


# Ashley Barnes: The 'cab driver' who wants England call to cap fairytale rise

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Football | Ashley Barnes Interview

The Burnley striker, 29, hopes Gareth Southgate rewards his journey from non-League to the top flight

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Barnes has worked his way up from non-League to the top flight ANDREW YATES/REUTERS

It is not your typical Premier League scene. A people carrier rolls into the car park at Burnley's training ground and, as the passenger doors slide across, seven footballers emerge, one by one. Then the driver's door opens and out gets Ashley Barnes, their leading goalscorer and designated driver.

This is what has been dubbed "Ash-Cabs" since the two Ashleys, Barnes and Westwood, expanded their longstanding car-share arrangement, clubbing together to buy what they call a minibus. Their team-mates gather at a pick-up point in Cheshire every morning before their commute takes them around Manchester and up the M66 into East Lancashire. Punctuality is essential; no one dares risk making the others late and having to pay fines on their behalf.

At certain other Premier League clubs, such an arrangement could only be imagined if there were Jacuzzis, mini-bars and goodness knows what else waiting for them in the back. Not here. "No, it's just the standard [Mercedes] Viano," Barnes says. "We

chipped in for it and we bring the boys in on a daily basis. Eight of us jump in most days. You probably don't get many players car-sharing at most clubs, but we're such a tight group here. I think that's why we work so well together on the pitch."

This cheek-by-jowl existence, a group of lads piling into the same vehicle on the way to training, brings out a sense of nostalgia in Barnes. It is 13 years since his career began in the unlikely environs of Paulton Rovers, the Somerset-based club competing then, as now, in the eighth tier of English football. "We were paid about £60 a week," the centre forward, 29, says. "I used to give it to my mum and dad for some keep. I was still at school and lucky enough to be getting paid to play football and it was nice, but for the older lads, it was their livelihood. They were working 9 to 5, coming home, getting changed and training in the evenings. They were must-win games because, if not, those lads weren't going to be happy with you. I think that put me in good stead, playing men's football from a young age."

In an age when so many of English football's finest young prospects struggle to fulfil their potential, Barnes's journey to the Premier League — via Paulton, Plymouth Argyle (and spells on loans at Oxford United, Salisbury City, Eastbourne Borough and Torquay United), Brighton & Hove Albion and Burnley — seems instructive. Can it really be a coincidence that, beyond the more prodigious talents of Harry Kane, Raheem Sterling and Marcus Rashford, six of the nine highest home-grown goalscorers in this season's Premier League have played at non-League level? Troy Deeney and Danny Ings had spells on loan to Halesowen Town and Dorchester Town respectively, while Callum Wilson went on loan to Kettering Town and Tamworth, but Glenn Murray (with Workington Reds, Barrow and Carlisle United), Jamie Vardy (with Stocksbridge Park Steels, FC Halifax Town and Fleetwood Town) and Barnes had a more sustained grounding in non-League football. It suggests that there is something to be said for doing it the hard way and arriving on the Premier League stage battle-hardened, rather than wide-eyed.

"You've got to work so hard to make it that way," Barnes says. "You've got to want it so much. You need to give everything and keep working on every part of your game and if you get that one chance, you've got to grab it with both hands. I know I'm not the finished article, I've still got improvements to make. I can't just turn it on like some of those big players. I've got to work so hard in training every day, give everything and be switched on 110 per cent."

Barnes played alongside Murray in League One for Brighton, where they scored 42 goals between them in the 2010-11 season. "We worked so well together," he says. "For both of us, coming up through non-League, into the lower divisions, coming into the professional game a bit later, you just want to keep striving and striving. You're desperate to achieve things. You're living your dream now, whereas other people might have had that from when they were young and they just float away. When you're playing in the lower divisions, you see a lot of great players higher up and you just want to strive for that chance."

