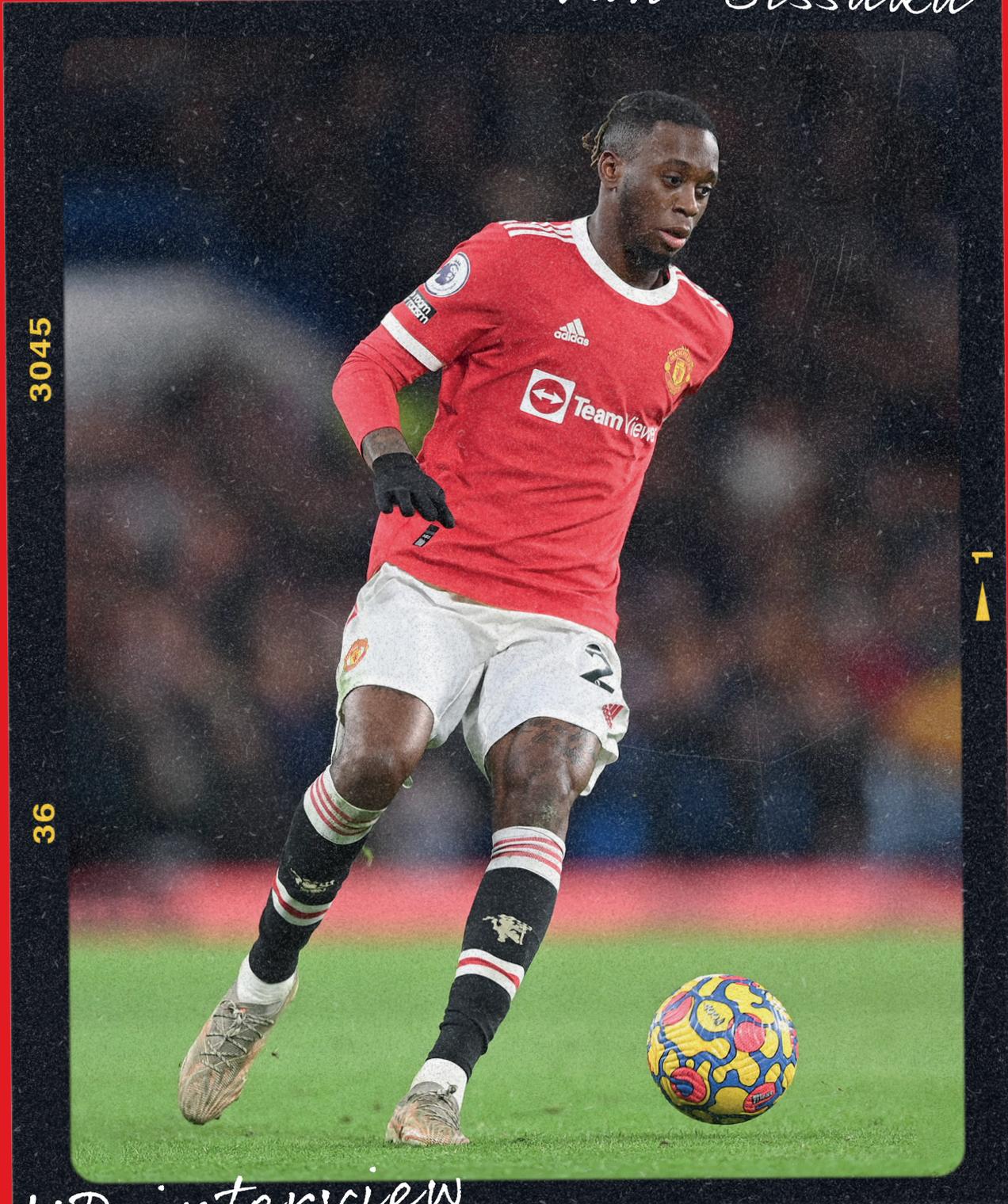


Aaron Wan-Bissaka



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WAN-BISSAKA

FOOTBALL IN LONDON, STAYING ON THE RIGHT PATH, AND THE CAPITAL'S BIG TALENTS

As we welcome the Eagles from south London to Old Trafford, their former defender talks us through his football education, recalling: **“We played everywhere. Any weather, anywhere”**

Next up for the Reds is your old club from your old manor. What does south London mean to you?

South London is home for me. That's where I grew up; that's all I knew as a kid. I grew up in New Addington, which is in Croydon.

What was New Addington like?

I was lucky that I had a love for football. We played everywhere really – in the streets, in a field, in the cages. Any weather, anywhere! My older brother helped massively because he could see there were other people my age that were going down the wrong path. During the day, everyone would be playing football, but in the evenings, he would help me stay on the right path and advise me to just stay home.

Your first club was Junior Elite, who have a real history of producing players – Wilfried Zaha, Emile Smith Rowe and United U23 defender Di'Shon Bernard, among others. What was it like for you?

