

# How Lewis-Skelly mother protects youngsters from the game's pitfalls

Parent of Arsenal prodigy has set up online platform to help others with thorny issues of academies, agents and deals

By Sam Dean

Marcia Lewis, the mother of Arsenal's Myles Lewis-Skelly, is not from a football family. She did not grow up around the sport and she did not follow it during the early years of her son's development in north London. "I didn't even know what the Premier League was," she says.

It was, therefore, something of a shock when she received a call from a football agent who wanted to represent her son. Myles was 11 at the time. A year later she received another call, this time from a major sports brand that wanted to discuss a sponsorship deal.

What is a mother supposed to do in such a situation? What is the cor-

rect way of dealing with an agent? What are the legalities and regulations involved? What should she tell Myles? Lewis had no points of reference, no easy answers and nowhere to turn. "My instinct was that it didn't feel right," she tells *Telegraph Sport*. "And I felt like there wasn't really a place I could go. I didn't know anyone in the industry. I didn't have a clue. So I felt quite alone."

Lewis, whose son has broken into the Arsenal first-team this season and was controversially sent off against Wolves on Saturday, eventually found support from parents of older boys, but she has not forgotten those initial feelings of uncertainty and unease. And as time passed, she met more families who were experiencing similar struggles. "As parents, we are entering into a business that we know nothing about," she says.

Lewis decided to immerse herself in the world of football. She achieved a master's degree in foot-



**Arsenal family:** (far left, from left) Myles Lewis-Skelly, Kate Iorpenda, academy manager Per Mertesacker and Marcia Lewis; (above, right) Lewis-Skelly signs professional forms with along with Marcia

ball business, qualified as an agent and, she says, "listened to Talksport every day". From there, she went on to launch NoIFan.club, a community that provides support and education for parents of children in the male and female academy systems.

To speak to Lewis and her colleague Kate Iorpenda – whose sons Tom and George play for Huddersfield Town and Ipswich Town respectively – is to realise how many families are in desperate need of this help. Football can be a murky

and confusing world, especially at academy level, where players are often scouted and recruited long before the age of eight.

Iorpenda, who works in education, became involved with NoIFan.club when she was put in contact with Lewis after speaking to parents at Brighton & Hove Albion's academy. Both of Iorpenda's sons had played for the club and she is particularly focused on the process of young players finding new clubs after they are let go.

"When my first son was released from Brighton, I felt really unprepared," she says. "The club helps you to a point but then you are on your own. How do you have conversations with clubs? How do you choose which part of the country to go to?"

"When clubs started to call about my son, because there was quite a lot of interest, I just didn't know how to have those conversations. I felt quite isolated and stressed. Having gone through that, when

my second son was released two years later I was much more assertive. Everything about it was much more exciting."

Lewis and Iorpenda are "kindred spirits" who believe more can be done to prepare parents, and by extension the players themselves, for the challenges of academy football.

Those challenges are numerous, and in some cases eye-opening. NoIFan.club recently came across a situation where an academy player wanted to buy a car with his earnings from his club, but the parents said no because they wanted to spend it on a car for themselves. "It can be very sensitive," says Lewis, who has launched an anonymous survey for parents to help further understand the issues facing families in football.

Other challenges include offers of inducements to parents from agencies, or the thorny issue of boot deals. "Most people don't know the ruling," Lewis says. An agent, for example, cannot represent a player in discussions with a club until they are 16. But that same agent can represent that player, at any age, in negotiations with a potential sponsor.

"What you end up with is an agent in your life, because they helped you with a boot deal," Lewis says. "You are not stuck legally, but you could very well be stuck in quite an awkward position. In those years [before the player turns 16], you have built up a relationship and they are now expecting to represent you."

There are also significant issues around education: there is inconsistency between clubs on how much time academy players spend out of school.

Separately, the regulatory issues of compensation for youth players and the small print of academy agreements are confusing for families with no experience in the field. Especially at times of change.

"I have seen too many parents wish they had a next step after leaving a club, and not getting anything for their child because they didn't know what to do," Iorpenda says. "The biggest challenge is that a lot of people have not thought about or prepared for what happens when it [the journey at one club] does come to an end."

NoIFan.club's work is not limited



**Controversial:** Myles Lewis-Skelly trumps off the Molineux pitch on Saturday after being shown a red card for a foul (right) on Matt Doherty



to the men's game. They are also working with parents of girls, who are trying to make sense of the women's development pathway. "The lack of resources inside those academies is really off the scale compared to the boys," says Lewis, who adds that parents have made her aware of tricky issues in the women's game related to puberty and menstrual cycles, among other difficulties.

