



SPORTING DIRECTOR.

LIAM SWEETING

Congratulations to our Under 18 team who booked their place in the EFL Youth Alliance Cup Final courtesy of a 3-1 victory over Cambridge United at the end of January. This is the second time in Club's history that the Under 18s have reached the final of this competition as winners of the Southern Section.

Colleagues in the Academy will, as usual, provide an overview of their excellent work across our departments this month. One of the areas that has been a real focus for as a First Team this season is the progression of our scholars into the professional environment and what this looks like as they are challenged to impact our First Team. The accelerated pathway continues at this stage as we recognise we don't currently have the steppingstone of an Under 21 or B Team group as the young professionals join our first team training group immediately. Whilst this is a huge positive in exposing them to this level of training, it also means we must pay close attention to each individual's needs as we monitor their development and ultimately, how close they are to impacting the first team. As is the case for anyone progressing in our academy, each journey is unique and so what worked for one player won't necessarily work for another.

This season we have utilised opportunities for players to go out on loan to experience not only a more physically demanding style of football, but also experience the mentality shift in what is required when winning matters for anyone at a senior level. Whilst not every player will go out on loan, it provides an important learning experience for our boys to stretch their capabilities in adapting to a diverse environment and learning to apply their unique strengths under another coach. Second year Scholars Joel Anker and Charlie Waller have already progressed from Step 5 football at Tring Athletic FC to Step 3 at AFC Rushden & Diamonds and just recently, Jacob Anderson has joined Kempston Rovers FC at Step 4 for his first taste of senior football. We are thankful for these partnerships and have seen our players represent our Club superbly so far.

One of the very best examples to look to right now is the progress of Brooklyn Ilunga, who joined us at age 7 in the Academy and progressed to signing a professional contract in October 2021. Since then, Brooklyn has trained with the First Team every day and experienced youth loans at Royston Town FC (Step 3), Hemel Hempstead Town FC (Step 2) and now is currently on loan at Wealdstone FC (Step 1) in the National League. Whilst Brooklyn has been on loan at these levels, we have adopted a hybrid training programme that allows him to train with both our First Team and the Loan Club for the further benefit of his continued development.

Brooklyn's mentality and character has played a huge part in this process as he has bought into each Club's culture and applied himself excellently at each level. His success so far has seen him rewarded with a second professional contract and we very much look forward to further developing him towards his goal of establishing himself in the First Team.

It is important we're able to celebrate these stories of development as so many people from Brooklyn's family, friends, coaches, medical professionals, educators and operational support staff have contributed – and of course, we hope there's much more to come!

Thank you for your continued support.



HEAD OF PLAYER CARE.

NATASCIA BERNARDI

Mental health is still a taboo subject in many competitive sport environments, especially in football where even research proved that the impact of emotions and stress, have an impact on performance, and on the individual overall.

High expectations, pressure to perform avoidance of injuries, and uncertainty to reach a professional contract in an intense and demanding environment. All these are just a small snapshot of the set of challenges Academy football players face. Although there is a lot to do in terms of identifying the full plethora of causes for players to have poor mental health, it is important the Club takes accountability and addresses the matter, having the players' wellbeing at their core.

With 2023 kicking off, we invited the PFA (Professional Football Association) to speak to parents of all year groups about the Youth Service and the Safety Net. The Safety Net is a PFA free online platform accessible to staff, parents and players about coping with football academy demand. There is a need to register to get access as its content is tailored for age/role. You can register here: pfa-safety.net and click on **Sign Up**.

We also invited the PFA wellbeing group for a workshop with our U18's in February. Jeff Whitley – former professional footballer and now executive of the PFA Wellbeing group, shared his personal journey through addiction and gambling and how he was able to recover thanks to the fact that he recognised he needed help. He also shared the helpline and resources the PFA has in place for U18's and over. You can find them here: Mental Health & Football (thepfa.com)

During **Mental Health Week**, our U15s and U16s had a workshop with Sporting Chance is a charity set up by former Arsenal and England captain Tony Adams to provide support to current and former professional athletes with their mental and emotional health. This was a closed door workshop (just the players and the therapist delivering the sessions were allowed in) and players were invited to open up about themselves.