“My older brother helped massively because he could see there were people my age that were going down the wrong path”

That's the club that pushed me on and made me. They taught me and prepared me for the outside world, for academies. I think I started there at about age five. There wasn't an age group that really existed for me, it was only the year above, so I had to join in with them. I obviously learnt a lot from that.

Which players inspired you at the time?

Thierry Henry, always. What made me look up to him especially was how he was so composed and calm; his finishing, his hunger to score goals.

South London is full of football cages – did you have one in New Addington?

Yeah, we had a concrete cage and luckily we had floodlights on it as well so we could play in there until any time. They were the good times, playing in there. It was the place to show what you were really about. It was always intense, always crowded. There was no limit on numbers, it was whoever wants to play just



Our flying full-back congratulates Sancho on his first goal for United, in the win over Villarreal, but Wan-Bissaka can recall a time when his team-mate was on the opposing side during their youth days in London

→ comes to play, so there was a lot of competition there for you to stand out in. You were playing in tight spaces, and it's quite rough as well. You can't show any weakness; it's all age groups playing at once.

Did you do much defending in the cage?

Yeah, you do actually, even though a lot of it is skills and dribbling, because when it comes to 'last goal wins', that sort of situation, that's when you've got to put your life on the line for it.

Did you do any other sports as a kid?

I got into a bit of cross country. I think the school kind of pushed me towards that and I enjoyed it a bit, but there was nothing that could beat football.

If you can think back, what was the main reason you wanted to be a footballer?

To be honest, it's all I can remember, just loving playing football. I think mainly because my brother played it, and I followed him, so it was whatever he did. I had a passion for it and followed it.

BT Sport recently made a documentary series with Rio Ferdinand called *South of the River*. Have you seen it?

Yeah, I've heard about the documentary, but I've not watched it yet.

“I remember playing against Jadon. I was at Palace, in the Under-15s, and he was at Watford, playing up two age groups. I don't know if he remembers! I was a winger then, so I didn't come up directly against him”

As you'll know, it's about how so many of England's best footballers are now from south London. Even in our game on Sunday against Chelsea, there were five playing...

Yeah, me and Jadon here, and then Trevoh [Chalobah], Ruben [Loftus-Cheek] and Callum [Hudson-Odoi] for them.

Five in one of the biggest Premier League games of the season. Does it make it you proud?

Proud, yeah, definitely. I remember all these people from growing up. I've seen a picture, a map of south London showing which part everyone's from. I'm surprised by how many, but definitely proud.

Did you ever play, in your youth career, against those players you just mentioned from last Sunday's game?

I remember playing against Jadon, actually. I was at Palace, in the Under-15s, and he was at Watford, playing up two age groups. I don't know if he remembers! I was a winger then, so I didn't come up directly against him. He just came on for 15 minutes, but I remember him.

→ **What do you think it is about south London footballers which means so many are at the top?** It's raw talent, but it's about wanting to express yourself, being able to, and showing the world what you're capable of doing. It's the hunger; the hunger to make it out and to be on the big stage. It's not easy choosing the right path. Sometimes you might have friends who might not have the same ambitions as you do. I was lucky with my dad – he was quite strict with that, he'd just keep me focused and make sure I stayed on the right path.

And there was a point in your time in the Palace Academy where you did lose focus a bit, is that right?

Yeah, it was because of what I was just talking about. My dad had told me plenty of times before, but there was just this one time where he told me and it actually kicked in. I felt his pain. He sacrificed a lot for me, and I knew I had to follow my dreams.

Your dad would take you on long journeys to games and training...

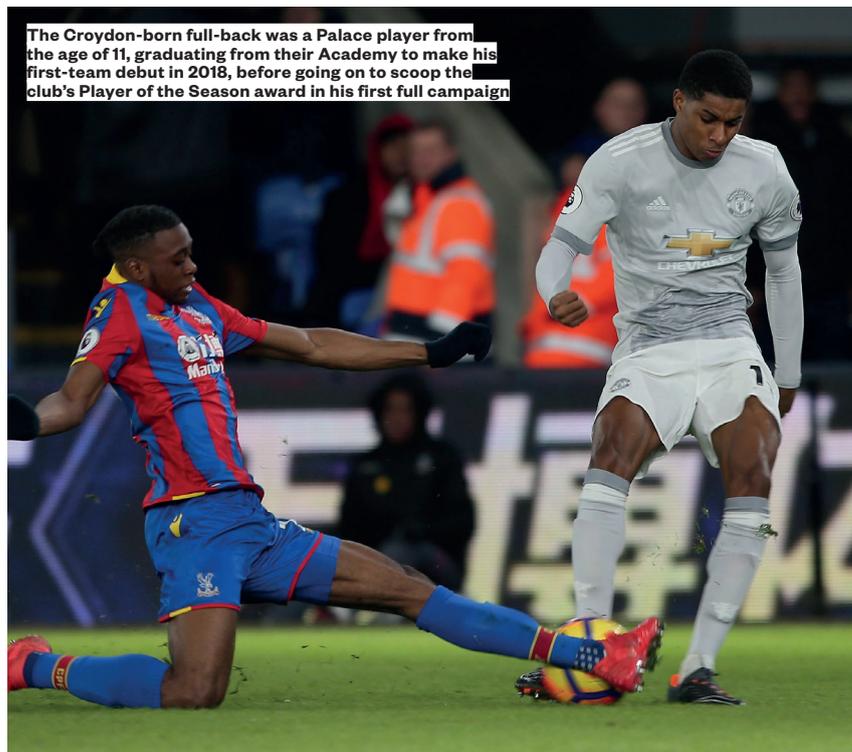
Yeah, we had the longest trip! It took almost two hours to get to training, but I didn't care, I just wanted to get to that training ground and learn from there. My dad always took me, straight from work. For me it was straight after school. Sometimes I was late because I'd be with friends who didn't want to go home, but he'd take me, in all kinds of weather.

