

# The State of Play

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GRASSROOTS SPORT HAS LONG PLAYED A CRUCIAL ROLE IN BOTH THE PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH OF MEN, FOSTERING COMMUNITY AND BELONGING, WHILE PROVIDING AN OUTLET FOR STRESS. BUT WITH PARTICIPATION AND FUNDING DOWN, MANY ARE

LOSING OUT. *MH* MEETS THE PLAYMAKERS WORKING TO TURN THE GAME AROUND



A

fter 10 years together, our weekend five-a-side game ended this January, not with a bang, but with a WhatsApp. Even though I'd left London three years earlier, I couldn't leave the group chat, because Saturday morning on the astro at William Tyndale Primary School in Islington had been the highlight of my week for the best part of a decade. Through the flux of my thirties – marriages, births, a death – football was a fixture. And in London life, 'Willy T', as we affectionately called it, was one of the only times I'd reliably see my mates.

One Saturday in March 2020, I joked with those assembled at Willy T about the coronavirus, then novel. A few days later, I boarded a train to Teesside with my wife, two children and one large suitcase, to ride out the escalating weirdness for what we thought might be a few weeks at my mother-in-law's. We didn't know it at the time, but we'd just left London for good. I was fortunate enough to have family and remote work, but I didn't have mates or football. And while I can't say that lack of football was the reason for my deteriorating mental health, I can say it didn't help.

A 2017 review commissioned by public body Sport England found a 'strong association' between better mental wellbeing and sport or physical activity; social interaction was 'central to this'. Sport and fitness were linked to greater self-confidence and potentially reduced anxiety and depression. Less happily, a 2020 report led by Manchester Metropolitan University found that the lockdown halt in play left participants anxious and disconnected.

Sport England's Active Lives survey for the restriction-free year to November 2022 indicated a bounce back to pre-Covid levels. But while team sports had 'overall recovered', stabilising at around 3.1 million players, participation was still down from 2016 levels by 400,000;

running, despite a spike mid-pandemic, was down by 1 million.

Christopher Mackintosh is a senior lecturer at Manchester Metropolitan University who led the lockdown report. He tells me that grassroots sports participation is 'flatlining'. There's been little progress since the government's Sporting Future strategy was announced in 2015, pledging to 'tackle head on the flatlining levels of sports participation and high levels of inactivity', with mental wellbeing identified as a 'key outcome'.

Those participating in grassroots sport are, says Dr Mackintosh, typically the same people who did previously: white, middle-class, higher-educated, home-owning – people like him and me. Between 2010 and 2021, grassroots funding was cut in real terms by nearly half; so neglected were some facilities during lockdown that, after, they were unusable. The Active Lives survey showed the poorest were hardest hit and have stayed hit. Black and Asian people are less likely to be active than white. Half a million fewer people aged 16 to 34 were active than six years ago.

In grassroots sport, the playing field is too often unlevel.

### A Team Of One

In his 2000 book *Bowling Alone*, political scientist Robert Putnam observed that more Americans were bowling than ever – only by themselves. He linked this to the widespread plummet of 'social capital', or our offline social networks. Due to factors including work, family structure, women's roles, television and computers, people were socialising with friends and family less and joining fewer organisations.

Willy T's demise was predictable. It became harder to find 10 players; some weeks, the pitch was booked but there was no one to make use of it – a situation previously unthinkable. Long-time members like me found it harder to commit, while newer ones didn't show up often enough to plug the gap.

This reflects a broader trend. The Football Association (FA) notes that



Minds United is a football club with a focus on improving wellbeing through the power of sport. It offers a variety of weekly sessions that aim to foster a sense of community and remind people that no one needs to suffer alone or in silence.



ADDITIONAL REPORTING: SCARLETT WRENCH, TOM WARD

## 01/ The Football Coach

Paul Menacer is head coach at mental health-focused club Minds United in London's Kensington. He's also the founder of the Grenfell Memorial Cup, having survived the fire that killed 72 residents of the tower block in 2017

**'Before Grenfell,** I lost my mum and dad in the space of two months when I was 14. The day my mum passed away, I went home from school and got my football boots. Football's my coping mechanism – my drug. It takes my mind off life. And it's just something I enjoy.

