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MEDIA TRAINING & THE ART OF SAYING NOTHING

Today's footballers are so adept at straight-batting journalists' questions, they're often... well, boring. Why are players scared to speak their mind, and is the press to blame? *FourFourTwo* takes a crash course in keeping shtum

Words Sam Rowe Illustrations Dale Edwin Murray

Shuffling uncomfortably in our seat, *FFT* feels beads of high-definition sweat trickle down our brow. Staring down a blinking camera lens like a terrified prisoner of war, we babble incomprehensibly for what feels like an hour, muttering stock phrases such as 'the gaffer', 'to be fair' and 'at the end of the day'. This morning your correspondent was a journalist; now, fielding questions in a mock press conference to learn first-hand the nature of a modern footballer's media training, he is a 17-year-old prodigy tipped for big things. But while our (fictional) left peg could rival that of Lionel Messi, it seems that our interview skills are more non-league than Champions League.

Where once we might mock the absence of personality in certain footballers' interviews – the dead-eyed stare, the refusal to engage in a proper conversation about the game, the robotic insistence to circle each question back to working hard for the lads and getting three points on the board come Saturday – here we are, mumbling the very same clichés. "I just want to get my head down, play football and impress the manager," we say, like an idiot. In a quest to prove how easy it is to evade the droid-like stock responses of footballers, we actually end up doing a rather convincing impression of a crap post-match interview. Our teacher agrees: "There's no personality, no warmth," he says. "You're

talking like a footballer." Then, just for good measure: "You look like an axe murderer."

The fact that we're not actually 17 or blessed with fleet-footed ball mastery notwithstanding, clearly *FFT* shouldn't give up the day job.

Traditionally, media training was a handy tool used by football clubs to prepare their young starlets – vast in talent but short on communication skills – for the production line of interviews that would soon accompany their career. A few years back, a hilariously awkward clip of Manchester United's fabled 'Class of '92' went viral, with the cherubic faces of G-Nev, Scholesy, Becks & Co. giggling their way through a reporter's imaginary line of questioning. And yet, embarrassing though it was, whether as a direct result of this ancient training day or something deeper within themselves, after enjoying glittering on-pitch careers Gary Neville would become a stellar, smooth-talking analyst for Sky Sports and Paul Scholes a pundit for BT Sport (though a little less slick, admittedly). We will never know what became of the media-shy wallflower David Beckham.

Often chaired by weather-beaten old journos or former PR folk, such training was generally viewed as the proverbial scout badge in a young pro's development; a simple box-ticking exercise, and not one taken all too seriously. "When I did it with clubs, it was ▶



with youth-team players as part of their academy programme,” one sports journalist reveals to *FourFourTwo*. “There was no money available to spend [on media training] even at Premier League level. On the day Spurs said they couldn’t afford my fee of £350, they signed [Sergei] Rebrov for £11 million! It summed up their approach to youth development.”

Today, this slapdash approach to schooling young pros in the art of the interview is simply not viable; not letting something controversial slip while chattering into a Dictaphone is only half the battle. With 24-hour news, social

media and smartphone-wielding civilians all representing potential booby traps to the stars of today – not to mention the occasional self-destruction of footballers themselves (just look at Leicester’s summer tour to Thailand) – education is often comprehensive now, starting at academy level.

“They taught us a lot about social media,” says Charlton’s 18-year-old scholar Regan Charles-Cook, articulate and engaging in his first ever interview. “Don’t react, think before you tweet, try to write in proper English... they showed us examples of how it has backfired.”

“You’ve got to watch what you say on there,” adds Karlan Ahearne-Grant, 17, who made his first-team debut for the Addicks last season. “You never know who’s watching, and abuse can get to your head, especially if you’re young.”

With the likes of Twitter, Facebook and Instagram providing a tangible link between footballers and their fans (along with their critics, lest we forget) it’s easy to overlook the fact that this was all but impossible as recently as a decade ago. Before, if you were particularly overjoyed or distressed with the shift a player had put in on a Saturday afternoon, you would have to write a strongly-worded letter to the club, or perhaps that footballer’s fan club, or else stalk them outside the stadium and risk prosecution, to have even the slightest chance of letting them know how you felt. Now? Simply hammer down your concerns in 140 characters or fewer, no matter how tender or scathing, and it’ll be accessible on their mobile phone in a nanosecond.

