

YOUNG PRETENDER

Ashley Young on his England ambitions, being crowned PFA Young Player of the Year, and his journey from Watford reject to Premier League hotshot...

■ Words: Richard Lenton

Without a major championship to quench our thirst for the beautiful game this summer, football's recess period has quickly degenerated into the silly season – a farcical time between one campaign ending and another beginning, when all manner of players are linked with clubs from Tranmere to Timbuktu. Take Ashley Young, the Aston Villa starlet and newly-crowned PFA Young Player of the Year, for instance. Here's just a handful of headlines the England winger has garnered over the past few weeks as twitchy hacks – who've been forced to swap the adrenaline rush of the Premier League for strawberries, cream and stiff necks at Wimbledon – pine for the beautiful game.

- » June 5: Ashley Young on way to Chelsea for £20m? (*The Mirror*)
- » June 18: Villa set to sacrifice Ashley Young in swap deal for Tottenham outcast Bentley (*The Daily Mail*)
- » June 18: Ashley Young may leave Aston Villa if squad is not strengthened (*The Guardian*)
- » June 20: Aston Villa's Ashley Young wanted by Barcelona (*The Telegraph*)

At the end of May, before all the hullabaloo over Gareth Barry's transfer from Villa to Manchester City and the subsequent rumours of Young being unsettled in the Midlands as a consequence, I caught up with the 23-year-old in West London. At the time the only thing on his mind was breaking into Fabio Capello's England team ahead of the World Cup qualifiers with Kazakhstan and Andorra. Having played only 13 minutes of international football in the previous year, he was itching for a chance. He got it. In a gentle reintroduction to the fold, he replaced Steven Gerrard for the second half against Andorra at Wembley as England cruised to a 6-0 victory to all but guarantee qualification for next summer's World Cup in South Africa. Afterwards I asked him if he'd felt like the forgotten man after hardly kicking a ball at international level for a year. "I can't say 'I should have been playing' because the lads have been brilliant – the World Cup table doesn't lie," he tells Football Punk. "But I do have big international ambitions..."

The World Cup must be a target now?

"I always set specific targets, but I keep them to myself, which press people like yourself hate! Once I achieve them I tick them off in my head but I never let them out of the bag. Sorry."

Okay, let's talk about last season. You're the new PFA Young Player of the Year...

"Yes, it's a massive honour, especially when you look at some of the names that have won it. For me, being voted for by fellow professionals makes it all the more special."

Did you have a bit of banter with Gabby (Agbonlahor who came second) about it?

"Yeah, plenty! I also remember in training the day after I got the award, we were both getting a massage when the reserve team manager came in and congratulated me then walked straight out. Gabby turned round saying, 'What about me, I came second you know?!' Me and Gabby are the ones who are always doing something; the gaffer calls us 'The Terrible Twins!' But he doesn't mind as long as we produce on the pitch, and both of us did last season."

So the team spirit's good at Villa then?

"Yeah, there's lots of good banter at the club."

Everyone gets on with everyone, and that showed in the season just gone when we took our team spirit from the dressing room onto the pitch. We had a great season – I really enjoyed it."

Villa's season tailed off quite dramatically after Christmas when you slipped from title contenders to sixth. Why was that?

"I don't think anyone can put their finger on why it happened, although it was a very long season – we started playing back in early July (in the Intertoto Cup). There are a lot of things that we could have done better. It was a blip that we went through which obviously went on too long. Everyone has a blip, but for us it just came at the wrong point of the season, especially after being in the top four for such a long time."

A lot of neutral supporters really started to believe that you could trespass on the top four, especially after your last minute winner in the game against Everton in December...

"Our fans all believed that we were going to finish fourth or better, but unfortunately we couldn't continue the great form we showed in the early part of the season. We said in July that we wanted to finish higher than we did the previous season. Unfortunately we finished sixth again, but

qualifying for Europe is a good achievement."

After that Everton game, Martin O'Neill ran onto the pitch and was shaking you, screaming, 'You're a genius!' What was that like?

"It was a really good feeling. A lot of players take that sort of thing with a pinch of salt because he's always praising his players. But when you're not doing so well I can assure you he's not afraid to let you know!"

Did you get plenty of banter off the boys afterwards?

"Oh yeah, it went down well with them! For a few weeks after I was just being called 'The Genius!'"

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Ashley Young, Harrow Borough Football Club, May 2009



'I want you to fly down the wing like a sparrow. Look at my hand, like this...'

'Just cos I'm off to Man City there's no need to aim for me, Ash...'

