

Chris Robinson

The Scouting Game

An Insider's Guide
to Talent Spotting
Football's Next Stars



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Contents

1. It Starts and Ends with Players	7
2. ‘Who Are You?’	14
3. What Are We Looking For?	27
4. Position Profiles	67
5. Reporting on a Player	93
6. Grassroots Scouting	126
7. Academy Scouting	153
8. First-Team and Video Scouting	185
9. Opposition Scouting	219
10. Agents	237
11. Parents	252
12. Scouts and Bias	282
13. Being a Scout.	297
14. It Starts and Ends with Players	322
Appendix 1: PFSA Code of Conduct for Scouts . . .	327
Appendix 2: Asians In Football – by Niaz Shazad . .	329
Acknowledgements	350

Chapter One

It Starts and Ends with Players

99 per cent of scouting is saying no

THE SCOUTING game is a game of persistence and, in a sense, a numbers game. You have to accept you will be going to watch a lot of players and for the most part very few of them will be the players that you want or can realistically get. You need to have that patience and persistence. You need to get the perspective right otherwise you will run out of patience. Even when you have brought a player in for whatever is the next step, then you have to accept it will probably not be your decision as to whether they get signed or not. Your job is to watch them, identify and assess them and communicate that to the club. The rest is usually up to other people. That is the reality of scouting, and unless you come to terms with it then you will suffer.

THE SCOUTING GAME

One of my favourite parts of the scouting season is the period from around mid-August to October when there are the early rounds of the FA Youth Cup. This is where your local non-league teams will be putting up their best u18s (under-18s) to compete and hopefully find a way through to the later rounds when the big academies join in. You usually get to see a lot of good players in competitive games that they want to win.

For the great majority of games that I go to watch, I am on my own. I prefer this because I really concentrate on the game and I am not there to chat. Over the years I have come to know a lot of other scouts and it is great to catch up with them; however, when it comes to the game itself, I will often wander off a little and find a bit of space for myself and focus on what is in front of me.

So, on this occasion, it was indeed unusual that I had someone with me, and it was my wife, which was even more unusual! She loves sports, was a national-level gymnast and now runs a gymnastics business, so is very tuned into games and competition. I have also found that she is a good judge of which players move well, which is a key part of identification where players are concerned. Having said that, it is not usual by any means that she comes with me to games. This evening, though, she just felt like coming along, so I

had company. I think she wanted to watch me work too, wondering perhaps what I get up to at all these games I go off to.

This was a lovely August evening, and the game was local to us, at Billingshurst in West Sussex. I am sure those facts helped her decision to tag along. We went for a nice meal at an Italian restaurant nearby before the game. This again was quite unusual. As a scout you get used to eating where and when you can. Too often it is a greasy underdone burger from a hut at the scruffy ground you are attending. Scouts will often recommend which grounds do good food or where there is a handy café near a ground. It is all part of the scouting culture. After the meal, we then went to Billingshurst FC's quite modern set-up with its little stands, which on this occasion had quite a few people there, as is often the case for the FA Youth Cup games. Family and friends may be drawn out to watch an FA Youth Cup game, particularly if it is a pleasant summer's evening like it was for this one. A night at Billingshurst watching u18 football! Who says I don't give a girl a good time?

Right from the warm-up Julie spotted the No. 10 of the opposing team and said how he looked quite sharp in his movement and quite agile. I like to be there to watch the warm-ups. You can get a feel for

who is ready to work hard and who is maybe going through the motions. You can begin to get a picture of the social dynamics in a team. Who is lost in their own world or who is encouraging team-mates? When we are scouting we are searching for clues about players. Some may turn out to be relevant and others may be misleading red herrings.

As the game progressed, the opposition – Chipstead – were clearly the better team but it was a good competitive game for all that. Chipstead played a 4-3-3 and the No.10 played on the left side of the front three. He was quite slightly built but wiry, had very good left-foot touch and showed some considerable skill with the ball, being able to beat players quite easily. He was quite nippy too, and showed the good physical movement Julie had noted. I had got a team sheet by asking the club officials beforehand, so as I looked at his name I was sure there was something familiar about him. I sent a couple of WhatsApp messages and got it confirmed that he used to be with the club that I was working for, although he had left at the end of his u14 season. He had gone on to another pro academy but had obviously drifted out of that given he was here in front of me playing for a non-league u18 team. His team won 9-1 and he scored four goals. There were two guys who sat behind us

who were scouts of some description and they were raving about him. Overall, I thought he had played well, and I also liked the left centre-back on his team, who I also recognised as having previously been in a Cat 3 academy for some years.

As we were driving home Julie was asking what I was going to do about this lad who had scored the goals. I said that he had had a good game, but he was playing poor opposition (with all due respect to Billingshurst) who were outclassed on the day. He was good on the ball, with a good left-foot touch, and a leftie is always interesting, but he did not work hard enough for me off the ball and only came alive when the ball was near him. He did not make much movement off the ball to create space, and was predictable. For these reasons I did not think he was going to be up to our standard, so while he played well, scoring four goals and was probably man of the match, he was not for me.

I did arrange to have him watched by a colleague in the next round of the FA Youth Cup, just to check up. On so many occasions I have either been very enthusiastic or dismissive about a player on just one showing and have learned that it can be misleading, so if there is the opportunity then it is worth getting that player cross-checked. Scouting is a team game. The conclusion came back from my colleague that he

agreed with me. The player had talent and ability but lacked application and game understanding. So we passed on him.

However, I did like the left centre-back, although he was right-footed and would have been more interesting if he had been left-footed. But he read the game well, had a good profile physically and talked very well. He used the ball effectively and above all as a centre-back he could win the ball and defend. My colleague who watched the next round was also positive about him. I ended up inviting this centre-back into a series of showcase games we had for that age group, and although we did not take him in the end, he did go on to receive offers from other pro clubs. He was not the player that for most people would be the most attractive in the original game I watched and he probably would not get the headlines like the No.10 who scored the four goals. However, he was in a position that we were more interested in and was more of a priority for us. He displayed other elements in his game that showed longer-term promise. Crucially, I knew the standard and requirements that my club had.

So I said no to a player who had been the 'star' performer on the night but still had him checked out further. I said yes to another player who then did come to us, as I said, but again in the end we said no. There

is a lot of saying no in scouting. The trick is knowing why it is a 'no' and when it is a 'yes'.

Follow this link to a video of me talking about that evening in Billingshurst:

