

'Everything came so quick but I don't regret what happened'

Jordon Ibe is determined to rekindle his career having overcome tragedy, trauma and mental health problems

Sam Dalling

Jordon Ibe was not supposed to go to the park that day. He reiterates the point several times when recalling the events of 17 June 2008. Ibe's mum had forbidden his attendance at Tabard Gardens in Southwark, south-east London, but he went anyway; a kickabout was too much of a draw for the then 12-year-old. That day Ibe witnessed his friend David Idowu being stabbed through the heart. A few weeks later, Idowu died.

"I'd not even seen a butter knife," Ibe says. The cadence of his voice has slowed, his words so soft they are virtually inaudible. "To see that happen in front of me ... my friend wasn't about that life. He got stabbed because he had the wrong school uniform on. I saw it and ran out of the park, ran home. I remember seeing myself on the news on the CCTV.

"You don't really know what to do. It wasn't like I was going to say anything to my mum because I wasn't supposed to be there. She didn't know I'd witnessed a death. I told her a few years later.

"I don't think I really processed it until I was a bit older. I'd not even been in a school fight, but I'd witnessed something like that. It's something I'll never forget, but I've never really spoken about it. Being so young, you're not really going to be processing trauma like that."

Ibe was not intending to speak

about the tragedy, nor does he raise it to stir sympathy. It comes up naturally during a broad and open conversation on mental health and anxiety, Ibe segueing to his childhood after describing being robbed at gunpoint at the age of 20.

He had been tailed from a London hotel one morning and, as he reached Surrey Quays, his car was bumped. It was lunchtime, broad daylight. "I got out not noticing who was in the car," he says. "They had balaclavas on. One put a machete to my chest and said: 'If you move, I'll stab you.' Everything happened so fast but slow at the same time. My silly arse tried to get away and the passenger pulled a gun out."

The two incidents are touchstones in Ibe's life. Their effects are impossible to measure, although he recalls hiding in bushes as a child to avoid running into the wrong people and hired security after the robbery. However, they have not detracted from his trust in humanity or his desire to be a good person.

Take a little-known story about the winger's time at Bournemouth, for example. Ibe got chatting to a homeless man who had split with his wife and lost contact with his kids. Ibe took him home, stuffed several bags full of clothes, checked the guy into a hotel for a few weeks and bought him a mobile phone so he could contact his children.

It was also while on the south coast that Ibe's mental health hit crisis point. Shortly before the pandemic, Ibe had bought a family home. But after splitting from his partner "it became a home for me". He was still able to see his young daughter, but it was not the same as living together. Family is everything to Ibe, his little girl his world.

"There were a lot of dark times. The house was too big. Being by myself was difficult," he says solemnly.

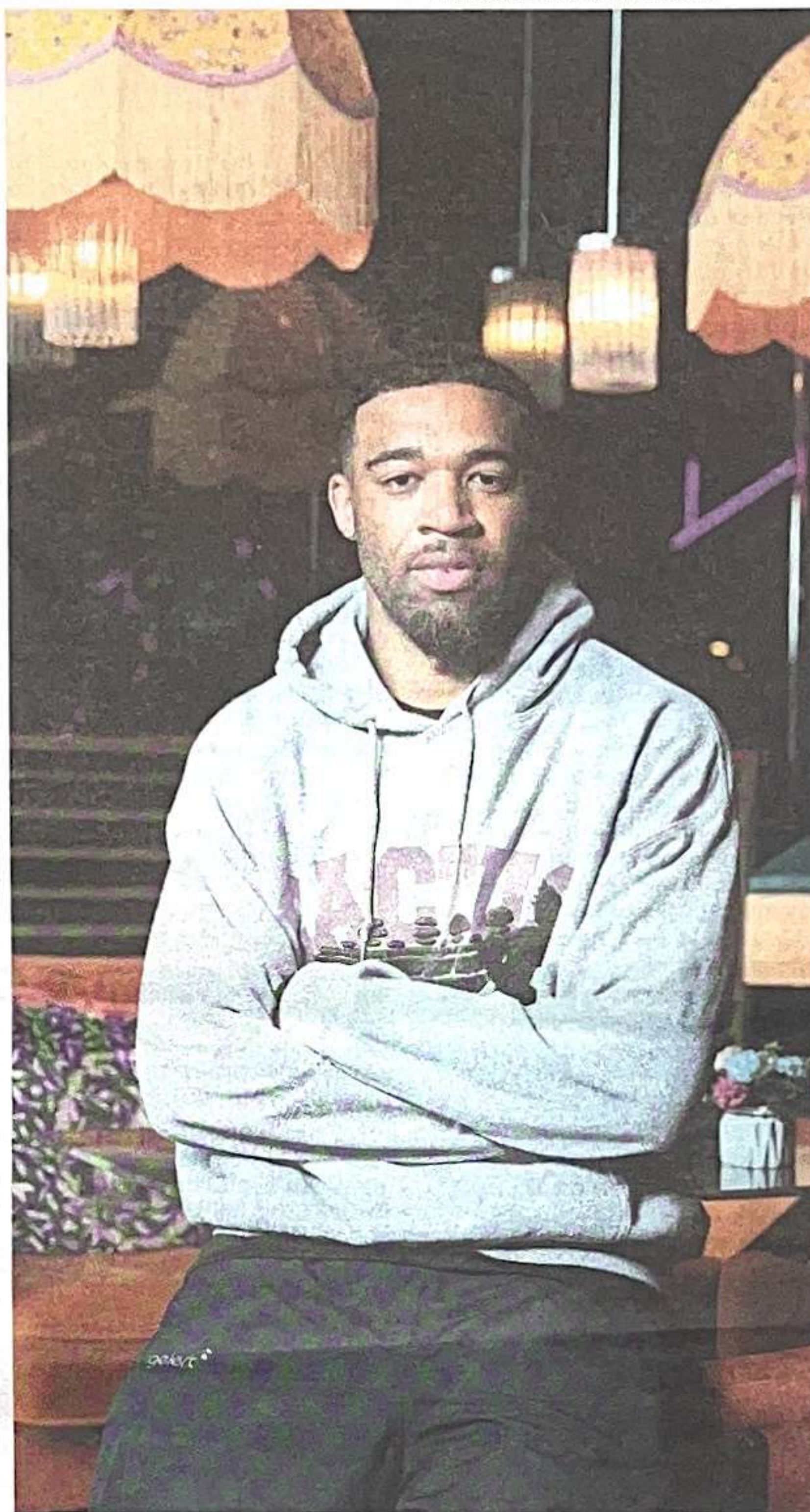
Many speak of being able to hide their inner demons, of putting on a brave face in public. Not Ibe. "People could see it in me. I was a bit in denial at first, but deep down I knew."