'Let me tell you about my header in the 1980 FA Cup final...'

'Honestly Gab, we can share the award...'

Sometimes you know instantly when a youngster is destined for footballing stardom. It's May 6, 2006, I'm sat on my mate's sofa in readiness for the Championship semi-final play-off between Crystal Palace and Watford at Selhurst Park, armed with a perfectly chilled six-pack to ease the pain of a murderous hangover. After taking the froth off my first beer, I'm already sensing I'm in the presence of someone special; someone destined for the very top - and I'm certainly not referring to the guy sat next to me eating his toenails...

On 61 minutes, with Watford already a goal up, the Hornets are awarded a free kick 30 yards from goal. 'We've got Ashley Young, we've got Ashley, we've got Ashley, we've got Ashley Young' resonates around the Arthur Wait Stand. The Hornets hero places the ball on the Selhurst turf, takes three small steps backwards, followed by a bigger stride to his left. He eyes up the target and takes a final glance at the ball, before unleashing a curling right-footed strike that flies past Gabor Kiraly and into the top left corner of the net. Cue pandemonium from the visiting fans.

It was just reward for Young, whose pace and trickery had elevated him above the honest pros fighting for a ticket to the big time that day. You didn't have to be a star-spotter of Eric Harrison fame to realise that Young was going places. Which makes it all the more surprising that he was almost lost to the game after being rejected by Watford's Academy at 16.

You've come a long way since missing out on a YTS at Watford...

"Yes, it was a huge disappointment. Heartbreaking. But Watford gave me the chance to go back and train twice a week with them while going to school."

Were you not tempted to go elsewhere?

"I had the opportunity to leave and try and get a contract elsewhere, but I'd been with the club since the age of 10 and I felt that Watford was the place for me. It was a club where a lot of players had come through the youth team and been given a chance in the first team, and I just felt that I could persuade Watford that I was worthy of a contract. Within a year I was offered pro terms and I've not looked back."

Was there a big turning point for you?

"It was as a 16 or 17-year-old when I was picked for the Under 19s. It was massive for me. In my first game we played Blackburn and won 4-0 and I set up two. From that day I knew I wanted to stay at Watford and step up again to the first team."

It's the morning of September 13, 2003. Watford manager Ray Lewington pulls Young to one side and informs him that he's in the first team squad to face Millwall at Vicarage Road that afternoon. After being

introduced as a 76th minute substitute, Young pokes home the third goal in injury time to wrap up a 3-1 victory. Youth team football was very much a thing of the past now... "Not being told I was on the bench until the morning of the game helped me because I didn't really have time to think about it. That was until the manager said, "Warm up, you're going on!" I was stood on the touchline for about five minutes because the ball wouldn't go out! To come on and score on my debut just topped it off. Dreamland. Everyone says it was a tap-in, but a goal's a goal!"

Any wild celebrations that night?

"No, I had about 20 family members in the stand watching me that day, and we all just got together at home in the evening."

The following season you established yourself as a striker. Is that your best position?

"As long as I'm playing that's all that matters, but I've been a striker since I was six. I've always felt that was my best position until I moved to the wing. But like I say, as long as I'm playing and playing well that's the main thing."

You hit the Premier League with Watford in August 2006. What were your first impressions?

"All of a sudden you're playing against world-class players who have played in World Cups etc. The stadiums you go to week in week out are different class, and there's also less games. The Championship was Saturday, Tuesday, Saturday, Tuesday relentlessly. It was a tough test when I first got into the Premier League but I settled in very quickly."

A few months later, you were on your way to Villa Park. Why did you choose Villa?

"The manager. You look at what he's done in the game, and he's a manager you just want to play for. I've never heard anyone say a bad word about him. Everyone talks highly of him and when you work under him you can see why. He sold the club to me and outlined how he wanted the club to move forward, and if you look at Villa from when I joined to how it is now then you can see how far we've come. I'm delighted to be working under him. Every day in training you just want to do well for him."

Does he ever get the hairdryer out?

"Not really the hairdryer, but he knows instinctively whether you need a telling off or a quiet word."

What are you aiming for next season?

"We want to break up the top four. We wanted to do it this season but obviously it didn't quite happen. With a few new additions I think we can do it."

Finally, those personal aims for next season...?

"I've already said I don't disclose those!"

Okay, I'm going to put 'succeeding Ryan Giggs as PFA Player of the Year, and winning the World Cup with England...'

"You can put it down if you want, but it's not quoted from me!"

Ashley wears adidas F50i boots. Join the F50i Challenge and showcase your game-changing moments at www.bragster.com/F50i

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