

# **Using football to tackle health inequalities**

'I had rather regenerate England  
with the football elevens than with  
average members of Parliament'

Edward Bowen, 1884 <sup>1</sup>

# Using football to tackle health inequalities

## Six ways football can promote health

Football is everywhere you look in modern Britain, on the TV, on the radio, in magazines and newspapers. Within the sample population in Sunderland almost a quarter of all the people in the largest subgroups expressed an interest in watching or playing the sport. (I assume that the figures were much higher in men than women particularly in the older generation.)

Unlike most of the other forms of popular culture in this paper, football is simply a topic to link in with. It is not a medium through which to communicate. (Compare this with music. It can be used to engage people as a topic, for example, articles on health issues of various stars. However, it can also be used as a tool to give out health messages, e.g. songs on particular issues.) Despite this limitation football can be used as a health tool in six ways:

### 1) Playing football as exercise

Playing football has now become popular with girls and women as well as males

### 2) Playing football as a way to build team spirit and other values

In the late nineteenth century the influence of Muscular Christianity and the moral value of sport took hold in the public schools. Christian Socialists later exported this to the slums as a community development tool. They saw how football as a team game could be used to promote certain values, such as team work <sup>2</sup>

**‘Some groups of the population are described as this (hard to reach). What do we actually mean? One such classic alleged group is young men and another alleged group is middle-aged men who think they are healthy. In Torbay we have decided to go to where those people go. On 15 March Torquay United are playing Scunthorpe United in a Division Three football match. There will be approaching 3,000 people at the match – mainly men. We have decided to hold a healthy lifestyle event with the wonderful support of the Football club... So this is not a “difficult to reach group” – they are easy to reach – the NHS seems to find it difficult to reach them – so the mission statement here is “GO TO WHERE PEOPLE GO”’**

*From ‘Ten Great Myths of Patient & Public Involvement’ by Trevor Gay<sup>3</sup> The media can also tie in with this kind of approach. Century Radio in Tyne & Wear offer to run their radio talk shows with stars of the past in community venues. The station charge for this. The venue gets increased bar receipts. The health agency gets access to a group of men that they may not reach any other way. <sup>4</sup>*

### 3) Football as a way to build communities

The work of Robert Putnam also suggests that clubs and local leagues of any sport may help maintain a local sense of community.<sup>5</sup> This in itself is good for health according to by Richard G Wilkinson in ‘Unhealthy societies: the afflictions of inequality’ <sup>6</sup>

#### 4) Football as a venue to reach people

Football stadiums are good places for advertisements aimed at certain target groups. However, the bigger clubs are now so expensive that the groups most in need of health information may not be able to go. It may be worth thinking about working with local weekend leagues to reach certain target groups

#### 5) Football as a way of linking health to people's own interests

Sections five and six explore how football can be used as a topic to engage people in health. This has two aspects to it. One can be described as superficial and the other, explored more in section six, as more intrinsic to the game. Neither is any better than the other. A 'superficial' approach is where football is used to 'sugar the pill'. This is a variation on the commercial world using footballers to promote their products or religion selling figurines of Jesus playing ice hockey to encourage Christianity. ([www.catholicshopper.com/products/inspirational\\_sport\\_statues.html](http://www.catholicshopper.com/products/inspirational_sport_statues.html)) <sup>7</sup> For example, a member of a local professional football team is invited to a health fair. The hope is that people will come to see him and then stay for the rest of the event. In terms of AIDA, football is the 'A', the initial way to **attract** attention. The rest of the event has to keep the clients' **interest**, create a **desire** to change and the ability for **action**. In terms of health education, in Sunderland the NHS worked with the football club to produce a set of cards of current players. These had health information on the back about drugs etc <sup>8</sup>