It reached a point that Ibe was having "thoughts that human beings shouldn't be having - you want to live, not be on the other side. If it wasn't for my path in life with God, especially my daughter, I don't know what the future would have been."

Ibe will eternally be grateful for the intervention of Eddie Howe, his manager at the time,

▼ Jordon Ibe has played 11 minutes of professional football since leaving Bournemouth in June 2020

CHRISTIAN SINIBALDI/THE GUARDIAN



"He helped me during the hard times - letting me go to rehab, taking time off football, going to see a psychiatrist."

Howe is one of the good men according to Ibe, "a real family guy. Every time I message him, he replies within a day or two. And you know managers are busy."

Ibe recently returned to public consciousness via the Baller League. He is not a former footballer, but a current footballer, even if he has played only 11 minutes professionally - for Derby and Ebbsfleet - since his Bournemouth contract expired in June 2020.

Still only 29, Ibe was a child prodigy. Aged 15 years and 244 days, he made his debut for Wycombe in the League Cup. A few months later, in October 2011, he scored on his first start. At school the following Monday his science teacher showed the highlights during class.

"Everything came so quick," Ibe says. "I was in year 10, playing League One. It was crazy."

It does not take long in Ibe's company to conclude that he would have found that spotlight awkward. But the lights only brightened. Among several Premier League

suitors were Liverpool. He initially turned them down. "It wasn't out of disrespect, but I'd never been out of London," he says. "Going to the north felt very foreign to me. I wanted to be with my family. It wasn't 'no' - it was: 'Could we speak about this in a year's time?'"

Liverpool waited patiently and when Ibe joined in December 2011 the club helped move his entire family north. A Premier League debut came under Brendan Rodgers in May 2013, with Ibe assisting Philippe Coutinho for the winner. Later that night he was back in London for a kickabout with his friends. "I love football and I told them I'd be down," he says.

Loans at Birmingham and Derby followed, the latter spell coming under Steve McClaren, and Ibe did so well that he was recalled by Liverpool in January 2015.

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The mention of McClaren visibly lifts Ibe.

"I felt like I was at Real Madrid at Derby," he says, grinning. "I was gutted when I left - he's the best I had. He gave me freedom to play. I was just happy with him. A lot of Derby fans have said if I'd stayed ... well, I just loved it there."

That May Ibe signed a long-term Anfield deal and within weeks Raheem Sterling - a mentor for Ibe despite being exactly a year older - joined Manchester City. "I thought it was my time regardless," Ibe says when asked if he felt that further opened the door. "I was determined to get on the pitch, whether he, or other players, were there or not. I knew I could rise to the standard."

Ibe was flying and after Rodgers's October sacking he featured regularly under Jürgen Klopp. But the following summer, in a demonstration of just how quickly the football sands shift, everything flipped. "I was kind of pushed out the door," Ibe says. His reluctance to reveal further details until his career is done is understandable. All Ibe is willing to say is that there was a "lot of politics" that he "didn't really understand at the time".

"I just had to pick up all my boots and make my way down to Bournemouth." Did it feel wrong? "Yeah. I don't regret Bournemouth but I'm very sensitive. I've always been that way. I didn't think it was right. But life is not like that."

Ibe was Bournemouth's record signing; a £15m starlet expected to make a huge impact. That is not how it transpired and come the last 18 months of his four-year contract he felt ostracised. An extension was on the table but his refusal to sign it - he wanted the control of being a free agent - meant he was, if not entirely excluded, pushed out.

"They'd spent a lot of money at my age and needed to recoup something. It's a business. I'm not disrespecting anyone, but I was killing it in training. It wasn't making sense. But I knew the reason."

Last season, Ibe turned out for the non-league sides Hayes & Yeading and Hungerford. For him it was all about feeling part of something again, smelling the grass, being in the dressing room. As for what comes next, Ibe is clear but also coy. "Continue football; reach the levels I know I can hit; give it that one last push," he says.

"I wouldn't say I regret what's happened. It's changed me for the better. Football is not the main accomplishment in my life. I have a deeper purpose; being a dad; being a great human being; being a brother; being a son."

Ibe is in conversation with several clubs. "Hopefully everything goes my way," he says. And with that he is off to spend time with his little girl.

In the UK, Samaritans can be contacted on 116 123 or email jo@samaritans.org. You can contact the mental health charity Mind by calling 0300 123 3393 or visiting mind.org.uk



Jordon Ibe was at Bournemouth for four years from 2016