As Academy Head of Player Care here at MK Dons, I am always happy to have **"the walk and talk chat"**, which is a 1:1 walk and check in chat with any of the players. Topics can vary: can be a simple chat about how things are going at the Academy, or something more personal. I found it a great way to build up trust and share difficult times as well as very successful ones. There is also an opportunity to be referred to Sporting Chance through the EFL for a consulting or a talking therapy for players who are aged 15 - 16. Please reach out to me to know more about this and the way I can support.

If you want to learn more about Sporting Chance: Sports mental health charity | Sporting Chance | England (sportingchanceclinic.com)

HEAD OF ACADEMY COACHING.

STEPHEN PAYNE

Congratulations to our Under 18 team who booked their place in the EFL Youth Alliance Cup Final courtesy of a 3-1 victory over Cambridge United at the end of January. This is the second time in Club history that the Under-18s have reached the final of this competition as current winners of the Southern Section.

Our best wishes go out to Ethan Andrews (U12) Jack Burke (U14) Corvell Pickering (U17) Jediah Bombo (U18) who have all sustained injuries that will keep them on the side-lines for a prolonged period. I'm sure you will receive updates on the progress of these players as they make their way back to full fitness here at MK Dons and we wish them all the best with their recovery.

We are lucky to be well resourced with Nataschia Bernardi our Head of Player care able to signpost these young people to the support they may have never thought they needed! We also have a caring and thorough medical department, headed up by Caitlin O'Reilly which is able to function to a really high standard and provide the knowledge and understanding of injuries and their recovery times to ease the worry these boys may be experiencing.

I've seen first hand through the excellent work the team have done with the likes of Keon Lewis-Burgess who is making excellent strides towards recovery from a broken ankle and other cases where the athlete and person are catered for in a challenging yet supportive rehabilitation programme.

On a much lighter note. We recently said a heartfelt goodbye to Lucia Abbate who started her Maternity leave. I'm pleased to announce that her new-born baby boy safely arrived and both mother and baby are safe and well.

Back to the football pitch. We have been working on securing parts of our playing style across the younger age groups. In recent weeks we have competed really well against Cambridge and Portsmouth and results are starting to align with some of the performance markers we look for in a game.

- Win rate 50% across schoolboy age groups
- Games won by the odd goal (or drawn)
- Playing in an attractive style that is representative of MK Dons

We try to win games. However, not at the expense of running an accelerated player pathway where players are exposed to the right game as often as possible! We don't want to win or lose by 5/6/7 goals. Instead we want there to be something to play for all the way throughout the game, by winning or losing heavily. It suggests the game may not have been correctly balanced.

Across a game weekend we set out to achieve a 50% win rate and also ensure the challenge/scoreline suggests the game was the right one! Take a look at the table below to see how you think these results stack up against those aims.

Age Group	29th Jan	Score Margin	5th Feb	Score Margin
U9	6-12	-6	3-4	-1
U10	11-11	0	6-4	+2
U11	2-1	+1	1-5	-4
U12	2-5	+3	2-2	0
U13	0-3	-3	4-7	-3
U14	4-1	+3	1-0	+1

As with every game, some context must be offered. For example our U9-U12 all had tough games against Tottenham Hotspur the Saturday before. There are growth related obstacles and we never know what the other team will put out against us, but I hope it provides an insight into the thought that goes into our games programme.

This level of detail is slowly working its way into other parts of the coaching programme. We are working on improving our success at set pieces for and against and also looking into improving our restarts from throw ins and Kick Offs. All these marginal improvements will make us harder to play against, more competitive across game weekends and help achieve our overall ambition of becoming the gold standard of Academy in the region.

Finally - A huge pat on the back must go to Adam Cove, Jon Cook, Luke Read and Max Llanwarne who are assembling a fantastic group of Under 8 players for the 2023-24 season. Formal offers start working their way to a talented few in the coming days. From now until their 'official' signing date. This part of the season becomes a really great time to observe our next Academy group! There is now a sharp increase in the number of fixtures the group will play against other academy sides. It gives us a great indication of the success of our local recruitment and it's great to watch the early signs of togetherness and camaraderie form with these young people aiming to represent MK Dons in the future.

FOUNDATION PHASE LEAD COACH U11S TO U13S.

RYAN SIMMONDS

As you'll already know. We pride ourselves on a varied games programme. In recent weeks as part of a review of the 9 v 9 format we have been integrating a different formation across our U11s and U12s age groups.

