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m+ EXCLUSIVE How Arsenal made Ethan Nwaneri and got one over on Man City to sign the next generation of superstars - thanks to a school fit for a World Cup, a Jude Bellingham clone and humiliating their opponents

- Arsenal are paying £17,500-a-year fees to the best young football talents to attend a leading London private school
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The marginal differences between winning a **Premier League** title and finishing runners-up are rather fine, as **Arsenal** have discovered. Even set-piece dark arts and a near-perfect defensive backline have not been enough. Yet the Gunners have now gone one step further in a decades-long bid to try to outdo **Manchester City**.

This is the story of the scholarship battle for English football's most promising young talents, a dynamic race to lure and nurture the best and brightest to one day star in their first teams.

In it, we find a school pitch designed to the same level as a World Cup stadium, a £1million transfer fee for the next **Jude Bellingham** and the country's two best clubs sneaking ahead where they can to take any advantage possible.

As of last month, Arsenal are offering to pay £17,500-a-year fees to one of the country's finest private schools, a steep price but one worth paying if it means they attract talent early and do not have to splurge millions later down the line on established players.

And this is how that scheme, in conjunction with a bespoke footballing programme, can help them to take down City.



In their decades-long effort to win the title, Arsenal are offering to pay fees to one of the country's best private schools in a bid to steal a march on the next generation of young stars



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St John's Senior School in Enfield costs £17,500 a year for secondary school students



Ethan Nwaneri, who attended St John's, scored for Arsenal in the Carabao Cup on Wednesday

As Mail Sport tours St John's Senior School in Enfield, London, people carriers line up near the entrance. The best schoolboy footballers from the likes of Arsenal, Tottenham and West Ham are about to be whisked off to their clubs for training.

The school, which costs £17,500 a year for secondary school students, is among the best in the country — their most-recent GCSE cohort achieved 70 per cent Grades 9-7, formerly known as A* and A grades.

And St John's is not just producing the country's next class of leaders, but on 28 acres of greenbelt land with an attached prep school, it is fast becoming the No1 spot to develop our best young footballers — with the Gunners at the fore.

In the reception, a TV screen is showing an Ethan Nwaneri highlights reel of his two goals against Bolton in the 5-1 Carabao Cup third-round win in September, his first strikes for the club he joined aged eight.

The 17-year-old, tipped as Arsenal's next big prospect, attended St John's until he was 16, and was moulded into the footballer he is today.

Enthusiastic headmaster Alexander Tardios beams when Nwaneri's name is mentioned. He can't speak highly enough of a student who also excelled academically, balancing his studies with a packed footballing schedule.

'Seeing Ethan play for the first time, I'll never forget,' Tardios tells Mail Sport. 'I went to watch the trial and he was so incredible that I texted a scout that I know and said, 'Have you heard of a boy called Ethan Nwaneri?'

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'And I got a text back saying, 'Sign him now!'. He scored eight goals for us in his first school match. You just see him weaving through and the kids are going, 'Wow, wow, wow'. I mean, he was incredible.'

It is his fast rise through the ranks which has led to the Gunners becoming official educational partners with St John's, ratified by the Premier League, to provide a unique specialised programme to rival the one at Man City.



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Budding talents are inspired by a TV screen showing Nwaneri's masterclass against Bolton



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St John's nurtures top schoolboy footballers from the likes of Arsenal, Spurs and West Ham



Mikel Arteta and Arsenal are doing everything they can to steal a march on the competition

Both clubs have been given permission by the league to provide a Full-Time Training Module (FTTM) programme which allows students more time away from campus.

They have their lessons at St John's but then on three days a week after lunch, they must go to their football training ground and focus on football. It is the school's responsibility to organise catch-up lessons so education is not missed out on.

St John's have also hired ex-Arsenal, Manchester United and Everton academy coach Jake Heracleous and QPR's head of emerging talent Dean Barker as PE teachers to take charge of football.

Initially, Arsenal and City offered the programme to students from Year 9 and above, owing to Premier League rules.

But City have now gone to the Premier League and got permission to lower their programme to Year 7 (11 years old). It's a cat and mouse game in search of the ultimate edge.

Wolves and Brighton also provide an FTTM pathway, but theirs are on a different scale — it is only the two title rivals who have such a unique programme.

One example of its impact is Kyran Thompson. The 15-year-old midfielder was at West Ham and being hunted down by the likes of Man City, Chelsea and Spurs. He has been likened to Real Madrid and England star Bellingham.

Mail Sport understands that Arsenal beat Man City to Thompson's signature by offering him a full scholarship to St John's — as well as a £1.1million fee to West Ham.