□ Southgate, the England manager, has been a regular at Turf Moor in recent weeks ALEX LIVESEY/GETTY IMAGES

"I always used to say I wanted just one game in the Premier League, to show what I could do. Now I've had over 100 appearances in the Premier League, so that's something I'm proud of, something that will always stay with me. Now I just think that I want one chance on the international stage. I know I need to concentrate on Burnley first and foremost and keep doing things right, keep working hard for the team, but it's something else to aim for. You need to keep setting yourself targets like that."

Until very recently, Barnes's international hopes were presumed to lie with Austria, whom he represented at Under-20 level, having qualified through his late grandmother, who was born in Klagenfurt. Franco Foda, the Austria coach, was at Turf Moor last month to watch Barnes score the winning goal against Tottenham Hotspur, but so too was Gareth Southgate. Austria's council of ministers said subsequently that, having discussed the matter, Barnes "does not meet the essential criteria for naturalisation". One door closes, perhaps, but, having scored six goals in nine Premier League appearances since the turn of the year, he hopes that there may finally be the possibility of an opening where England are concerned.

"The Austria thing has gone quiet," he says. "They tried to look at the passport situation but it wasn't successful. My first choice has always been England and if I can keep doing well for Burnley and put the thought in the manager's mind, you never know what's around the corner. There's an international break coming up, so you never know."

This is Barnes's fourth Premier League campaign and he needs only one goal, his tenth, to maintain his record of scoring more goals every season in the top flight. As with Murray, he has seemed to become a more rounded footballer — more driven, but also more astute — since recovering from a serious knee ligament injury. Since the midway stage of last season he has scored goals against Manchester United (twice), Manchester City, Chelsea, Arsenal and Tottenham. Liverpool, who await Burnley at Anfield on Sunday, have been a tougher nut for him to crack since Virgil van Dijk arrived early last year.

"I love playing against the big teams," he says. "It's a great challenge to play against the best and show what you can do."

"Van Dijk is the probably only defender I haven't won many battles against. He's the strongest, most difficult opponent I've come across. He's definitely up there for Player of the Year along with the likes of [Sergio] Agüero and [Raheem] Sterling."

"I would like to think he has some weaknesses I can conquer but the game looks so easy for him sometimes. He's a great player."

What can Van Dijk expect on Sunday? "I think most defenders would say they don't like playing against me," Barnes says. "I work so hard. I don't like to give them a minute's rest. That's my aim every time I go on the pitch. I want to play like it's a cup final. I want to give it my all and leave them coming off the pitch thinking, 'I didn't enjoy that. He's tough. He will not stop.'"

□ Barnes and Murray formed a prolific strike partnership during their time at Brighton  
MATTHEW CHILDS/ACTION IMAGES

Barnes is no stranger to a yellow card — he has picked up seven this season — but the most recent one, against Southampton last month, was regrettable on two levels. He was aghast to be booked for diving when television replays showed that he was fouled by Alex McCarthy, the goalkeeper, (“very frustrating”) and that it should have been a penalty, but he accepts that his reaction, raging at Adam Nunn, the assistant referee, was “very disappointing”. “I don’t know how the officials didn’t see it [the foul], but I know they have a difficult job to do,” he says. “It was in the heat of the moment but I look back now and know it was too much.”

He knows it does not excuse his reaction, but Burnley had gone 67 Premier League matches without being awarded a penalty — they would finally get one later that afternoon — and the suggestion that he had dived left him furious. “We don’t dive,” he says. “The manager here is very much against that. We’re a very honest group, maybe too honest at times, but that’s the way the gaffer has influenced us.”

In the nicest possible way, they are an uncomplicated team — “earthy”, to use their manager Sean Dyche’s description — and Barnes is an uncomplicated centre forward. It is not hard to imagine that, had things turned out differently for him, he would have been happy running “Ash-Cabs” for the lads at Paulton Rovers as they prepare to take on Cirencester Town at home in the Evo-Stik League Division One South tomorrow. He would still be striving, though, for that one chance to shine on a bigger stage. “Keep striving” is Barnes’s mantra. It has served him well.