With widespread trolling afoot, even the most senior of professional footballers can occasionally bite back. “I will put you asleep within 10 seconds,” barked England and Manchester United captain Wayne Rooney to a Liverpool-supporting detractor on Twitter in 2011. “Get ya mum in, plays the field well son! #s**t” offered Rio Ferdinand in September 2014, when a fan goaded him by suggesting his QPR side needed a new centre-back – a retort that landed the defender a three-match ban and £25,000 fine. When it comes to education of their young scholars, clubs ensure that social media is central to their teachings.

“All our junior professionals are put through sessions where it’s explained to them that the fact they’re wearing the Arsenal badge makes them a public interest and, to a degree, public property,” says Mark Gonnella, communications director at Arsenal. “With that comes huge responsibility to stand up for the principles that Arsenal as a football club represent. It’s not just about managing the media; it’s about how they behave in public and on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, as well as the press.”

Of course, the latent risk of terrifying young players into submission can be that, at an age where their personality as well as ability is still very much in development, they don’t go on to have much of one. “Exhibit 1F: Wayne Rooney naming *Sister Act 2* as one of his favourite films. Exhibit 1G: Mark Noble and Carl Jenkinson going fishing together,” wrote sports columnist Jonathan Liew in a *Telegraph* article last year. “When did footballers become quite this uncool?”

It wasn’t always this way – the footballers of yore had charisma in spades. George Best’s rock ‘n’ roll lifestyle saw him dubbed ‘the fifth Beatle’, John Barnes was a rapper (albeit a slightly naff one) with a No.1 single to his name, the Crazy Gang were anarchists that would ignite anything even remotely flammable and Paul Gascoigne was a one-man comedy show, commanding

London buses, donning plastic breasts and stripping down to his birthday suit at the earliest opportunity, to the glee of supporters and reporters alike. Call it nostalgia, but there was a strong sense of fun in football back then. Players weren't purely high-class athletes you adored from the stands or on *Match of the Day*; they were affable, personable, the everyman who you felt you could have a pint with.

Then something happened. As the Premier League grew in stature, with it came wheelbarrows full of cash and altogether more 'professional' footballers. Gone was the customary mayhem of old, replaced by footballers that were brands with multi-million-pound endorsements, entourages as vast as their diet plans and a new, unhealthy skepticism of the outside world. Players and press were no longer brothers-in-arms but scorned lovers who would still see each other at parties and have idle chitchat, yet neither would enjoy the experience or come away with anything of merit. What went wrong?

"I suppose everybody looks back with rose-tinted spectacles," says Mark Whittle, head of media relations at the FA, who supply England seniors with a refresher in media training, "but the simple fact of the matter is that football is big business. It is extremely professional, and with that, brand and image is very important, certainly for clubs, players and agents.

"In the case of the national team there's a responsibility to set an example; to be the role model; to inspire people to emulate you by playing but also behaving in the same way."

The odd eccentric remains – Zlatan Ibrahimovic is a treasure trove of soundbites and Andrea Pirlo a hirsute, effortlessly cool throwback of a footballer, whereas Mario Balotelli continues to channel Paul Gascoigne in playing the lovable fool both off and on the pitch – but such characters are few and far between in today's footballing landscape.

The biggest irony of the modern game is that, in an age where players can share their innermost thoughts with the world via a few taps of an iPhone screen, they're more faceless than ever before. Top players are far more likely to tweet about their latest sponsor than what's going on inside their skull. At the time of writing, only one of the 10 most recent tweets on Wayne Rooney's timeline is remotely personal: a good luck message to Rafael, prior to his transfer to Lyon. The rest is centred around a commercial or charity cause. Why? Because as we're often told, footballers are role models to all ages, so when sticking your head above the parapet can risk abuse, upsetting your employer or even a ban from the FA, it's little wonder most keep it #bland.

