

MENTAL HEALTH IN SPORT

A sporting chance

The pressure to succeed that elite sportsmen experience has been under the spotlight due to a number of professional cricketers and footballers suffering from depression. But, as **Brent Sayder** discovers, sport also plays a part in helping young people overcome mental health problems



Sports stars suffering from mental health problems show that they can affect anyone regardless of their background, social standing or wealth. Robert Enke, the German international goalkeeper, tragically committed suicide in 2009. England cricketers Marcus Trescothick and, earlier this year, Michael Yardy have both been forced away from competition by their depression. Footballer Paul Gascoigne and boxer Frank Bruno have both had their mental health issues widely reported on in the past.

Despite these examples there are still relatively few sports players to openly admit having mental health problems, when considering that around one in four of the general population will suffer a mental health problem in their lifetime.

There is still a sense within some sports, such as football, that admitting you have a mental health problem shows weakness. To tackle this misconception, free sessions are being offered for coaches at all sporting levels to learn more about

mental health. Time to Change, a charity programme set up by Mind and Rethink which aims to tackle the discrimination surrounding mental health, has been working with Premier League football clubs to provide these coaching sessions.

Joe Nickel, sport and mental health project officer at Time to Change, says that it has received “very positive feedback” from the coaches who have attended these training courses. Nickel points out that support from Premier League clubs has been vital in getting the coaches interested as it was exciting for them to go to clubs like Chelsea and Arsenal for training. He says the coaches were “really thoughtful. Nobody said ‘that’s rubbish’ or ‘only weak people get mental health problems’.” Nickel got involved with the project because he believes “sport has got a massive capacity to improve the lives of people suffering from mental health problems [because] physical activity is good for mental health, whether you have a mental health problem or not”.

Sport provides a “forum for social interaction”, he adds.

An example of the way sport can benefit people mentally as well as physically is demonstrated by the work done in Haringay as part of the Tottenham Hotspur Foundation’s A Game of Two Halves. This project offers young boys in years 8 and 9 who are at risk of exclusion with free football sessions. These sessions have both a football element and a strong pastoral one. The coaching is built around a relevant football theme or skill, and then the boys are encouraged to discuss applying these skills in a wider context such as school and social life. An example of this was a session built around passing, with several passing drills used to develop their skills.

The boys are asked about the process of passing the ball; they look up and decide on the best move, then it is suggested that they can apply that skill in school, deciding on their best move before doing something.

Although they come from

different schools, play football at different standards and are not all in the same year, these boys all get along very well with each other. On the pitch they are all supportive of each other and the behaviour is much better than one usually sees at an adult’s match, amateur or professional. It is clear that these children are perfectly capable of functioning well in a group, yet their school experiences have generally been very negative.

Nick Barnes, project leader of A Game of Two Halves, explains that their problems are “entirely down to setting”. These boys struggle in a school environment, but this sporting environment gives them an opportunity to build their confidence, improve their social skills and show that they can devote real effort into improving their football skills and their school life. One boy explains that because of the sessions

he is “co-operating with people better” and has learned to “keep going on when the odds are against me”, while another participant explains that the sessions have “helped me to talk to others”.

The Time to Change program initiative shows how sports can be used to offer support to people who might otherwise have no interest in receiving help. Nick Barnes explained that these children would never want to go to see a counsellor or therapist and no references to mental health are used in these sessions. Yet, by offering football in the context of emotional wellbeing, they are able to offer pastoral care to the young people, who may have a wide range of issues from anxiety problems to issues with anger.

At the top level of sport, young players making the transition from youth/amateur competition to professional status have to deal with

a dramatic change to their lifestyles which can have serious repercussions for their state of mind. When asked what the Professional Cricketer’s Association offers to help ease this transition, Jason Ratcliffe, assistant chief executive, explained that they “have welfare advisers throughout the country” and pointed out that their website offers a range of support including a confidential helpline for players that want to talk to a professional therapist on any issue including drug use, alcohol and depression.

Sport can have a wonderful effect by encouraging physical activity and helping to bring people together. When these effects are combined and supported with available therapeutic and pastoral support, it can play an important role in positively impacting mental health from the elite down to the grassroots level. ■

A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

Football’s role in the fight against depression

Football in general gets a pretty bad press these days, writes *Alistair Moncrieff*. Whether it’s tales of financial extravagance in the midst of a world-wide economic slump, the apparent lack of loyalty displayed by many at the top level of the game, or the somewhat dubious nature of some players’ private lives. And while all of these issues, among others, are undoubtedly a stain on “the beautiful game” we should not forget that football is, and always has been, a hugely powerful force for good. Throughout football’s history it has united communities, broken down barriers and eroded stigma in all areas of society. There is one area in particular, where football is in an almost uniquely powerful position to be of help to those that are most in need of it and least likely to seek that much needed assistance – it has the potential to be an extremely potent weapon in the on-going fight against depression.

I spent months of my life existing rather than truly living. I lost interest in things I had previously been passionate about; my circle of friends, which previously had been diverse and engaging, shrank until it was effectively non-existent. It was only when I became completely unable to function that I sought the professional help I needed to start me on the long road to recovery. By the time I became aware something was genuinely wrong I was already in a deep and potentially destructive depressive episode.

Over the last few months as I have gradually improved I have often wondered: when did this

start, were there signs that I and those close to me missed, would things have turned out differently if the issues behind my decline had been addressed before depression took such a firm hold upon me? It occurred to me that my ignorance surrounding mental health issues had caused me to disregard many “red flags” that, if recognised, may have encouraged me to seek help at an earlier stage and therefore prevent those many wasted months.

To my mind the detection of the early stages of depression is where football can and should play a key role. Football coaches across the country at all levels, spend a large amount of time with young people who are not only increasingly at risk of depression but also, like me, in ignorance of its causes and effects. The role of a football coach now includes assessing their players’ mental attributes as well as their physical. If the proper training has been given to the coaching staff, regarding awareness of mental health issues, this would put them in a position where they are able to identify anyone who may be at risk, and alert, for example, their family (who may through no fault of their own also be ignorant to the complexities of mental illness). This would enable intervention at a time when the disease is far more manageable, before it becomes destructive.

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