Back in 2020, I did an interview with the FA about my experiences after Grenfell and during Covid, which for me was an all-time low. Tarik [Kaidi, Minds United founder] saw the article and reached out. My first experiences at Minds United were very, very heart-warming. For years, even after Grenfell, I was... not ashamed of my mental health, but I felt like people might judge me. So, when I went there and saw people I knew, it opened my eyes that I shouldn't feel this way. I feel like I've grown as a person.

I was lucky enough to play in the Game for Grenfell in 2017 with a load of ex-professionals and celebrities in front of a sold-out crowd at QPR. After, I went to QPR and the Grenfell Foundation with the idea for the Grenfell Memorial Cup. Last year, we got over 650 people from the community on the pitch and over 6,000 in the stadium. This year, we took teams up to St George's Park, the national football centre in Burton upon Trent. It was life-changing. Recently, I met Prince William, the President of the FA, who was very supportive of our projects. What football's done for me, it can do for others.

With mental health, you have good days and bad days. Insomnia's one of the worst things. Depression – I get days where I physically can't get out of bed. I've got psychotic features – I hear voices. Sometimes I have suicidal thoughts, to be honest. But I feel like I'm in a community now where we can pick each other up. We have WhatsApp groups where we're there supporting each other, no matter if it's 12pm or 5am. Hopefully, over time, how I feel about myself will get better the more good I try to do for my community.'





Members of Minds United FC compete at the Middlesex FA Mental Health County Cup at Brunel University in June this year. Founder Tarik 'TK' Kaidi (right) started the club in 2019, inspired by his own struggles with mental ill health



high among possible causes of dwindling player commitment is 'changing lifestyles and priorities', including spending less time in the office during the week and more time with family at weekends and, as in my case, relocation. The cost of living crisis is also likely to have had an impact, with pitch hire, maintenance and general costs all increasing.

Research commissioned by the FA's grassroots charity, the Football Foundation, and published in 2019 showed that the beautiful game's humble bottom rung saved the NHS over £43m a year in GP visits alone and prevented over 200,000 physical and mental health disorders. People who played football regularly were happier, more confident and more skilled at communicating than those who played no sport. Regular football's positive impact was three times greater for those on lower incomes.

The use of sport as a tool to improve mental health isn't, says Dr Mackintosh, as robustly evidenced as it is for, say, heart disease. Causality is difficult to prove; 'wellbeing' is subjective. Sport's potential benefit for mental health also depends both on the activity itself and the 'other stuff that you wrap around it', says Dr Mackintosh. That could be as simple as going for coffee after. A session should be social, inclusive, perhaps with non-competitive, team-building elements and the presence of peer support, mental health first-aiders or counsellors. The cycling group he set up, Men in Mind, has only one rule: go as fast as the slowest. Afterwards, they have a cup of tea and slice of cake.

Football is, in Dr Mackintosh's description, 'tribal', which carries associations both positive and negative. The question, he says, is whether it's supportive – or why people are kicking lumps out of each other to try to win when, as he always tells them, no one here is going to Wembley, 'But you could be doing something inspiring.'

### Part Of The Club

The 'stadium' pitch at the Elmbridge Xcel Sports Hub in Surrey only has one stand, although it does have a proper tunnel. Today it hosts the monthly

mental health league, for which Minds United FC have brought two teams from inner-city London. Players variously suck on pre-match cigarettes, vapes and slushies.

Founded in 2019 and accredited by the FA, Minds United runs weekly sessions for wellbeing, community, young people and women respectively at the Westway Sports Centre in one of the most deprived areas in Kensington, a long way from leafy Surrey. The club puts out teams of various sizes, sexes and descriptions at Westway and nearby Wormwood Scrubs (the open space, not the prison), plus travels to Brunel University on London's outskirts for another monthly mental health league. At the time of writing, they're about to play even further away to defend their European Cup in the Netherlands, having just retained their futsal title in Italy.

Minds United's founder and managing director, Tarik Kaidi, is also the driver and kitman. Many of Minds United's players have been patients at St Charles Hospital in Kensington, where Kaidi was

sectioned in 2013. Both the activity coordinator and the fitness instructor at St Charles bring players to Minds United and attend games.

