

## NEGATIVE PASTS: FOOTBALL AS AN AGENT OF CHANGE FOR PROBLEMATIC DRUG USERS

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*“Sport has an invaluable role to play in improving the health and well-being of communities. It can make individuals healthier and communities more vibrant, by reducing health inequalities, lowering long-term unemployment, cutting crime, and delivering better qualifications, but also by developing pride among individuals, strengthening community spirit, and empowering communities so that they are able to run regeneration programmes themselves”.*

Rt Hon Richard Caborn MP, Minister for Sport and Tourism

### **Introduction**

Drug users are some of the most marginalised individuals in society. The overwhelming majority of heroin and crack users experience long-term disadvantage across several spheres of life – education, accommodation, employment - and experience stigmatisation as a result of their drug use and related criminal behaviour. Individually they are characterised by low self-esteem, poor self-motivation and a history of under-achievement.

The Positive Futures programme has helped to demonstrate the value that sport can have in engaging hard-to-reach groups such as young offenders, but to date, sport has played relatively little part in adult crime reduction and drug rehabilitation programmes. Calton Athletic in Glasgow has been one programme to use sport as a change agent, and despite its apparent impact, there has remained an ingrained reluctance to harness sport as an alternative or adjunct to more established psychological and pharmacological interventions.

### **The Project**

With a small amount of funding, Government Office North East developed a project to enable Newcastle University, drug agencies, Probation and Police to run a football tournament for problematic drug users under treatment in Newcastle and adjacent areas of Tyneside. Its aim was to engage drug users in coached football sessions for one afternoon a week over 8 weeks, culminating in a tournament on the final day. At the start, each drug user was put into a team of 10 people, usually on the basis of the drug project where they were being treated, and each team had a University student allocated as its coach and “sports mentor.”

The main purpose was to help drug users become involved in physical activity, making health gains and increasing their self-esteem and self-worth. There was also a benefit to the students as the project allowed them to fulfil the required number of coaching hours to obtain a football coaching award. One of unknown factors was how bringing together two very different groups in society – the “haves” (the students) and the “have-nots” (the drug users) would work out, and how this would impact on a third group with a vested interest in the project’s success - the community.

### **Results**

Over the course of the project an average of 40 service users from 8 drug agencies regularly attended the weekly coaching sessions. Whilst care was taken to anticipate problems, over the whole period there were no significant conflicts to address, though the support of police, probation and the key workers from each drug agency provided added safety and security. The relationship between the mentors and their teams has been unequalled, with a mutual respect established from a very early stage. At the tournament, the winners received a trophy, but every participant received a medal, reinforcing their sense of achievement. There has been excellent feedback from the service users, the drug agency co-ordinators and the student mentors.

### ***The Service Users***

Increased self-esteem, health gains and constructive use of time are all valuable benefits that our service users have described experiencing from the training. Directly after training, the co-ordinators described them as “*happier, healthier and tired*”. The need to use drugs in the time during and after training was reduced – one

hostel reported that after the training sessions their clients were in bed and asleep by 10 pm! Health awareness and experience of healthy living has also been achieved - some have taken up other sports, whilst others have stopped smoking. One of the most important benefits has been the opportunity to be involved in a team on a regular basis, which has increased their communication skills, personal development and the feeling of having a part to play in the activity being undertaken.

### ***The Students***

Although keen to participate and to get their coaching badges, the student coaches had considerable anxieties about their client group. It was felt these concerns were based on a lack of knowledge and understanding about what is an essentially stigmatised group of individuals, about whom little other from media-represented misconceptions are available. Such concerns were expected, and continual support was provided by the presence of police and probation staff, and key workers of each drug agency. By the second session, feedback showed that the students had developed a rapport with their teams, and positive mutual respect had been established. The students expressed feelings of surprise at how easily with they communicated with their teams. Keeping the same teams with the same mentors allowed this relationship to develop. As the weeks progressed, the feedback from the students became increasingly positive, expressing feelings of personal achievement, satisfaction and enjoyment. Without a project like this, it is unlikely that they would have had the inclination or opportunity to work with a hard-to-reach group like drug users, and they gained far more from the experience than they initially expected.

### ***The Community***

Drug misusing offenders account for a high proportion of low-level crime. The gains to the community in rehabilitating these individuals are clear. Engaging this group in sport has not only been a useful, additional part of their drug rehabilitation programme and an attempt to reduce their offending, but has been a positive step in their 'reintegration' back into society. Further, the training sessions have highlighted some really talented individuals. Six people have been identified as having the ability to become qualified coaches, allowing for the potential to link health, sports and improved life chances with acting as positive role models for their peers. This has meant firstly, that these individuals in particular will be encouraged to pursue sports activities, and secondly, encouraging considering future employment in sports e.g., coaching or working in gyms, has begun. Another benefit is that it is also a part of Sport England's and indeed Government's policy to get more people to take regular exercise and in particular to engage with people who are socially excluded. Finally, bridging the gap between students and ex-offenders has broken down a barrier of misconception, and encouraged the service users to realise the real potential and possibility of engaging in further education.

### **Discussion**

The project has been funded modestly by GONE's Crime & Drugs Team (£2K) and the National Treatment Agency (£1K). It is felt that for such a relatively small sum, the benefits have been significant. There has been excellent support from the police, probation and the drug agency co-ordinators, who also have felt that there have been benefits through increased intercommunication. Newcastle United Football Club has officially supported the programme and provided training tops for one of the teams. Further strips have been provided by other agencies, whilst food and water has been donated by a large Supermarket chain. The scheme is now going to be rolled out on a regional scale, with a similar tournament arranged on Teesside and a subsequent one planned for Wearside and Durham. For the longer term, the plan is to establish a post of a regional sports development officer to establish the tournaments, develop leagues, and ensure that drug users become coaches themselves, and to extend the scope and penetration of football and sport as a major change agent for problematic drug users. This will be accompanied by more robust research and evaluation to measure the reduction in crime and drug use that we believe sport can achieve.

### **References**

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