NoIFan.club is helping to arm parents with the knowledge and skills to handle life in academy football, but clubs across the country are not always welcoming. "For some clubs there is that sense that they don't want to open the door," Iorpenda says. "Because it can all get really complicated. But if you work with the parents and help them feel safe, confident and in control, the kids are going to benefit." It is highly possible that their role as mothers – rather than fathers or agents – is leading to more resistance.

"There are no mothers who have been through this journey who are doing what we are doing," says

'When clubs started to call about my son, I just didn't know how to have those conversations'

Lewis. "We are the first, and sometimes being the first makes people feel uneasy. You could Google search 'agent mothers' and you will always get the negative story of the mum who ruined their son's career. But that is just not the truth. We are just not visible in the industry. Even the coaches on the women's side tend to be men."

NoIFan.club is self-funded and it costs £3.99 per month to join its community, which gives access to workshops, experts and other resources. The subscription fee goes towards covering the costs of the business, with Lewis working up to 17 hours a day on building the platform. "Myles often comes in and asks, 'Mum, are you still at your laptop?'" she says.

The end goal is clear. These mothers want to show there is a place to go for families who are struggling to navigate the choppy waters of youth football. The more informed these families are, Lewis and Iorpenda strongly believe, the better life will be for the next generation of players.

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## Police probe death threats to referee Oliver after red-card storm

By Tom Morgan  
SPORTS NEWS CORRESPONDENT

Police have been called in over death threats aimed at Premier League referee Michael Oliver after his controversial red card for Arsenal's Myles Lewis-Skelly.

Online comments about Oliver's young family were also reported to officers by Professional Game Match Officials Ltd (PGMOL), which said it was "appalled" over "abhorrent" attacks. Both Scotland Yard and Northumbria Police are understood to be in the process of gathering evidence after a febrile day in which Oliver came under attack from fans and pundits.

Arsenal were understood to have

been in touch with PGMOL over the abuse aimed at Oliver and are supportive of any inquiries.

They are still considering whether to appeal against Lewis-Skelly's sending-off against Wolves which prompted the backlash. They have a deadline of 1pm today and were expected to raise a complaint with the Football Association. With the likes of Alan Shearer and Keith Hackett criticising the red card, Oliver faced a pile-on of abuse from Arsenal fans on social media over the weekend.

The PGMOL, the body in charge of referees at elite levels, said in a statement that police had been alerted. "We are appalled by the threats and abuse directed at Michael Oliver following the Wol-

verhampton Wanderers v Arsenal fixture," it said. "No official should be subject to any form of abuse, let alone the abhorrent attacks aimed at Michael and his family over the past 24 hours. The police are aware, and a number of investigations have commenced.

"We are supporting Michael, and all those affected, and are determined to tackle this unacceptable behaviour. Sadly, this is not the first time a match official has been forced to deal with threats in recent times."

Mikel Arteta stopped short of turning on Oliver on Saturday but admitted he was "absolutely fuming" at Lewis-Skelly's dismissal for a foul on Matt Doherty late in the first half of Arsenal's 1-0 win.

PGMOL's position remains, however, that the challenge was extremely late, the point of contact was high and that video evidence supported that conclusion.

Arteta highlighted the FA's decision to overturn Manchester United midfielder Bruno Fernandes's red card against Tottenham Hotspur in September.

Pundits launched more direct attacks, with former Premier League referee Hackett telling *Telegraph Sport* that Oliver should be stood down for a couple of weeks "to provide him time and clarity to learn from his mistake by being given operational advice".

The foul on the edge of the box was "checked and confirmed" by Darren England, with the VAR

deeming Lewis-Skelly to have committed "serious foul play".

"I am absolutely fuming but I leave it with you," Arteta said afterwards. "Hopefully we don't need to [appeal the decision] and if we have to, there is a really good precedent, what happened with Bruno this season as well."

Pundit Shearer said on BBC's *Match of the Day*: "Never ever a red card. What worries me is that you've got an assistant VAR and a VAR who have seen several replays in slow motion, and they think that that is a clear red card."

Lewis-Skelly will miss Arsenal's home game with Manchester City, the Carabao Cup semi-final with Newcastle and the Premier League trip to Leicester City on Feb 15.