most of their talents, it's strictly protein shakes and water rather than cocktails and beer. Drink Up!

Words Danny Lewis Photographs Marko Tuominen, Tom Brogan



“IT WAS AN OPPORTUNITY AND I JUST THOUGHT WHY NOT, JUST GO FOR IT”

KR Reykjavik last season. Despite tasting defeat he cites this as one of his biggest achievements, something he would not have managed if he hadn't made the move abroad. “Even though it was the first qualifying round, to say that I've played in a big tournament like that is amazing.

“I think if I was playing in England my chances of ever playing in the Premier League are very, very slim and if you go abroad I'm sure there's a lot of English lads who would play in the top league in Finland, Sweden or Norway and be able to play in competitions like that.”

However, it is not just players from lower leagues who are flying from the nest to increase their prospects. This season alone Manchester City's Jadon Sancho and Arsenal's Chris Willock moved to Borussia Dortmund and Benfica respectively in search of a clear route to first team football.

“IT IS GREAT EXPERIENCE FOR THE PLAYERS”

With England's youngsters providing plenty of silverware this summer, there has been a lot of focus on whether Premier League clubs will entrust these talents with enough game time to help them fulfil their full potential.

Despite people's concerns, Paul Simpson, who guided England's Under 19s to victory in the European Championships this summer feels that a move abroad is not always necessary. “There are a lot chances coming for English qualified players and it is now up to them to show they deserve to stay in the team. They have shown they can compete with the best in the world at their own age.

“I would prefer it if we can provide the right football education in this country and I think we have enough talented coaches working here to be able to provide that. I am not against any player going abroad so long as they are able to adapt and be a good fit for our national teams.”

Despite this, Simpson doesn't believe those who do leave will be at a disadvantage regarding national team selection. “It is great experience for the players to move abroad and as long as they are happy and getting match experience it can only be a positive for England national teams.

“I certainly can [see a player representing England's first team while permanently playing abroad in the near future] and don't see it

Left Billy Ions is still in Finland playing for SJK while Hafid Bounyafe is back in English football having played in Cyprus (below)

When Billy Ions equalised for SJK in the Pohjanmaan derby to help his team on their way to a 2-1 win against VPS, he earned a lot more than local bragging rights. Only 3,877 people were present at the OmaSP Stadium in Seinäjoki, Finland as the Englishman

chested the ball down and volleyed it into the top corner, but thanks to social media this strike was soon to be seen across the world.

This was Ions' first taste of recognition from the English public, but behind the scenes he overcame adversity to do what only approximately 200 other Englishmen are currently doing: forging a football career abroad.

He's now 23 years old but when Ions was young the striker's family moved to Spain where he made his first forays into the professional football set up with Tenerife. Ions then moved back to England where he was unable to break through at Leeds

United or Newcastle United before being drafted into the Nike Academy.

It was his time in the Academy that brought about Ions' move to Finland, when the striker impressed in a friendly against PS Kemi who were in Kakkonen (the third tier) at the time. Despite not knowing about Finnish football the young Englishman -who was 19 at the time- decided to take a leap of faith and make the move. “Honestly when I was told I was going I really didn't know what to expect.

“I had no idea, especially when I was told I was going to the third division in Finland, I really didn't have a clue what I was getting myself into. It was more like just getting myself back into football, it was an opportunity and I just thought why not, just go for it.”

After a tough first year Ions contemplated moving back to England, spending time with West Auckland and Benfield during his break. Despite the challenges many players who go abroad face, such as the climate and language, he stuck with Kemi.

This decision paid dividends as he and his club climbed their way to the Veikkausliiga, the top division of Finnish football with back to back promotions in what he cites as a career highlight. “Emotion wise and football wise it was one of the best periods in my football career so far. Everything went so well, it was like a fairy tale story for Kemi to get promoted once, then to get promoted again. I scored a lot of goals.”

After that he moved to SJK, for whom he played in their Europa League first qualifying round loss against Icelandic side





Above Yannick Bolasie has gone from a non league player to Premier League star via a year in Malta

being an issue.”

One player who has shown the rewards that can come from leaving home is Yannick Bolasie.

Although he doesn't represent England, the winger did grow up in London. At 18 years old he was playing for Hillingdon Borough with a burger as his goal bonus. Now 28, he is a £30 million footballer who turns out for Everton and has 31 caps for DR Congo.

A year that he spent with 25 time Maltese champions Floriana during the 2007/08 season has definitely contributed to that. “It was a valuable experience for me, it taught me a lot as a young player. Adapting to a different culture, different style and different manager helped me develop as a player and I'm still in contact with my coaches from there and they still tell me things about my game now.

Despite having enjoyed the experience abroad, Bolasie jumped at the chance to return home, turning down big moves to other countries. “We had scouts come out from Plymouth, Leicester, Hoffenheim and Sturm Graz to watch me out there.

“I had a choice of four for where I wanted to go and I decided to come back to England. I visited the Plymouth facility and decided I wanted to go there. I'd obviously spent a year out in Malta and that was a good experience but at the time I just wanted to go back home and play.”

That move to Plymouth eventually proved to be another springboard for Bolasie's career as he then went to Bristol City and Crystal Palace before his arrival on Merseyside.

While a return to England was beneficial for the winger, many Englishmen find themselves back to square one when they go home after a move

abroad, being forced back into England's non league.