**'Playing for Success is a national education initiative that is a result of a unique partnership between the Premier League and the Department for Education and Skills. The scheme, which focuses upon addressing the needs of under-achieving young people, mainly in years six to nine, places a strong emphasis on improving pupils' attitudes and motivation to learn. Pupils attend Study Support Centres after school, which in many cases are based at Barclays Premiership grounds.'**

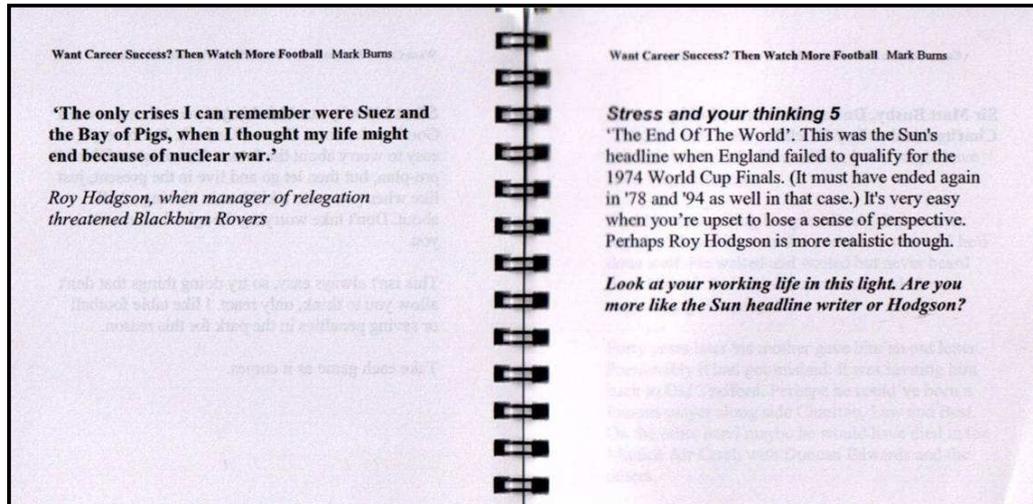
*The Premier League has a range of community initiatives including Kick It Out! (Racism), and Football Aid (anti-diabetes and other priorities.)* <sup>9</sup>

#### 6) Bringing out health related issues within football

As discussed in section two, football is not morally neutral. The professional game has certain topics, values and contradictions embedded within it. It might therefore be used to engage people in a debate about a range of health matters. These topics and values might include

- Issues round lifestyle that tie in with player and fan behaviour, such as alcohol and drug use, stress, violence, gender roles and class
- Issues round health education skills that often derive from the role of the manager such as how to make decisions, how to deal with feelings, communication and promoting self-esteem
- Issues round the wider determinants of health. Examples include helping others, poverty, racism, the role of government and the media. These are a reflection of the world the clubs operate in

One way of using these links would be a magazine like 'Fit'. This is produced by Dr Foster on behalf of the Department of Health. It is aimed at men aged 18-35 and in part contains health interviews with famous footballers. <sup>10</sup>



The approach used in 'Fit' can be used with older men too. Above is sample page from 'Want Career Success? Then Watch More Football', an unpublished book on work and health. 11 (a)

For something more interactive, try a board game. There are a number of discussion based board games around issues like sex or masculinity. On the next few pages are some sample questions from one that uses football as its central theme. (To see a more fully worked up version contact me on [mail@sexanddrugsandrocksandhealth.com](mailto:mail@sexanddrugsandrocksandhealth.com))

In all three of these examples it is possible to look at all aspects of the three legged stool model i.e. information, attitudes/feelings and skills. In terms of the AIDA model football is again used to try to **attract** attention. However it is also used to try to maintain **interest**, create a **desire** to change and enable **action**.

So for example, in the unpublished book mentioned earlier, examples from football are mixed with theories and information about health. This is intended to create a desire for change. Addresses are given for people if they need help to act on this. With the board game expanded on below, it could be played under the supervision of youth workers. They could then further help change take place.

All the hypothetical examples of course would need social market research to test out their feasibility.