When you look back at those long journeys, how does that make you feel now?

Grateful for it. I always tell him. Looking back, even for me to do it, I look back and it took a lot



From south London's football cages to the Premier League stage, Aaron's battle-ready path to the top flight is a familiar one for a number of the league's current crop



The Croydon-born full-back was a Palace player from the age of 11, graduating from their Academy to make his first-team debut in 2018, before going on to scoop the club's Player of the Season award in his first full campaign

“It took almost two hours to get to training, but I didn't care, I just wanted to get there and learn. My dad would take me – he sacrificed a lot for me and I knew I had to follow my dreams”

of energy even for me, so I respect him for doing that and keeping at it.

Are there many other players that you see now in the Premier League who you remember playing with or against from that time?

There's a lot I can remember; the list is long! A lot from the Chelsea Academy, like Tammy [Abraham, now at AS Roma]. There's Ezri [Konsa] who's at Villa now, he was at Charlton before. [Ebere] Eze at Palace obviously, I remember playing against him when he was at Millwall and QPR. He's a great player.

Do you see similarities between yourself and other players from south London, like Jadon?

Yeah, from the start, from when I first played against him. Just the way he expresses himself, he shows what he's capable of doing. You have to have that flair to show what you're capable of in the cage. You're basically just put in a position where you have no choice.

You progressed well at Palace but you were a winger right up until just before you got into the first team. Can you talk us through that a bit?

→ Yeah, so my first experience was really the pre-season tour in 2017, in Hong Kong, and that was madness, to be honest. I didn't expect to go with them. I'd trained a bit with the first team but to be on tour, being around them 24/7 for a few days, that was a good experience for me. I learnt a lot there. That was with [manager] Frank de Boer. He played a back-five with wing-backs, so I played there a bit. And then when Roy came in, he switched it to a back four, and then there was a chance at the right-back position, and any chance that's given to me, I was going to take it. I started off not liking it, but I got into it. They saw I wanted to try it out and they gave me a shot, helped me out. We trained on it for a few weeks, maybe a month. And then the first game... Tottenham! That was a good moment for me. I remember walking out. You just see like a mass of people. That walk on to the pitch... that's the longest walk. I'm just thinking, 'is this real? This can't be real. I can't believe I'm here.'

You were thrown into the deep end; four of your first five games for Palace included United, City, Chelsea and Tottenham. Do you think you learnt more in that period than at any other time in your career?

Yeah, I definitely got stitched up there! If I'd played badly, I never would have played again! But yeah, definitely. I just gave it my all, to show them what I was capable of. I learnt a lot playing against those top teams as well; the intensity, just getting used to that.

“When Roy [Hodgson] came in, there was a chance at the right-back position, and I was going to take it. I started off not liking it, but I got into it. And then the first game... Tottenham! I remember walking out thinking ‘is this real? This can’t be. I can’t believe I’m here’”

Does the sight of fans being back in the stadium make that even more enjoyable?

Yeah, I missed that and I've enjoyed it. Since they got back, it's that moment you enter the pitch where you can hear them straight away. It pushes you on to do better, them cheering you on. That's what we need and that's what we get.

We notice you're a player who chooses not to do loads of social media...

Yeah, some say I'm a man of few words; I just like keeping myself to myself. That's how I've been growing up. I kept myself to myself from there and focused on my main goal. Family are obviously a big support for me, from the start.

Briefly turning attention to today's game, Palace have a great team now but Wilfried Zaha aside – we all know about his quality – who do you see as their biggest threat?

Ebere Eze. I like him. The way he plays, I like watching him. Seeing where he came from, all the setbacks he's had – getting released, not getting accepted at other clubs – to where he is now, I like seeing things like that, people who prove themselves to the world despite the struggles, changing their lives. 🔥

Going shoulder-to-shoulder with Palace attacker Eberechi Eze, one of the promising young stars in the game who Wan-Bissaka has much respect for

