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 Snyder 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 affected 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.

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, the issues behind my decision to leave a club in a 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 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, shrunk 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 finally called 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 I had opened up to my friends or family before depression took 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 footballers have 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 developing depression but also, like me, in need of support and encouragement to help them overcome the 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 someone 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.

Alistair Moncrieff is a sports science graduate and football writer

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