Players signposted from St Charles tend, says Kaidi, to have mental health conditions such as schizophrenia – like Manny, who tells me he came on the fitness instructor's recommendation. Or depression – like Reece, who modestly downplays the illness that hospitalised him as 'nothing too serious'. Otherwise, players can come to Minds United for anything, says Kaidi: 'Also, I don't say to them, "What's your mental health problem?"' 'Big' Joey, Minds United's former chairman and goalkeeper, who has variously been in the paras, homeless and in prison, says that Kaidi saved his life.

The first opponents of Minds United's first team are, confusingly, Kingstonian Mind United FC, run by the Kingston branch of mental health charity Mind. When Kingstonian score, Kaidi switches from target man to sweeper-keeper,



## 02/ The Tennis Project

Launched in consultation with local mental health teams, Grantham Tennis Club's Feeling Good Project provides free lessons to those who are isolated or could otherwise benefit from community sports. For 20-year-old Hamish Parr, it proved transformative

'A couple of days before Christmas, I collapsed. I was at a party with my then girlfriend's family, and I fell over and couldn't get up. I thought I'd had too much to drink, so I decided to sleep it off. But in the morning, I still couldn't move. An ambulance was called, they did some scans and found I'd had a stroke. I spent the next few days learning to walk again.

I'd been working with my older brother, a brick-layer, so I had quite a physical job. But after the stroke, I couldn't work. It was my grandma's idea that I should join her tennis club. She wanted to get me out of the house more because I was just sitting in bed, not doing a lot, so she took me along to Grantham.

For two or three months, I joined the Feeling Good Project every Friday. It played a big role in my rehabilitation. My left side was affected by the stroke, so I did a lot of practice throwing the ball up to serve.

The sessions helped me a lot mentally, too – getting me out of the house again, talking to people. There were about 10 to 15 of us, a range of ages. Halfway through the lesson, we'd stop and have a drink or something to eat and have a conversation.

I wasn't really doing much sport before I started playing at Grantham. But, since then, I've taken part in the Manchester Marathon to raise money for the Stroke Association. My brother and I made about £2,000. It was a lot more enjoyable than I thought it was going to be, too. I was quite surprised by how well we did.'



The Wimbledon Windmilers are blazing a trail in male mental health by hosting #RunAndTalk sessions, which pair short runs with prompt cards to break the ice and initiate meaningful conversations



## 03/ The Running Club

The Wimbledon Windmilers have been active for more than 40 years and are part of England Athletics' #RunAndTalk programme, which seeks to spark meaningful conversations – and friendships. Men's co-captain Richard Cohen has both felt and witnessed the benefits

**'I've been a** member of the Windmilers for more than 10 years. I'm from South Africa originally, and for a while I didn't have a social network here. I was looking for that sense of community.

We have more than 500 members, and consider ourselves an inclusive,

sociable club. But it can sometimes be difficult or daunting for new members to connect. One of our team found out about Run and Talk. We thought it was a great idea to initiate conversation, especially about mental health.

Run and Talk sessions, which we host a couple of times a year, are gently paced and around three miles long. There's a walking group and a running group, and everyone's invited. We try to pair people who don't know each other well, then give them prompt cards to start conversations – anything from "What do you do for work?" to "Tell me about a problem you've had related to your mental health." It breaks the ice.

A long run is almost like a car ride; you have time to tell a whole story, and you're not making eye contact, which can help people to be more vulnerable. If your sport is cricket, you rely on the after-activity to have conversations.

With a run, you can use the active time for conversation, as long as you keep the pace manageable.

Someone once told me that if they need to have a difficult discussion with their partner they do it on a run. It regulates your breathing, so you can't yell. You have to think about what you want to say, so it's more succinct.

On one of my first Run and Talks, I was actually going through quite a difficult patch with my partner. The prompt card gave me the opener I needed to share, and it did help. I think as men particularly, we brush things off. Sometimes we do need a nudge.

