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COLM LENAGHAN/PACEMAKER PRESS

I won't go away, insists ex-player in 'gloving' claim

One by one, they have summoned the courage to speak up, daring to put their heads above the parapet — middle-aged men breaking down in tears as they have revealed and relived the horrors that they endured as children chasing the football dream. It has been an unimaginably harrowing experience for all, but it has also brought a cathartic unburdening and, from it, an unimagined sense of solidarity. After years, decades, of suffering in silence, they are no longer alone.

In Belfast, though, one man walks alone. It is 30 years since George Blackstock travelled across the water, just after his 16th birthday, to begin life as an apprentice at Stoke City. He did not make the grade; he was released two years later. Too small, at 5ft 4in, according to Mick Mills, who was Stoke's manager at the time. Too traumatised, according to Blackstock, who told Preston county court last year that he had been mentally scarred by an incident in his first few weeks as an apprentice.

Blackstock's claim, rejected by the court, centred on an allegation of a ritual called "the glove". He claimed that after incurring the wrath of senior players on two occasions — the first because the tea he had made them had gone cold, the second when he disallowed a goal while refereeing a training match — he was dragged, "kicking and screaming", to the first-team dressing room. He alleged that he was then held down on a table while Peter Fox put on his goalkeeping glove, smeared it with Deep Heat muscle cream and inserted it up the 16-year-old's backside as "punishment".

Blackstock first raised his complaint in 2008 after sitting through a child safeguarding module on a coaching course. After explaining his version of events to one of the course leaders, he was encouraged to launch criminal proceedings against Fox, the former Stoke goalkeeper, who strenuously denied the allegation. Several of his fellow apprentices supported Blackstock's claim with similar allegations about the dressing-room culture at the club in that era, but Staffordshire police and the Crown Prosecution Service concluded that there was insufficient evidence to proceed with a criminal case.

Blackstock instead launched civil claims against Fox, for physical assault, and Stoke, for "vicarious liability", suing for £170,000 in lost earnings because of the trauma and stress incurred and the impact on his career. That case ended in October last year with Fox and Stoke cleared in court and Blackstock, defeated and broken, instructed to pay £100,000 in legal costs

to both parties within a fortnight. This proved an interesting week to make contact with Blackstock, who works as a warehouse supervisor in Belfast.

A year has passed since the case and he has not been pursued for that money by either Fox or Stoke. His resolve has increased in light of recent developments, but his anguish was clear as he broke down in tears four times over the course of two long telephone conversations. "I think they hoped I would just go away," Blackstock said. "I haven't gone away and I won't go away. I have to carry on the fight."

Blackstock's solicitor, Kevin Winters, has confirmed his intention to request a reinvestigation by Staffordshire police. He has also requested that the FA add Blackstock's case to its inquiry into abuse cases, which will be overseen by Kate Gallafent, QC.

Fox said in Preston county court — and was backed up by several other senior players — that the "glove" incident didn't happen. Judge Philip Butler ruled in Fox's favour, saying that while he did not believe Blackstock's claims to be "consciously dishonest", he was "unable to find as a fact that the specific events alleged by and allegedly involving the claimant did occur".

At the end of it all, Fox was cleared, though he said that he and his family had "been through hell" over the allegation and that it had caused him to resign from a part-time role as a goalkeeping coach at Blackburn Rovers' academy as well as withdrawing from a fostering programme with his wife. Fox alleged that the claims against him were made "in the hope of being awarded a large amount of money"; Judge Butler had dismissed the evidence brought by some of Blackstock's fellow apprentices in the belief that they had an "agenda of their own to pursue and a financial interest in the outcome", with reference to the possibility of making similar claims relating to their time at Stoke in the 1980s.

It was suggested at one stage in proceedings that, had Blackstock's claim been successful, it would have opened the floodgates for other potential claimants to come forward — and not just in relation to Stoke. Nicholas Fewtrell, the barrister representing Stoke, told a pre-trial hearing in December 2013 that "if one is taking the lid off Pandora's box, it is not likely to be an isolated event", adding that "this practice of punishments, pranks and initiations will have been common at clubs in all sports". Staffordshire police declined to confirm last night whether they had received new communication from Blackstock or from other former players.