“WHAT ELSE DO YOU NEED TO WORRY ABOUT?”

One such player is 21 year old winger Hafid Bounyafe. In 2016 he had been playing for the reserve team at St. Albans when his agent made him aware of an approach from Cypriot second division side Digenis Oroklinis.

He opted to make the move, but after just six months in Cyprus Bounyafe had to return to England due to the financial situation at the club. He now plays his football for Aylesbury FC in the Evo Stik Southern League Division One East.

Although this experience hasn't impacted his mentality towards the sport he loves, Bounyafe does admit he found life abroad less stressful. “You can't be big time and flaunt what you've got, or what you had, because you come back and you're playing semi professional football anyway.

“Here in England you've always got something to worry about but over there you're training every day, you've got a match on Saturday, what else do you need to worry about?”

In the past there have been Englishmen such as Gary Lineker and David Beckham who have gone abroad to play football once their careers had already taken off, but it is only in recent years where a move to a foreign land has become a genuine option for careers in need of a kick start.

Whether it is a non league player who hasn't been

“ADAPTING TO A DIFFERENT CULTURE, DIFFERENT STYLE AND DIFFERENT MANAGER HELPED ME DEVELOP”

given the opportunity to progress up the leagues or a promising youngster in a Premier League academy with no route to the first team at their club, a move abroad has become a better and more lucrative prospect than ever before.

There is a lot of talent wasted in England due to a lack of opportunities and Billy Lons has seen that first hand so is thankful for the career he now has. “There's a lot of young lads in England, a lot of my friends were in better positions than me when I was back home a few years ago and they aren't even playing now. Now I'm here in Finland and I'm not in a bad position in my career, so I'm happy with where I'm at now. It could be a lot worse.”

A move abroad doesn't equate to certain success, but with thousands of youngsters filtering out of the game at home, this could be the time for players to take the risk and leave England for the benefit of their careers.

FROM NEW ZEALAND TO NEW YORK

Englishmen are playing all around the world creating legacies, making history and winning silverware.



CURTIS EDWARDS

As recently as 2014 Curtis Edwards was playing for Spennymoor Town. The midfielder went to Ostersund in 2016 after they had worked their way from the fourth division of Swedish football to the Allsvenskan. He scored a volley to secure a point against Athletic Bilbao in the Europa League group stages, helping them progress to the knockout stages.



CHARLIE SHERINGHAM

The son of Teddy, Charlie Sheringham -who plays in the same position as his dad- spent most of his career in England's non league before signing for Bangladeshi side Saif Sporting Club Limited in November. He scored on his debut against Dhaka Abahani Limited and has continued his goal scoring form, bagging six goals in just 10 matches since making the move.



RAVEL MORRISON

Many will argue that Morrison's career hasn't needed to be kick started as he has played for the likes of West Ham United. However after many failed moves, while still on Lazio's books he has been loaned out to Atlas in Mexico to help him resurrect his career. In 11 games he has scored against Queretaro but was also sent off after just 19 minutes against Tigres.



OLUKOREDE AIYEBUSI

Having already played in Finland, USA, Switzerland, Germany, Iran and Sweden Aiyegbusi now plies his trade in Kazakhstan with Shakhter Karagandy. The left back attended the Community College of Baltimore County Essex and earned himself a Sporting Kansas City contract through the MLS Draft. He has also played for Great Britain at the World University Games.



DAVID OLAOYE

When he made his debut for El Porvenir against Berazatagui in the Primera C this season, David Olaoye became the first Englishman in history to play professional football in Argentina, having already played in Greece and Slovenia before the move. His twin brother Daniel currently represents Nordvarmlands in the fourth division of Swedish football.



ALEXANDER CVETKOVIC

He started his career in Manchester United's academy, but after being released by the Red Devils as well as Norwich City and Wigan Athletic, Cvetkovic moved to Fola Esch in Luxembourg during the summer of 2016. The striker -who wears the number 3 shirt- has featured for the club in the Europa League and managed to get an assist against Ostersund this season.



STEPHEN HOYLE

The New Zealand Premiership is currently the country outside of the UK and Ireland with the most English talent and Stephen Hoyle is arguably excelling the most of them all. After ten games of the season the striker sits third in the league's goal scoring charts with an impressive return of seven goals. Before moving to New Zealand Hoyle played in Scotland and Canada.



GEORGE SAUNDERS

At the age of eight George Saunders joined Arsenal. However, his family moved to Spain where he played for the academies of Villareal and Espanyol. The midfielder failed to make an impact at the top level in Spain, moving to Colombia in 2013, where he still plays now. He could get a Colombian passport, which would make him eligible for their national team.



JAMES LAWRENCE

Lawrence got his football education at some of the best academies in the world, playing for the youth teams of both Arsenal and Ajax. However, he failed to make the step up to first team football at either. The midfielder now turns out for Trencin in Slovakia where he has won both the Fortuna Liga and Slovnaf Cup twice and played in the Europa League qualifiers.



JACK HARRISON

As a youngster Jack Harrison took the decision to leave Manchester United's academy and take a scholarship to study in the USA. This has paid dividends as the winger is now an ever-present in New York City FC's starting lineup having been chosen by them in the 2016 MLS SuperDraft. He has also represented England at Under 21 level, making his debut against Scotland in 2017.