The FTTM project all started nine years ago. Tardios had a meeting with Matthew Henly, Arsenal's head of education, who was intrigued about the prospect of providing an educational safety net for young footballers.

St John's struck an agreement and gave 100 per cent scholarships to Luis Brown — his father Kenny played for West Ham and his grandfather Ken represented England — and Harrison Dudziak in September 2017.





But Arsenal are hoping to have a monopoly on many young superstars rising through the ranks



Nwaneri netted a pearler during Arsenal's 3-0 win over Preston, showing off his superb skill

The experiment worked, both boys achieving a mix of A*s, As and Bs. Brown now plays for West Ham, and Dudziak signed a first professional contract with Arsenal in July, joining their Under 21s.

The big breakthrough came in 2018 when an 11-year-old Nwaneri arrived for a trial. Interestingly, his future Gunners team-mate Myles Lewis-Skelly was at the same trial and stood out, too, but Mail Sport understands that the school could only give one 100 per cent scholarship at the time, and Nwaneri was their top choice.

He went on to achieve top grades in his studies, as well as excel at Arsenal. On the back of that, the Gunners applied for their FTTM two years ago and after an 18-month process, their first cohort started just last month. They are Thompson and midfielder Joshua Sesay, who joined from Millwall aged 15.

Arsenal only pick players who they are adamant will make it to the professional ranks. The programme, which covers most things — even a student's uniform — allows the Gunners to lure in the best talent from across the country.

Tardios explains: 'If they are going to relocate a child from the north or the south of England, instead of saying, "Right, we're bringing you over and you're now going to play for Arsenal", they say, "We're going to bring you to Arsenal, but we're going to pay 100 per cent of your fees to attend St John's", which has never happened before.

'We had one child recently who came down with their mum and they are only going to choose between Arsenal or Man City because of the private education offer.'

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Students have lessons at St John's but three days a week after lunch, they go to their football training ground



The Gunners only pick players who they are adamant will make it to the professional ranks

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Nwaneri is a quiet, humble character around Arsenal with a serious nature about him. Upon visiting this huge campus, you get a sense of how he has been moulded through his formative years.

Take the St John's punishments for ill-discipline, for example.

Caught swearing? Two-day suspension.
Caught bullying? Permanent exclusion.
Caught bringing a phone in? It's confiscated for two weeks.

As you walk into the classrooms, all the pupils have to stand up. The rooms are designed with wooden panels, mirroring a court room to aid concentration.

This ethos is packaged with eye-opening facilities. Their football pitch has 22 water cannons underneath — the same number as the Emirates Stadium — and both primary and secondary drainage systems.

The pitch was laid out and looked after by ProPitch — the same company which worked on last year's Champions League final pitch at Wembley and the 2022 Qatar World Cup pitches. There's even an on-site spa for sixth formers and the academy players.

'We had to ensure our pitch was to the absolute highest standard,' says Tardios. 'We couldn't afford to tell clubs that they got injured on our pitch.'

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Nwaneri - pictured hugging his manager Arteta - is a quiet, humble character around Arsenal



The Arsenal teenager is having a positive impact on the young budding prospects at St John's

Nwaneri has been fully integrated into Mikel Arteta's first-team squad this season, making four appearances off the bench in the league so far alongside his League Cup brace against Bolton.

And his impact is having an effect at his alma mater, too.

'Word got out that these boys are at Arsenal, they talk to their friends,' says Tardios. 'And then a lot more Arsenal boys started to apply, and then the Watford boys started to apply, and then the West Ham United boys started to apply, and then the Spurs boys started to apply.'

'Boys from Chelsea applied for the scholarship last week. Never had that happened before.'

It has resulted in a formidable school team, whose opponents have forfeited cup matches to avoid the prospect of humiliation. One unlucky Year 8 team at Enterprise School was on the end of a 24-0 hiding in October, even though only three academy players are allowed on the pitch at any one time.

Tardios adds: 'Our fourth form team have not played one game this season because every team that we have drawn have pulled out. We are in the last 16 in the borough (competition) and we haven't played one game yet!'



Despite making just four substitute appearances in the league so far this season, Nwaneri looks ready to play a pivotal role for Arsenal in the Premier League title race



With so many talents coming through, Arsenal's battle with City is likely to rumble on for years

The programme is working that well, St John's have eyes on an expansion so they can take more academy stars on. The number of talented children wanting the chance to enrol far outstrips the places available.

Whatever happens next, Arsenal's battle with Man City on the playground is set to rumble on for years to come — and other clubs are sure expected to join in.

Arsenal

West Ham United