



## Commentary

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### Football as a metaphor: learning to cope with life, manage emotional illness and maintain health through to recovery

#### Introduction

All I know most surely about morality and obligations, I owe to football. (Albert Camus, 1913–1960)

Albert Camus (1913–1960) was an Algerian philosopher, a novelist and a Nobel Prize winner for literature. Much like his contemporary Jean-Paul Sartre, Camus' work reflected a philosophy of the absurd together with an understanding of personal alienation and disenchantment with living. Yet qualities of human dignity and social connection also featured as an important part of his belief in conducting life within a schema of human integrity. They are principles which apply to mental health and well-being along with recovery approaches to mental ill-health.

#### Albert Camus and football

Camus was a goalkeeper and so the guardian of the university football team Racing Universitaire Algériens. He was regarded as a fervent and courageous player but sadly perhaps failed to progress in football because of contracting tuberculosis, an illness for which there was little or no hope of cure at that time. Long before the then popular Manchester United footballer Eric Cantona (1993–1997) made football and philosophy fashionable, Albert Camus spoke of football as a metaphor for human existence and developing personal identity. Camus recognized virtues in football concerned with working together towards a common purpose. In the mid 1990s, perhaps echoing Camus, Eric Cantona once revealed that a part of the secret of Manchester United's success at that time was predicated on the

team members both respecting and protecting one another.

Albert Camus described a similar ethic of looking out for your friends, personal integrity and even-handedness as providing an uncomplicated morality for living and framework for conducting human relationships. Camus believed that sport and particularly football at that time encompassed a sort of virtue of personhood, which might offer people a more appropriate framework for living than politics or even philosophy could ever provide.

During the 1950s, Camus was asked to comment about his experiences of football and particularly the time he spent with Racing Universitaire Algériens. He responded by saying that he learnt much of morality and duty from sport and particularly during his time as a footballer with Racing Universitaire Algériens. Camus referred to recognizing from football and his experiences in goal particularly that the ball never comes to you entirely as you might expect it to and he believed this was a reality reflected in life more generally. His personal approach to life was to treat winning and losing with equal regard and not be overly influenced by either. Albert Camus viewed the game of football as a philosophy that is lived rather than intellectual and detached and concerned with personal individuality and social relating.

#### Football and identity

Recalling many of Camus' ideas, football has recently been linked with personal identity and meaning. Kaelin (2008), for example, provides a philosophical analysis of French footballer Zinedine Zidane's sending off in the 2006 World Cup Football Final for a head-butting incident. The study is embedded in the ideas of Theodor W. Adorno and Jacques Derrida. Utilizing a deconstructive approach to interpreting *taken-for-granted* aspects of existence, Kaelin concludes that the popular notion at the time that Zidane's behaviour

was irrational is inaccurate. He proposes a deeper logic at work linked to Zidane reinstating his authentic identity, while rejecting one imposed on him by others, particularly the darker commercial values linked to modern day football.

### **Football: a social and therapeutic activity**

Correspondingly, football is increasingly viewed an accessible way of understanding human motivation and overcoming and promoting psychological health through developing a sense of positive identity and encouraging social connection (Steckley 2005). In Italy, for example, Psychiatrist Mauro Rafaelli conceived the Gabbiano club which provides football as a therapeutic activity for people suffering mental ill-health.

In a recent FIFA paper concerning the innovation, Rafaelli commented:

A football team is a social group, each individual has a role, everyone has a social place; rules and relationships are all-important. So when an isolated and excluded person joins a team, it teaches them to live in, and with, the larger community. (Rafaelli 2008 cited in FIFA 2008)

Currently, there are a reported 50 football teams forming the Gabbiano club and while not a universal remedy, football is viewed by Mauro Rafaelli as contributing towards social connectedness and overall good health of people experiencing mental ill-health.

### **Football as group psycho-education**

In the UK, football is also being used as a therapeutic activity to advance recovery for people suffering mental ill-health. To illustrate, Pringle & Sayers (2004) developed a community mental health project located in Macclesfield Town's Moss Rose football stadium in Cheshire, UK. The project has been funded for 3 years by the Laureus Foundation's 'Sport for Good' initiative and promotes mental health promotion and mental health within the local community. The authors describe ways they employ football as a metaphor for modern day living, helping young people grapple with issues concerning depression, low self-esteem and social inclusion. Harnessing techniques taken from football and group work allows sensitive topics related to mental health to be addressed in meaningful ways.

Similarly, to commemorate World Mental Health Day in 2007, Unite the Union and the Kent and Medway NHS and Social Care Partnership Trust held a football tournament and coaching day. The tournament took place at the David Beckham Football Academy in London, UK and was organized for mental health services from across England and Wales. Teams were made up of both mental health service users and mental healthcare professionals contributing to a culture of working together for a common cause.

More recently, Oldknow & Grant (2008) have reported a comparable award winning project carried out in the Rotherham, Doncaster and South Humberside NHS Foundation Trust named REACT, which is an acronym for recreation enterprise-assisted client training. The authors discuss the benefits and pitfalls of the enterprise in terms of football contributing to the quality of life of marginalized young people in ways perhaps not previously possible. Self-reports from participants include: feeling better about self-image, greater self-confidence, better bonding with others and a heightened sense of collective identity. The examples cited represent only a small number of football initiatives linked to promoting mental health in the UK.

