



# FRESH AIR FOR RECOVERY

**When Alastair Mordey came across a dynamic footballing initiative, he realised what recovery could really mean for young people who were given the energy to discover it for themselves**

**T**urning lives around' is one of those clichés we hear on a regular basis in the drug and alcohol field. But let's be honest, it doesn't happen that often – at least not in a predictable or prescribed way. During five years as a service user and then five years as a professional working in the field, I've only encountered it maybe three or four times. Yet during recent partnership work between the alcohol charity I work for in North London and Air Football, a leading football development programme in East London, I have seen remarkable progress first hand in around 15 young people – most of them young, and with multiple problems.

Set up two years ago by Colm Whitty, an ex-professional footballer and former service user at Redbridge DAAT, Air Football spans three boroughs – Redbridge, Newham and Bexley – and attracts around 90 participants a week. The project provides 'development through football' and takes referrals from drug and alcohol services, dual diagnosis, homelessness and probation.

Weekly training sessions and matches, as well as regular opportunities to play in tournaments, provide meaningful activity and a family-like environment where service users seem to bond through their membership of a team. Participants also have access to advice sessions on all sorts of issues, ranging from fitness, nutrition,

smoking cessation and sexual health to financial advice – thanks to partnerships with local businesses and services including HSBC, who provide bank accounts, and Fitness First, who provide free gym membership. Training opportunities are offered through Football Association coaching awards and apprenticeships.

All this makes up a truly vibrant community development model. Clients actually want to play football so engagement in treatment – and all the benefits that represents – becomes non-threatening. If that sounds like a good project on paper, imagine what it is like in reality.

The tournaments that Air Football organises and runs a several times a year are major events, taking in sport, live music and food, as well as fitness testing and other health promotions. Awareness-raising campaigns on issues such as knife crime attract various luminaries and celebrities to lend their weight to the cause, and awards ceremonies – where players are rewarded for attendance in treatment, for getting a job or entering training – are accompanied by rousing talks by sporting heroes like Les Ferdinand of Tottenham and John Moncur of West Ham.

Colm Whitty seems to have used the commercial skills of promotion and event management to achieve social aims. One of the things you notice about Air Football is that these high profile achievers add star quality to proceedings, a feature that undoubtedly retains clients. These role models are 'real' for service users, because they mirror exactly what they want to be.

Air Football started with just £6,000 from Redbridge DAAT, which they used to develop an 11-a-side team and won Street League – a football league for the homeless – in 2007. Major partnership links were established early on with local housing associations, employment agencies and health services. A website was developed and, crucially, a strong pool of volunteers was created. Last year they received a grant of over £206,000 from the football foundation, via the North East London Mental Health Trust, to expand their work.

Since then their achievements have kept growing. They have staged four cup competitions, six player award days, two knife crime awareness tournaments and a celebrity tournament, participated in the positive mental attitude league, launched a scholarship fund and started up a coach trainee scheme made up of ex service-users, which has recently delivered training for children at the senior



world cup in Thailand.

The volume of younger clients is particularly important to Air Football. They serve as a 'breath of fresh air' with their less fully formed attitudes to life – the reason why Colm chose the name. Long-term answers surely lie in such early intervention – a fact evidenced through research and practice in countries like New Zealand and Australia and particularly in the mental health field. Of Air Football's clients, 47 per cent are aged 19 to 24 and 32 per cent are from 25 to 35 years old. To give an idea of their background, 51 per cent are referred from drug and alcohol services, 19 per cent are from mental health services and 17 per cent from probation.

A testimonial from the Metropolitan Police claims Air Football is helping to 'tackle drugs, crime and gang related issues in our communities'. Key statistics are impressive to say the least – there have been 3,107 training attendances, 89 bank accounts opened, and 83 training courses undertaken. But even more importantly, 42 per cent no longer use drugs or alcohol, 19 per cent have stopped smoking and 62 per cent have reduced their offending.

The most convincing evidence, as always, comes from the comments left by service users and their families on the website – wives congratulating Air Football on giving them 'a new hubby', policemen imploring the project to come to their area where they are desperately needed, young people thanking them for helping them to turn their lives around, and young people from other areas asking desperately to be involved in the project. The most frustrating thing is that in this time of funding cuts – which are affecting Air Football like everyone else – this model could be delivered effectively anywhere, because of the universality of footballing venues and coaches, and Britain's love of the game.

I first met Colm on a freezing cold day towards the end of 2008, when he was coaching one of his twice-weekly football sessions on the fields behind Goodmayes hospital. I was on the lookout for other sporting groups who were involved in working with substance misuse, to help me cycle my second 1,000km relay around Finsbury Park using London Cycling Campaign Funding to build interest in endurance sports for recovery communities. I had been working predominantly with Haringey Services, and was now keen to get East London services to work

with me. Air Football agreed to help and joint cycle training started between our services and the boroughs in spring.

During the Finsbury Park event in June, what I saw before me was the most organised and dedicated group of young people in drug treatment that I've ever seen. The family atmosphere was contagious, and their humbleness and willingness to be of service in building a constructive project was unstinting from the beginning. I was frankly taken aback, because I had never before experienced this level of engagement in traditional treatment services. Torrential rain dogged the event from the beginning and many of the clients from my own service and other services had failed to show. But the young crew from Air Football continued onwards. The event raged on all day through the rain and at 4pm I had to insist that people stop riding due to time restrictions, at which point we had amassed 777km – a fantastic achievement considering the problems we had faced.

After the event I realised that the vital ingredient of Air Football is something intangible that you couldn't quantify easily with statistics. It's watching the aspirations of young men and women soar, despite the deprived communities where they live remaining the same. It's the poetry of the group members on the website describing their feelings of belonging. It's looking at ten to 20 young former drug users who have taken seriously wrong turns asking 'how can I help? What do you want me to do? Let's keep it going.' It's when not one, but several, of the group bug you to help them find some way that they can nominate their project leader for an award. Then you know that you're onto a good thing.

Finally I remembered where I recognised Colm from – it had been bugging me from our first meeting. It was from several years previous at a service users' meeting, where we were all sitting sharing our problems and someone else was giving the inspirational talk – someone who obviously inspired both of us to go out there and give something back.

Let's hope that this cycle continues to repeat itself, because then we are reminded that while real and lasting change is very rare, when it does happen it is magical.

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