

HELPING THE TRANSITION

To mark his 25 years of full-time service for the club, we speak to the Academy's player liaison officer **Dave Bushell** about his ever-evolving role, keeping up club traditions and helping kids reach their full potential...

Sir Alex Ferguson remembers Dave Bushell as one of his most loyal and important members of staff. The Bolton-raised former teacher has been associated with United for more than three decades, laying down the marker for several generations of players on what it takes to represent the club.

Congratulations on this landmark, Dave. For those who don't know of your work, can you sum up your role at Manchester United?
My title now is Academy player liaison officer. That involves meeting players and families, visiting their schools and their homes, and making sure the transition to Man United is as easy as possible, making sure we're caring for the youngsters who are coming to us.

How did you come to join Manchester United, and, for example, not the club you supported, Bolton Wanderers?
Well, because Man United asked me! I had 25 years' teaching and I became England Schoolboys manager while I got my full badge – what they call the UEFA A License now. I had five years as England Schoolboys manager, looking after players like Ryan Wilson, or Ryan Giggs, as well as Andy Cole and Nicky Butt. I met the boss [Sir Alex] in 1986/87. United were playing Arsenal at Highbury, we were playing Scotland at Wembley, and we stayed in the same hotel in Beaconsfield. I just had a chat with him and got invited in. [United's former chief scout] Les Kershaw and Brian Kidd were involved as well. I got to know them, and I used to go in and help out in



Last summer, Dave was presented with an award to recognise his immense contribution to the SuperCupNI tournament over the last 30 years

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my holidays. When I finished with England Schoolboys in 1991, they asked me to take the Under-16s, starting in 1992. In 1994, I became youth development officer and in 1997/98 our roles changed when the Charter of Quality [which aimed to improve the standard of youth football, by introducing players into professional club academies] came in. I became head of education and welfare.

Do you remember your first day?

My first day proper was 2 January 1995. Brian Kidd told me: "This is January – it's the second half of the season so it'll be a piece of cake, this, Dave." Within a week [future youth-team coach] Paul McGuinness had given me all the landladies in Salford to look after! I'd go to The Cliff every morning, check the youth-team players were okay, then Thursday was education day, so I'd be going to Accrington to check they were doing okay at college. On Friday, I'd pay the landladies and check they were all right, and I did a heck of a lot of scouting in the first few years. One of the first players I looked after was Darren Fletcher.

It must be a source of great pride that Darren is now working alongside you?

Darren's a fantastic lad with a brilliant family and it's wonderful that he's back. He's a wonderful contact with the youth team and the Academy. He's a very easy-to-get-on-with guy. He's not just a very good footballer with a smashing career, but a great character.

What do you enjoy most about your job?

Dealing with youngsters, looking after them, and the pride you get from their development. It's the people, being proud of people like Marcus, but also all the others, like Jimmy Dunne at QPR or Joe Rothwell at Blackburn Rovers, or Gerard Pique at Barcelona! I remember with Gerard, the manager came out and said everything's done, the only problem now is we need some good digs for him, so if we don't sign him, it's because of you, Dave!

So many players and their families have passed through United in your time and you've built relationships with all of them.

How do you build and maintain those relationships with so many people?

Well, I suppose because they're nice people! They're family friends. My wife Carole has always supported me, right from the beginning. She's been one of the important cogs in the wheel. We're still good friends with so many of these people, like the Evans family [parents of Jonny and Corey] and the Hamiltons [parents of Ethan]. If we can, we'll have supper with them. I partly learned this [as a way to maintain relationships] from Joe Brown [a former United scout] and his wife.

Are there any other people you'd like to pay tribute to and thank on this landmark?

Well, Joe Brown for one. Thank you, Paul McGuinness, for giving me all those landladies in the first week. I couldn't keep up! I'd say

thanks to Les Kershaw for giving me the job, thanks to the boss for being so supportive, and for being a friend now. There are too many people, to be honest, to name them all, but I should say thanks to [current head of Academy] Nick Cox as well. And also everyone at Ashton-on-Mersey School – they're the best signing I ever made for United, 25 years ago.

How do you think United has changed over the years?

The change is in the number of staff we have now. With Tony Whelan, myself and Paul McGuinness, we went on a trip to France for a tournament in 1996, and on the way back we did a 10-point plan. And one of them was to have a secretary. When we were in the big meeting with the boss that summer, we asked about that. They offered me and Paul a secretary to be prioritised in the main office. Now we have three administrators who are really good. We've got Louise [Doherty] supporting Nick; Rachel [Cross] doing the U23s, and so on. And then we've got analysts, athletic development people, physios, two doctors now. I don't know how many full-time staff it is now, and the biggest challenge I think now is communication. We've got a new system in place to manage that, but at the end of the day, it always comes down to face-to-face interaction. →



Dave's fine work for the club continues with the long-serving Red recently involved with helping educate Academy youngsters about the story of Munich



→ **How difficult was the Covid lockdown – was that your hardest challenge?**

It's a big challenge but I think the Academy and the young boys came out of it trumps. All the coaches and the staff rang up all the families every one or two weeks, and not just about football. 'How are you feeling? What are you doing?' kind of thing. We wanted to make sure they were safe and okay. And then we had these Zoom sessions with Darren Fletcher, Ole, Nicky Butt, Marcus, Jesse. That was great. I did a cookery competition where the kids had to cook a new recipe. The ingenuity and enthusiasm of all our Academy players came out. That's what really enthuses you and keeps you going.

Nick Cox described you as a “custodian of culture”. What culture do you think you want to ensure carries on at United?

I think myself and my mate Tony Whelan built up our base over the years from learning from the boss and former youth-team players, and hearing how Jimmy Murphy would go and knock on doors. I used to sit there at The Cliff

listening to Jimmy Ryan, Eric Harrison and the boss. You're having a piece of toast and a cup of tea and you're learning things all the time. But the one thing about it was the family. Even though it's a massive club, this is where I think I've done all right: going into family homes and making sure they feel wanted and cared for. We can't just make a boy into a footballer but we can make sure he's comfy and happy so there is a chance that he'll reach his potential.

The obvious link is between that and the philosophy of Sir Alex...

Yes. The boss would meet every boy we were signing or trying to sign. He did that with Scott McTominay and his father. Managers can't do much before kick-off, but I wonder how many take the time to meet boys before a game? He used to say, "I'll trust my players now, you're more important to talk to and we hope that you want to come. You're going to have work hard and make sacrifices but people like Dave will look after you." Having Alex Ferguson by your side doesn't half help you! Things are

obviously a bit different now, but Nick and Steve [Higham, Academy operations manager] are replicating those things, showing how we care, how we're a family, and how we're all together. Jimmy Murphy Jnr and I did the Munich presentation to the U18s and U23s the other day, and I thought, 'this is the right way to do it.' Because those players should know about the way our club has been run and how it's continuing from Sir Matt and Jimmy right the way through to the boss, and now we're doing it again.

Finally, if you had a message to young people leaving school and going out into the world, what would you say to them?

Well, number one, before you go out of school, do the best you can in your GCSEs. Because your GCSEs open a door. All the things you do in life open doors. Obviously, you've got to choose the right door, but the more you've got to choose from, the better chance you have of having a happy life. And whatever you want to be, you work hard and sacrifice things. 