The anaesthetic quality of some player interviews is not only hard-wired through risk-averse education, but years of reinforcement. "They watch a lot of sport as they're growing up, see how other footballers do it and then copy it," says Glenn Kinsey, owner of Pozitiv.com, a media coaching agency that strives to *untrain* clients and help them come off as themselves instead. "You've also got that overlay of not wanting



"You've got to be wary of what you say - you never know who's watching"

to put a foot wrong or cock it up, but as a footballer they often learn from their idols, and if their idols are dull as dishwater, they're probably going to follow suit."

But perhaps the media itself should shoulder some of the blame. Though we cry out for the next Paul Gascoigne, any behaviour that does step even the slightest bit outside of boring is usually splashed across a newspaper's front page, not the back. Both Luis Suarez and Mario Balotelli (upon leaving Manchester City in 2013) cited the intrusion of the British tabloids as a factor in absconding from England, and the treatment of our homegrown stars is arguably even more savage. Arsenal's Jack Wilshere found himself at the centre of a global news storm for daring to smoke a cigarette in 2013 (then again in 2014, and once more in 2015 – a shisha pipe this time), with Raheem Sterling and Jack Grealish condemned for inhaling the legal high nitrous oxide earlier this year. In the case of Grealish, then just 19, his ill-fated attempt at a lads' holiday in Tenerife went awry in June, with a now infamous snap of the Aston Villa midfielder taking a late-night siesta on the Spanish island leading to widespread criticism in the press, even though it took place during the close season.

"There is certainly a case for saying [the press] have their cake and eat it," says Gonnella. "Take Jack [Wilshere] as an example.

Footballers are criticised for not engaging with fans in the modern game, and then Jack grabs the microphone during the celebrations after the FA Cup final [the midfielder led the crowd in a chant that called rival club Tottenham 's**t']. We understand why he ended up in hot water, but he made a connection with the fans, in the way the fans would like, and he's criticised."

Granted, sympathy for individuals that are paid upwards of a million pounds a month, never pay for football boots in their lifetime and are able to buy plush houses before sitting their A-Levels is not always forthcoming, but there might be a valid argument to be had about the sheer volume of media commitments. During any given week, footballers and managers are duty-bound to attend press conferences and conduct pre- and post match interviews with all manner of broadcasters – many of which inevitably pose identical questions – not to mention the countless requests from national and local press, magazines, websites, bloggers and fans, and in-house media such as club websites, TV channels and the official match programme. Over the course of a long season, that vacant, dead-behind-the-eyes look actually starts to make a little sense.

"The players aren't in the business of selling newspapers or getting page views on websites; they want to give an honest opinion on what they love doing – playing football," claims Whittle. Perhaps that's worth consideration the next time 'boring' James Milner dedicates a lacklustre away draw to Liverpool's travelling support.

Back in FFT's own personal crash course (or rather car crash) in media training, our mentor Glenn Kinsey – who counts West Ham United, the President of Tanzania and U2's Bono among his past clients – has some sympathy for today's stars. "Footballers are odd," he says, "because most people I work with – be it in business or the media – have risen because of their communication abilities. Footballers are completely different, as they often don't want to do it and are dragged into it – have to do it – and find it irritating.

"Sometimes, frankly, they don't have fantastic personalities. Their talent is in their feet, not on a public stage. That can be challenging, because you might have their agent wanting you to make them into Mr Showbiz, but you can't."

For FFT, it would appear that Gary Lineker is safe in his *Match of the Day* throne a little longer. We stretch a 90-second post-match interview to an embarrassingly long eight minutes; an almost Shakespearian monologue without pauses, yet plenty of 'um's and 'er's amid the embarrassing clichés.

"I hope to push on and prove I'm not just a one-strike wonder and hopefully push on with my career and make a real name for myself," we squeak, on the topic of a recent make-believe net-buster. Somehow, even in the world of fantasy football, this seems unlikely.

Sometimes, it's best to leave these things to the professionals. ❖