### Sample questions for a football board game

Below are sample questions from a possible discussion based football board game.<sup>12</sup>

#### Specific health topic issues

1. Alcohol
  - Is alcohol is to blame for most football hooliganism?
  - a) Yes
  - b) No

2. **Drugs**  
Players shouldn't be tested for drugs like cannabis, which don't improve their performance.
  - a) Agree
  - b) Disagree
3. **Junk food**  
Gary Lineker shouldn't advertise crisps. They make kids unhealthy.
  - a) Agree
  - b) Disagree
4. **Mental health and Stress**  
Top players and managers are paid so much money they should be able to cope with the stress of fans abusing them etc.
  - a) Agree
  - b) Disagree
5. **Use of NHS**  
Is it OK to get a doctor's note so that you can watch an important match?
  - a) Yes
  - b) No
6. **Violence**  
Having a good fight at a match would be exciting.
  - a) Agree
  - b) Disagree

### **Life skills**

7. **Decision-making (Ethics)**  
Should you care if your team bribes opponents as long as they get away with it?
  - a) Yes
  - b) No
8. **Decision-making (Priorities)**  
What would you think of a fan who gave away a large part of their huge Lottery win to buy their club new players?
  - a) Idiot
  - b) Good way to spend the money

**“All that I know most surely about morality and obligations, I owe to football”**

*Albert Camus and other great thinkers' quotes have been used by Philosophy Football, Sporting Outfitters of Intellectual Distinction, on T-shirts and other items. They illustrate the link between soccer and society. (To see the whole product range go to [www.philosophyfootball.com](http://www.philosophyfootball.com))*

9. Feelings

Eric Cantona Kung fu kicked a fan. The United legend attacked a rival supporter because

- a) He couldn't control his feelings
- b) The fan deserved it

10. People skills

The team you managing are losing at half-time. Do you

- a) Shout at them
- b) Discuss tactics and ideas to raise their spirits

11. Self-esteem

Research has shown that people's self-esteem goes up, when their national team do well. People should feel good about themselves, not about a group of 11 other people chasing a ball.

- a) Agree
- b) Disagree

**Wider determinants of health**

12. Community: Helping others

Researchers set up an 'accident' and watched what happened. Fans helped the victim if he was wearing their colours. They didn't if he was in the colours of a bitter rival.<sup>13</sup> Would you help someone from your biggest rivals?

- a) Yes
- b) No



*Football is more and more becoming a game that appeals to all sexes and nationalities. This makes it useful for health education purposes. (b)*

13. Gender

Trevor Francis fined QPR midfielder Martin Allen for missing a match so that he could be at the birth of his son. Should a player be punished for putting family before club?

- a) Yes
- b) No

14. Racism

Is there still too much racism in football?

- a) Yes
- b) No

15. Media

"THE END OF THE WORLD!" How many people think this after England do badly in the World Cup. The press sensationalise football. The only real tragedies were at Heysel and Hillsborough, where people died. Do you agree that the media get things out of proportion?

- a) I agree
- b) I disagree

16. Poverty

TV spent millions of pounds on World Cup football in 2006. Think of all the starving people it could have fed. It is a scandalous waste.

- a) I agree
- b) I disagree

17. Role of Government

The Government should spend money to ensure that no clubs go out of business.

- a) Agree
- b) Disagree

Football is the main sport in the UK. However, the Olympics come to the UK in 2012. Many of the approaches mentioned could also be adapted to this theme in future.

**FA use popular culture to help England**

Interestingly the Football Association sees the value of popular culture to ensure that a person is fit and well. The FA and sports psychologists drew up a list of 400 songs, films, books and video games before England played in the 2002 World Cup. The 400 were divided up into six sections:

- Get fired up
- Chill out
- Have a laugh
- Escapism
- Football focus
- Get Patriotic

These were 'designed to ensure optimum performance on the pitch and full relaxation off it'. <sup>14</sup>