Given there are 7 billion people in the world – or 3.5 billion men – the chances are someone has had a similar experience to you. You can be surprised by how understanding people are and just how much support exists out there.'



but Minds United can't make their dominance count. Most of the missed chances fall to an increasingly frustrated Paul Menacer, Minds United's head coach and a survivor of the 2017 fire at Kensington's Grenfell Tower. The game ends 1-0, the reigning European mental health champions' first loss all season.

Minds United's second game, a 9-3 win over their second team, lifts the spirits. And Menacer finds the net in the third game, a comprehensive 5-1 win against Surrey Eagles. After, Minds United's players sit together pitchside, listening to music as they rehydrate and play keepy-uppies. The clouds have parted: it's all sunshine and smiles that last the whole way back to London.

### The Player's High

If exercise is a drug then, writes Stanford psychologist Kelly McGonigal in her 2019 book *The Joy Of Movement*, 'the one it most closely resembles is an antidepressant'. The so-called 'runner's high' is triggered by endocannabinoids: chemicals with similar effects to cannabis that relieve pain and reduce anxiety. The endocannabinoid system is activated by exercise, social connection and cannabis intoxication, of which team sports combines two – sometimes three, judging by the smell of 'grass' at my local pitch hire centre.

Conversely, the states most strongly linked to low levels of endocannabinoids, aside from cannabis withdrawal, are anxiety and loneliness. Because, writes Dr McGonigal, endocannabinoids are 'about feeling close to others'. The runner's high evolved, it's theorised, to incentivise early humans not just to hunt but to work together, which triggers a 'cooperation high'. Regular physical activity may lower our threshold for bonding with others.

In a 2017 survey by the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness, more than one in three men said they felt lonely at least once a week, and that feeling lonely made them depressed. Nearly 40% said they were isolated, an objective measure of relationship quantity, which isn't the same as feeling lonely – but the two can lead to one another, as can loneliness and mental health problems.

Lockdown gave all of us a taste of the isolation that often accompanies mental health problems, says Kaidi. He

tried to keep his community connected remotely, sending round sofa exercises and keepy-uppy challenges with toilet rolls, but some people didn't have wifi, so he had to call them.

Kaidi sends me a YouTube video from his manic episode of him talking really fast to bemused, preoccupied police. He attributes the mania to the drastic lifestyle change and sleep deprivation from getting involved in an internet radio station, plus the pressure of his upcoming wedding. Eventually, the police came looking for him. He was kept in St Charles for four weeks and not allowed out to get married. Once discharged, he fell out with his business partner; broke up with his fiancée, the mother of his daughter; and became depressed. He sat inside watching YouTube and didn't want to live.

A social worker signposted him to Kingstonian Mind United FC, where Kaidi became a coach until a fallout prompted him, with the help of Big Joey, to start a new club. Kaidi was named Middlesex FA's Grassroots Coach of the Year Adult 2020.

Playing football will, obviously, only be beneficial for mental health if you enjoy it, he says, although some people like to just come and watch, or hang out and play *Fifa* in the 'club house': a vacant office building the club occupies for a token fee. I'm minded of the evidence that you don't have to participate to benefit from grassroots sport: volunteering is also associated with enhanced wellbeing.

'Some of it could be being part of something, like being part of a club, being part of a family,' says Kaidi. 'Some people might not have family.'

### Finding Fellowship

Loneliness is more common after major life events – a break-up or bereavement, moving jobs or area, retirement or redundancy, becoming a dad – and it's a biological imperative to connect that, perversely, can be perceived as shameful. More than one in 10 men told the Jo Cox Commission that they'd never admit they felt lonely.

After lockdown restrictions relaxed, I put off trying to find a game in my new area because I didn't want to look

like a Billy no-mates. No sooner had I contacted the pitch hire centre than I was bombarded with invitations, because players are always needed. I now play on Wednesday night for a seven-a-side team, and sometimes in a game on Sunday evening, too – although less so because it clashes with my kids' bedtime.

The sudden death of the organiser of his long-standing games inspired journalist James Brown's 2018 book *Above Head Height: A Five-A-Side Life*, about the 'strange brotherhood' created by playing football together. Comedian and author David Baddiel, who recruited Brown to his own game ('the Tuesday Night Strollers'), explains that, as men get older, 'it's quite hard to have mates'. You need a reason to step away from family and work; football provides that.