Wide Forwards and a 10

Using Veo to analyse our match day performance, the idea to play with wide forwards and a '10' was introduced. The problem our teams encountered was forwards were spending too much time with their back to goal and were not establishing a numerical overload to help progress up the pitch.

The aims of the wide forwards:

- Receive the ball higher up the pitch and wider in the build-up of play whilst facing forwards
- Final third runs are towards goal and get players closer to goal
- Support on the back post when attacking wide (to cross and score)

The aims of the 10:

- Drop in to create overload
- Be unmarked for large parts of the game playing 'off' defenders
- Instigate our press and align with existing game model out of possession
- Drop off and receive on the half turn, to play forwards

The U9 and U10s are also integrating wide forwards into their game day we have been amongst the goals! So, continue to listen out from the side lines for the players and coaches talking about 'back post goals'

The U13s have also introduced wide forwards within the 11 a side format, It is a different challenge as the make up of the group is slightly different and I'm sure parents would have been scratching their heads against Sutton to see where the kids were playing at

times. During the game we inverted our wing backs and had wide forwards higher up the pitch so we could have 5 players in a 'central midfield' area against their 3. In theory we hope to make this count to progress higher up the pitch.

We are doing this to enable our forwards to be higher up the pitch, allowing them more opportunities to score goals. Whilst our '10' can play more centrally, so they are not isolated and can make clever passes whilst arriving late in the box. Since adopting this formation we have not only scored more goals, but we have dominated possession, and penetrated a lot more.

The formation also aligns very closely to the 4-3-3 that the First Team are implementing under new Head Coach Mark Jackson. We hope that in the coming weeks wide forwards are amongst the goals for all MK Dons sides!

We are now working with our defenders and midfielders to play closer together in the build stage with the idea of drawing the opposing press onto us and wait for the right moment to play through, round or over the oncoming press to our wide forwards.

Individual Development Plans

Along with implementing these tactical themes, during training nights we are also focusing on the players IDP's. We strongly believe it will enhance the individuals players identity, and we are training heavily on 'moments' that are happen during matches. For example, defenders and goalkeepers may have to disguise their passes to break the press, midfielders receive the ball under pressure and on the half turn, whilst wide forwards may have to curve their runs and finish with their weak foot.

These are very exciting times for this phase and for this academy. We believe we are not only getting better results on match days, but more importantly through all this work, we believe we are developing the individual and producing better, well rounded young footballers.



ACADEMY SPORTS SCIENCE AND MEDICINE CO-ORDINATOR.

CAITLIN O'REILLY

Half term has brought us an exciting opportunity to work closely with our players to have new experiences related to Sports Science and Medicine, helping them to gain knowledge on their physical performance levels, as well as how they can best support themselves nutritionally.

During player voice sessions with our Head of Player Care, Natascia, several age groups commented on how they would like to receive more education on nutrition. We have been lucky enough this week to have Sophie, First Team's Nutritionist and Masters student come in to present. The presentation was based on food groups, meal ideas and the importance of a balanced meal. Our players also tried several types of smoothies to help understand why certain ingredients are important at different times.

Carbohydrates.

Scan the QR codes to take you to similar recipes! We have also taken the opportunity this week to complete some Sports Science testing. This has included 10m and 30m sprint times, which helps us analyse our player's acceleration skills as well as how well they are able to maintain speed. We have also completed the 505 test, this looks at speed of change of direction on both legs. Change of direction efficiency is key in football to enable players to have a physical and tactical advantage over an opponent.



We are looking to increase our Sports Science programme and testing when our new full time role is filled. We hope that this will be possible to announce in the March Newsletter.

Lastly, we would like to thank all age groups for their engagement this week, we will be sending out the presentation by Sophie to help support nutritional advice at home and be sure to let us know if you try out more smoothie recipes!



Breakfast Smoothie
High in Carbohydrates
High in Protein



Green Smoothie
Rich in Vitamins
Rich in Minerals



Recovery Smoothie
High in Protein
Some Carbohydrates

SAFEGUARDING.

MARTIN HARRIS

The Club recognises its moral and legal responsibility to safeguard and promote the welfare of all children and adults at risk we will endeavour to provide a safe and welcoming environment where children and Adults at risk are respected and valued.

All individuals, regardless of gender, race, age, ethnicity, ability, sexual orientation, and religious or political beliefs, have equal right to protection from abuse, exploitation and neglect.

