



Billy Clifford

'Chelsea's policy of buying established stars denied some really good players the chance of making it'

Billy Clifford has - unsurprisingly - mixed feelings about his football education at Chelsea.

On the one hand it was "the making of me - I was a Chelsea player for 14 years, from the age of eight" - yet on the other hand he is deeply disappointed by the club's policy of overlooking its talented youngsters and buying established, international talent.

It's only since the transfer ban was imposed last year that the club (prompted by new boss Frank Lampard) has finally put its faith in an academy crop that has cost over £200m to fund.

"It's amazing really" said Billy when I spoke to him between training sessions for his own football coaching business. "When I played in Chelsea's FA Youth Cup-winning team in 2010 it was the first time the club had lifted the trophy in 49 years. Then we had a stream of great, great young players for the next seven or eight years who should have been processed through to the 1st XI. The club reached the final for something like seven successive years!

"Yet only a handful, people like Nathan Ake and Reuben Loftus-Cheek, made it to the Chelsea first team. The club was focused on spending on established big-name players".

Billy was just one who missed out. He played at right-back in that youth cup-win-



Wriggle room... Billy escapes the challenge of Tonbridge defenders at the Vale

ning team nine years ago - "about the only time in my life I've not played in midfield" - and it's all the more poignant that the man who took Billy under his wing, right from the under-16s, was Chelsea's head of academy coaching Dermot Drummy.

"I owe him a lot. Not just because he believed in me as a youngster, but because he helped me back into the pro game three years ago when he was manager at Crawley - I enjoyed my first year until he was sacked and replaced by Harry Kewell".

Of course, then followed the devastation. Drummy, depressed by his dismissal after working so hard for a break in senior football, took his own life in November 2017. It hit everyone hard, especially the young players he had nurtured over six years as coach, reserve team manager and then as international head coach at Stamford Bridge.

"I had a strong connection with Dermot. He coached us to that Youth Cup win in only his second season in charge. And then he was manager when Chelsea won the Premier Reserve League in 2013-14".

That was the season the Stones faced Chelsea's under-21s at the Vale in pre season to open the Bulla Stand. Was Billy

involved in that game?

"No, that was my last year at Chelsea and I had already gone out on a six-month loan to Yeovil - but funnily enough I saw the feature in the programme a few weeks ago, harking back to that game and it was interesting to see how good that young team was. All but one of them were youth internationals!"

Billy was one of a raft of talented youngsters loaned out to EFL clubs to toughen them up. "I played at Ajax in a friendly and was in the Chelsea squad for a few Champions League games but never got on the pitch. Same in the League Cup.

But then I went to Walsall and played 18 games, then to Yeovil in the championship and even had a spell with Royal Antwerp.

"They were described as the 'Leeds United' of Belgian football as they were in the second tier, but a big club with 15,000 crowds and a lot of tradition.

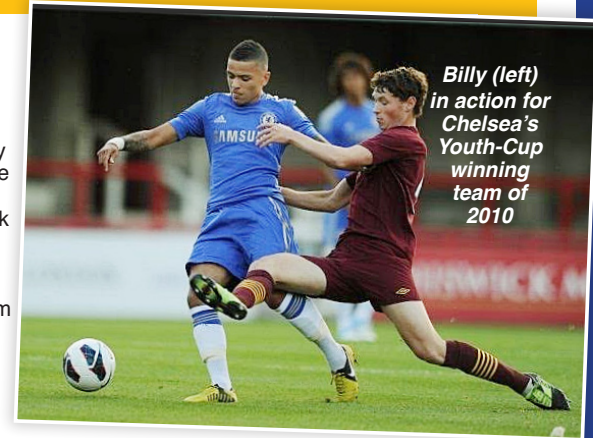
"I had done some work on the training ground with Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink at Chelsea and he was the manager at Antwerp and got me across. It is an unbelievable city and they have since got their way back up with the elite clubs, but it didn't really work out for me and I came back to England to play for Boreham Wood in the Conference National".

He'd only played half a season with Wood when Crawley came calling.

"I played over 50 games for them in League Two but after Dermot was sacked it just wasn't the same. I didn't see eye to eye with Harry Kewell and I also picked up a foot injury in pre season which limited my game time - so I was on my way back to Boreham Wood after less than two seasons".

By this point, Billy was a certainty for inclusion in Dean Brennan's little book of good players who were underachieving!

He and assistant Stuart Maynard are famous for their meticulous scouting notes and it was only a matter of time before B.Clifford (5 stars



Billy (left) in action for Chelsea's Youth-Cup winning team of 2010

technical ability, 3 stars application - just my guess) would be joining the duo's then-club, Hemel Hempstead. This was at the start of last season.

Then when Billericay owner Glenn Tamplin wanted Brennan and Maynard as the new management team at New Lodge, Billy was soon in Riccay's blue shirt.

"I know their style and I love playing for Dean and Stu, but Billericay was the wrong environment. When they left it was a difficult couple of months for me... and when Slough, my home town club, wanted to take me on loan for the rest of the season to fill in for Scott Davies it was a no-brainer.

"I never in a million years thought that I'd ever play for Slough. I was brought up there and live there now with my partner Amanda and our daughters Rylie, who's nine, and four year old Mia. The ground is just round the corner from me and the football club is now progressing really well - in fact they nearly made the play offs last year, just losing out to Wealdstone - funnily enough! - on the last day when we could only draw at Truro after being 3-1 up. After I joined we went 12 games unbeaten, from close to relegation to just missing out.

"But when I saw the sort of team they were putting together here at the Stones it was an easy decision to join Dean and Maynard again in the summer - there is quality all over and we just really enjoy playing.

"I am given the role I love, to dictate play and - touch wood - it's working really well."



BILLY CLIFFORD