Some years earlier, I had recruited my then *Men's Health* colleague Ed to Willy T. One Saturday morning in 2018, I told the guys at Willy T that Ed had killed himself not long after he'd moved jobs – because some news is too bad for WhatsApp. Ed and I weren't that close, but I'd seen him almost every week for years. We observed a minute's silence before kick-off and later played for a trophy that was engraved in his honour. I can, at least, still see him in the team photos, and the highlights packages on YouTube with commentary, graphics and Champions League music. In 10 years, he was the best player that

Willy T saw.

I don't want to spout some fatuous bullshit about how grassroots sport is a panacea for mental health when playing football hasn't stopped me feeling... wobbly, or Ed from

killing himself. But his fiancée told those of us from Willy T who came to pay their respects at his funeral that he was always happier after he'd played a game with us.

I sometimes wonder if football isn't bad for my mental health: before playing, when my anxiety can spike, or after, when I've been beaten, bodied, bantered off. I suspect that, deep down, I play partly out of some internalised standard of masculinity, to make my

**It's thought the 'runner's high' evolved to incentivise us to work harder**



## 04/ The Cycling Squad

A Manchester Metropolitan University researcher who explores the role of grassroots sport in community wellbeing, Christopher Mackintosh set up cycling group Men in Mind to help riders find kinship on the road

**‘I’ve faced mental** health challenges for 20 years; I’ve been well for about five. When I go in the room with policymakers, I’m quite unusual because I’ve got lived experience of doctors, psychiatric nurses, social and community workers, and the complexity of all that.

I set up Men in Mind in 2017. We’re a group of about 10 core riders. Four to eight of us meet every Sunday, usually riding from Manchester to Cheshire. Ages range from thirties to sixties, and walks of life from creative professions to plumbers, pharmacists to architects, teachers to ex-military. We have dads, childless men, adoptive fathers and a great-grandfather.

Issues faced are similarly diverse, and pertain to family, relationships, social context and physical health. We rarely chat ‘mental health’, as it’s unspoken that we’re there for each other. Our space is very much a safe one, but informal and fun, with humour at the centre. The group has a culture of inclusion and support. We’ve been asked to “roll out” and become bigger, but relationships of this quality are hard to build, so we’ve chosen not to expand.

Pre-Covid, we raised £25,000 for Manchester Mind with two rides: coast to coast from Whitehaven to Tynemouth in 2018, and from Newcastle to Edinburgh in 2019. Two teenagers joined the coast-to-coast ride, which was really positive: they could see men happy to talk about mental health. We’re opening a dialogue in a complex area, but with a simple sell: if you find someone to do something fun with, it might get you out and about.



hard-man dad proud of his soft lad. But I can say that those times when I manage to leave it all on the pitch are some of the only times I feel truly at peace.

### In It Together

Kaidi drops most of the players off at the Westway Sports Centre, located alongside the notorious elevated road of the same name. Billy, who’s autistic, left his boots on the minibus, so the rest of us drop them off at his house, waving to his mum. Then we stop for kofte, egg and chip baguettes – with chilli and burger sauce – and mint tea from a street food van that, like Kaidi, is of Moroccan heritage. Attendees at Minds United’s Wednesday community sessions enjoy Caribbean

food prepared by club chairman Joseph John, a handy player as well as cook, and another Grenfell survivor.

The biggest challenge to Minds United’s work is resources: money, but also volunteers. Players don’t pay for anything, but Minds United pays for staff, pitches, kits, tracksuits, balls – and their three-year grants from Kensington and Chelsea Foundation and Grenfell Young People’s Fund are running out.

In an ideal world, says Kaidi, Minds United would have its own building with one or more pitches; a sponsor or private donor ‘would be a dream’. But he’d settle for someone to take some administrative weight off his shoulders. Sometimes he feels burned out, but he doesn’t want to

stop. He’s participated in projects that only run for six or 12 weeks, and what are people supposed to do after that?

Minds United’s Friday night session for 18 to 25s on the big pitch next to the Westway is nominally a community session, not a mental

health one. But then, as Kaidi says, the whole community has been traumatised by Grenfell. Shrouded in wrapping to protect from weather and falling debris, the remains are topped by banners that say, ‘Forever in our hearts’. After the fire, Westway Sports Centre became a refuge for homeless survivors.

