

BLACK FOOTBALLERS

Peter Ball



The rise of black footballers has received very visible confirmation in the last twelve months. Cyrille Regis, Luther Blissett and Mark Chamberlain all won England caps in 1982, to join their only predecessors, Viv Anderson and Laurie Cunningham, both recently excluded by injury, as the advance guard of the black players now found in increasing numbers in the Football League. Behind them are another group who are likely to join them in the near future and fulfil the recent prediction of the Football

Association's former head of coaching, Allan Wade, that the day would come when six or seven of the England team would be black. Danny Thomas and John Barnes have already been selected for the full England squad, and Chris Whyte, Garry Thompson and the recently out of favour Justin Fashanu were all members of last season's Under 21 team.

This reflects the situation in the Football League itself, where more and more young black players are breaking into the first teams

up and down the country. In the first division there are now 22 black players appearing regularly, with another 7 or 8 on the fringes of the first teams. It is now a frequent enough occurrence to cause little surprise, yet even five years ago the number of black players in the first division could be counted on one's fingers, and the only reason for going onto the second hand was because West Bromwich Albion had three, Wolves two. Ten years ago the contrast was even more startling with Clyde Best of West Ham the only black footballer appearing regularly in the first division, and the widespread prejudice within the game held that black players lacked the moral and physical toughness, 'the bottle' in football jargon, to survive in the Football League—'the toughest league in the world'. Although there are undoubtedly pockets of resistance inside the game, that myth has generally been laid quietly to rest, while the more subtle variation that 'they' are alright as forwards but don't make good defenders, let alone goalkeepers, is also in the process of disappearing. Central defenders like Chris Whyte at Arsenal, Noel Blake at Birmingham and Bob Hazell at QPR have overcome that one, while Manchester City's stunningly promising reserve goalkeeper Alec Williams looks likely to prove the point conclusively when he finally succeeds Joe Corrigan.

There are though divisions within the group. Many of the older group of players were West Indian born, although most grew up in England and one or two are of very unusual background for an English professional footballer. Cyrille Regis was born in French Guyana, and was eligible for a French cap until he was picked by England. More surprisingly John Barnes, one of Bobby Robson's young hopefuls, has an impeccable middle-class West Indian background. He came to England at 14, when his father was appointed military attache to London. A natural athlete, Barnes played rugby for Middlesex schools and was discovered playing in park football by Watford. In spite of that unlikely background, he broke into the first team inside a year of being at the club.

But these stories are rare. Much more typical are the examples of Garth Crooks and Mark Walters, Aston Villa's richly promising young forward who has recently been keeping England winger Tony Morley out of the club side. Crooks was 'discovered' by Stoke manager Tony Waddington when he went outside to find out who the kid (Crooks was then 14) was who was driving him mad by constantly kicking a football against his office wall. Waddington found Crooks, and subsequently signed the player for Stoke. Walters, who grew up in Birmingham near the Villa ground, supported the club as a kid and recently recalled how he used to wait outside the ground until half-time, when the gates were opened and you could get in free, because he couldn't afford the entrance money. These are stories which many of the game's former greats would recognise as their own, with the exception that Crooks was actually kicking a football, while the Mannions, Steels, Carters, Lawtons and Matthews often had to make do with a rag ball, or, if they were lucky, a tennis ball.

That is significant, for it is hard not to conclude that the main distinguishing feature of the new generation of black players is that they are black-skinned rather than pink-skinned. Otherwise on the whole they fit comfortably in as inheritors of the tradition of great players coming from the British working class, and many from the poorest areas where football is one of the few escape routes from poverty. Most come from the areas in the big cities which have traditionally supplied professional footballers. If one of the richest sources historically, the North Eastern coalfields, has supplied none, it is because there was very little black immigration there in the 50s. But equally significantly most of the London born players come from the integrated working class communities, where they have been brought up in schools with a football tradition and an area steeped in football culture, and few from a 'ghetto' area like Brixton.

But it is also clear that there is some way to go before the integration is complete and black players are accepted totally as just footballers. If the high talents of Mark Chamberlain, John Barnes and Luther Blisset are the natural inheritors of Stanley Matthews, Tom Finney and Nat Lofthouse, the numbers breaking through in the lower divisions are smaller. The suspicion remains that black players have to be exceptional to make it, and until there are more ordinary ones around—and a percentage of bad black players—then English football will still be open to charges of discrimination, even if it is much less overt than a decade ago.