All individuals have the right to participate, enjoy and develop through sport, in a safe and inclusive environment. All staff have a responsibility to report and to act on any suspicion or disclosure where a child/Adult at risk is at risk of harm.

Key Contacts

Senior Safeguarding Manager	John Cove	01908 252950	safeguarding@mkdons.com
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Academy Designated Officer	Martin Harris	07570 302503	martin.harris@mkdons.com
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Supporting the Academy Designated Safeguarding Officer, the Academy have a Safeguarding working group, who support within their specific areas:

Academy Player Care Manager	Nataschia Bernardi	nataschia.bernardi@mkdons.com
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Academy Head of Coaching	Stephen Payne	stephen.payne@mkdons.com
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Academy Sports Science & Medicine Coordinator	Caitlin O'Reilly	caitlin.oreilly@mkdons.com
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Each area of the business also has a team of designated Safeguarding Officers who work alongside the Lead Safeguarding staff to drive operational best practice.

If you have a concern...

Reporting and escalation procedure: If you have a concern about the safety or welfare of a child or adult at risk on one of our activities, trust your instinct and take immediate action:

In the first instance, speak with the person in charge of supervising the activity who will share your concern to a member of the Safeguarding Team.

If you cannot speak with someone at the time, contact a member of the Safeguarding Team via the contact details listed above or the safeguarding referral email address safeguarding@mkdons.com.

A member of the team will respond to your email and advise on the next best course of action.

Please note that your concern will be managed sensitively and information will only be shared if it is necessary to ensure the safety of a child or adult at risk.

If the concern requires an immediate police, social work or health response:

Police / Ambulance / Fire: Call 999 for report an emergency

Police (non-emergency): Call 101 to report a crime to local police.

NHS: Call 111 when you need medical help fast.

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SPORT & EDUCATION TRUST

Safeguarding Contacts

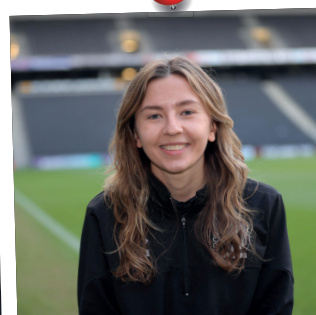
For MK Dons & MK Dons SET



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Safeguarding: It's everybody's business

We take safeguarding very seriously at MK Dons and MK Dons SET if you have a worry or concern you can contact anyone on the poster for support or to report a safeguarding issue. Email safeguarding@mkdons.com



HEAD OF ACADEMY OPERATION AND DESIGNATED SAFEGUARDING OFFICER.

MARTIN HARRIS

The Academy was delighted recently to play its part in the EFL's Week of Action. Launched in 2017, the programme sees Clubs and CCOs from across the EFL's three divisions showcase some of the most impactful community projects with managers and players joining participants across the country. During the week the club visited various schools in the City, supporting school assemblies, PE lessons and After school clubs, with numerous first team players attending to engage with the children and teachers in attendance.

The Academy were also keen to support the project and on the Wednesday, second years Joel Anker and Charlie Waller were invited to visit Knowles Primary School to take part in a couple of PE lessons. They supported the children with various challenges that were set followed by a Q & A, with the pupils asking numerous questions about their football career and ambitions.

On the Friday it was the turn of first years Seb Stacey, Albert Wood and Callum Tripp, who attended Bishop Park Catholic School for their afternoon PE lessons, where they engaged in football skills challenges. They were then guests of honour for the schools end of week assembly, helping to present the week's awards and answering questions posed from the school.

I was pleased to accompany the players during their visits, and it was fantastic to witness the engagement and fun they had with the children, being great role models and representing the Academy and Club exceptionally well. It was a great learning experience for our scholars, to support a project within the community. The players had the opportunity to answer questions during their visit and discuss their own football journey, which they did with confidence.

Recently the Academy have hosted a number of Staff CPD events, all of which have been well attended and have covered a variety of topics. This has included presentations delivered by our Director and Chair of the MK Dons SET John Cove, Sporting Director Liam Sweeting, Performance Director Simon Crampton and EFL Youth Development Regional Manager Ben Smith. Alongside providing information and training, the events are a great opportunity for our staff to sit down across all departments to ask questions and provide feedback, enabling the Academy to further review the programme, processes and how we can continue to develop and further refine these, for the benefit of the players within.



M K D O N S A C A D E M Y

Thank you.