Walking alone: Blackstock, a former trainee with Stoke, was unsuccessful in his claim against the club and an ex-player last year for loss of earnings suffered as a result of the impact of an alleged assault

Moving away from the Blackstock case here, talking in more general terms, that "practice of punishments, pranks and initiations", as Fewtrell called it, was at times far more brutal and far more sinister than is suggested by those words or indeed by the reminiscences of big-name players, looking back through their apprentice days through the prism of a glorious career. Among Manchester United's famed "Class of '92", the accepted narrative is that those excruciating, humiliating initiation ceremonies and punishments — being put in a tumble-dryer for a spin, having the club's crest scrawled on to your chest with a Dubbin-covered wire brush, lying on a masseur's table while balls were belted at your face through the hole — contributed, in some way, to the toughening-up process that made serial champions of them. Plenty who went through English football's apprentice system in that era would disagree.

The subject is explored in my book *Forever Young*, the story of the late Adrian Doherty, a rare talent who joined United as an apprentice in 1989, illuminating the same youth team as Ryan Giggs, but struggled with homesickness brought on by what he felt was a hostile, unpleasant environment in digs and at the training ground. He is not around to tell his story, tragically, but some of his fellow apprentices told how they felt that they had "crumbled" in the brutal dressing-room culture of the time — and before any Eric Bristow types suggest that any apprentice who "crumbled" was clearly not tough enough to make the grade in the first place, it is worth considering one astonishing allegation from Lee Sharpe, who

wrote in his autobiography about schoolboy trialists in digs being lined up in front of a pornographic film and "made to watch it" and subjected to "a dig off all the lads", ie, a flurry of punches, if they dared to get aroused.

Somewhere, presumably, there is a former United schoolboy trialist who was forced to endure that, perhaps on the eve of the opportunity of a lifetime. Who knows whether he went on to have a professional career and, either way, whether he did or not, whether he has been traumatised by it over the decades that have passed since? What about the former Liverpool player who was quoted, anonymously, in *The Independent* three years ago about a ritual called "blacking", whereby he claimed that apprentices would be pinned down while their testicles were daubed with boot polish? According to the player, "one player was left with a stutter. Others never played football again. It was mental and physical abuse on a daily basis."

That is what Blackstock claims. He says that he "lived in fear" for the two years of his apprenticeship at Stoke and, as a result of a "horrendous" experience, he lost the heart and the desire to pursue his dream of becoming a professional. In that respect, it is similar to what has been claimed by several of those players who have gone public about abuse endured at the hands of youth-team coaches in their teenage years or earlier. Those players have found solidarity in each other and in an outpouring of sympathy and outrage. George Blackstock, by contrast, walks alone. But the walk goes on.

Lee makes way for Holland as Southgate shakes up his England backroom staff

Gareth Southgate has released Sammy Lee from his backroom staff as he begins putting his mark on the England set-up (Paul Joyce writes).

Lee was appointed by Sam Allardyce in the summer, but has been told his services with the national team are no longer required.

Southgate was appointed on a four-year contract on Wednesday and will make Steve Holland his permanent

No2 in the summer. Chelsea's first-team assistant coach will continue in a part-time capacity for the friendly with Germany on March 26 and the World Cup qualifier with Lithuania at Wembley four days later before joining the FA full time in June.

It remains to be seen whether Martyn Margetson, the goalkeeping coach — another Allardyce appointment — will remain in situ.

Allardyce brought in Lee and Margetson in the summer after Gary Neville and Dave Watson left England along with Roy Hodgson in the wake of the Euro 2016 defeat by Iceland.

However, his tenure as England manager spanned one match — the 1-0 win over Slovakia — and lasted 67 days after he was caught out in a newspaper sting.

Neilson delighted to take manager's job at MK Dons

Robbie Neilson has been confirmed as the new manager of Milton Keynes Dons. The 36-year-old Scot succeeds Karl Robinson at the Sky Bet League One club after leaving Heart of Midlothian and will take charge after today's FA Cup second-round match away to Charlton Athletic. He will be joined by Stevie Crawford, who also worked alongside him at Tynecastle.

Neilson said: "I'm delighted. I'm

looking forward to developing the club, developing the players and moving the club forward. The most important thing was picking the right chairman and the right club and this was the right match at the right time — it's a club that's going places."

MK Dons, who parted company with Robinson in October and have had Richie Barker in caretaker charge, are 19th in League One.