The nearly 40 ‘young’uns’ here tonight might not readily admit to

struggling with their mental health, says Menacer. But if they act up on the pitch, he can take them aside, where they might open up. Sport England’s evidence review found that in ‘populations of at-risk youth’, sports participation can ‘serve as a tool to overcome a wide range of social inequalities’, and build interpersonal skills that translate into improved pro-social behaviour, self-esteem and self-worth.

The three free pitches once at Grenfell’s base were built over with a new leisure centre and school. During this process the tower was clad with low-cost, highly combustible material so it didn’t look, in the building manager’s description, like a ‘poor cousin’.

Menacer used to

play on them with Yasin El Wahabi, who was killed in the fire aged 20.

The pitches were ‘missed’, Menacer told the inquiry, ‘We were a community through sports.’

Moving together generates ‘we-agency’: a sense of being part of something bigger than ourselves that empowers us to take on something bigger than ourselves. Whether charity runs or protest marches, collective activity makes us feel less daunted and more optimistic. We-agency is, writes Dr McGonigal, an ‘antidote to despair’.

One Saturday morning in May, I board a train from Teesside to London to participate in a fundraising five-a-side tournament with some of my Willy T mates. One of them is connected through another game to a guy I don’t know called Richard Brown, who needs £250,000 for pioneering immunotherapy treatment in Germany. He was diagnosed with brain cancer while his four-year-old daughter was recovering from leukaemia.

Labouring in the heat, we lose our first group game 1-0 and go a goal down in our second from my misplaced pass. But we snatch a draw, then win our third game to finish second in the group. Groove and level found, we proceed to win the second-place semi-final and final, earning the prestigious title of second-place champions and a round of applause at the pitchside awards ceremony. We pose for a team photo, arms around each other, all sunshine and smiles. ☺

## Sport gives you a reason to step away from family and work



Burgess and his fellow volunteers are trying to break down the macho culture that surrounds rugby and show that it’s okay to have feelings. Joca offers access to free counselling and Burgess is hopeful that it can spread to other sports soon



## 05/ The Rugby Team

Justin Burgess is the welfare officer at Welwyn RFC, a club that’s encouraging men to speak about their mental states sooner via a pioneering support service, Joca (Just One Click Away). Here’s how he’s made tackling stigma a team effort

**‘Seven years ago,** we lost three of our players to suicide in an 18-month period. I knew them as members of the club, but I was also their funeral director. There were over 350 people at one funeral, yet he must have felt like he had no one to reach out to.

We wanted to break down the stigma of asking for help. Particularly at a rugby club, where we’re meant to be big, strong lads. We wanted to show it’s okay to have feelings, and end that culture of “man up and have a beer”.

We founded Joca, a service for anyone who wants to talk through a problem. Emails are picked up 24/7 by myself or another. I’ll offer my number and, if they’re comfortable, we’ll chat. If they want to take it further, we can get time with a Joca-affiliated counsellor. We can get our members a free session within 48 hours. We’re very proud of that.

We’ve helped about 400 people and 13 rugby clubs use Joca. I also met with a cricket club and the Lawn Tennis Association to talk about Joca. We’re volunteers, so it’s a lot of work. But it’s growing slowly.

There’s something about the team sports environment that makes it the right place for a charity like this – particularly with a ‘manly’ sport like rugby. Some of the guys we’ve helped, they’re 6ft 5in, 18st... but we’re all human beings with our own problems.

One guy who contacted Joca was getting depressed because he couldn’t get a job. We linked him up with someone who could help with his CV, someone else lent him a suit, someone got him a job interview. It’s just catching people at the top of that spiral before things get out of control.

There’s a big emphasis on making sure players are okay after injury. If they can’t make training or don’t come to games because they don’t feel match-fit, we pick up with them to ensure they feel part of the club.

The three guys we lost galvanised us. We look out for each other more now. We take things more seriously. Rugby is the vehicle, but it’s just bringing people together for a chat. A brotherhood. A bloke might not pick up the phone and say, “Can we meet up to talk?” But you might come here and end up talking about problems over a game of rugby.’