### **Coping through football: the Football Foundation**

Utilizing football in a similar manner, the Football Foundation is a charitable organization funded by the Premier League, the Football Association, Sport England and the Government in the UK. The charity's stated intentions are to use football to help build health communities throughout England. The Football Foundation has recently launched an inventive scheme, which concerns recovery from mental illness through football called 'Coping through Football'.

The innovation was launched at the Football Foundation's Mental Health Summit at Arsenal Football Club's new Emirates Stadium on 5 December 2007. The scheme is aimed at young people and is intended to reduce the sense of personal isolation, which can form a major part of mental ill-health as well as acting as an impediment to recovery. The initiative is also designed to reduce stigma and discrimination experienced by many people suffering from mental health problems while encouraging

sound physical health through collective sporting activity.

According to the Football Foundation:

Coping through Football seeks to reduce the isolation and discrimination faced by one of the most marginalised groups – the mentally ill. It uses football as a tool to engage 18–35 year old men who are within the mental health care system but prefer not to attend the typical therapy sessions on offer. It is delivered in conjunction with the North East London Mental Health Trust, Waltham Forest Primary Care Trust and Leyton Orient's Community Coaches. (Football Foundation 2007)

The Football Foundation's aims and underlying principles along with other projects outlined clearly pay tribute to Albert Camus' much earlier ideas concerning football as reflecting life, humanity and social connectedness for both men and women.

#### **David: a personal experience**

Football, however, can be used in other ways, which offer reason and insight to aspects of living and are potentially therapeutic. To illustrate, I recall some-time back working with a young man I will call David. The story is true: only David's name and some circumstances have been changed. David was 22 years old and suffered severe social phobia and anxiety disorder. Growing up as an only child and in a single-parent family, David had learned to live without his estranged father and the company of siblings by developing an intense internal world. His sense of identity was concerned with thinking of himself as his mother's protector. Accordingly, he was anxious to gain approval by endorsing her attitudes towards others.

This state of affairs, however, prevented David from developing an identity which was separate and distinct from that of his mother and forming his own views about the world. Subsequently, at times of difficulty he did not have the necessary skills or sense of self to affiliate with others in ways which would bring about self-assurance and feelings of personal equanimity.

David had recently become emotionally unwell because of difficulties in work. He became excessively preoccupied with pleasing others and worried about failing to live up to others' expectations of him. The situation caused him to feel angry and shameful for his inability to assert himself in ways that would allow a sense of personal integrity. He

also became concerned about previous occasions when life did not go his way, including discontinuing his university education.

David stopped seeing the few friends he had kept since leaving university. Consequently, instead of looking to others for support and comfort he isolated himself in his bedroom occupying his day with computer football games. While this method of coping permitted David some control of his world, he continued to feel tormented by endless ruminations concerned with personal and professional failure and life being unjust.

These circumstances served to perpetuate David's unhelpful self-stigmatizing and shaming views about himself. He ultimately tried to kill himself with an overdose of painkilling medication and was admitted to the Accident and Emergency Department of the local hospital for treatment. Following a detailed mental health assessment, David was later referred for psychological therapy at which time he described himself as a failure and his life as purposeless.

#### **Football as a metaphor**

David and I were, however, able to harness his imaginative qualities to bring benefits to his life. Football, he revealed, was his great passion and one, which promised him a hope of recovery from his current bout of mental ill-health. Football as a metaphor for living permitted us both together to discover new ways of exploring the connectedness of the world and relationships as well as address matters related to the importance of personal identity to health and happiness. Our discussions included issues concerning dignity, fraternity, separateness, belonging and the sometimes unfair nature of life. Living for others, David concluded, does not bring about satisfaction or personal composure.

David eventually joined a football supporters' organization locally and took out a subscription with the nearby gym. Subsequently, during psychological therapy he was able to think about the benefits of having caring friends and associates, all of whom shared a common interest in football, health and happiness. David was also beginning to develop a sense of pride associated with belonging to different groups and as a result of his new experiences, he reflected on the significance of identity. He also considered the integrity of maintaining relationships and the importance of his emergent

friendships in ways different to the usual. Because of developing a shared language and identifying with certain values and techniques relating to the game of football, while eschewing those he deemed inappropriate, David's future began to look different.

Football even offered David a means of personal evaluation and therapeutic growth, using allegorically the football league tables and current club form to assess his own progress in life. We were also able to think about where he situated himself in the football stadium to view football matches and how this might be varied in order to gain a different viewpoint linking this to social situations. These strategies proved invaluable to David managing his life enabling him to step back a little and take stock when faced with difficult situations. David was becoming less concerned with pleasing others and began viewing life and relationships in a more balanced way. Calling to mind Albert Camus' thoughts about football, David acknowledged that at times in life as in football things don't always work out as planned. Each of us has to accept that success and failure including periods of instability, being off-form or personal injury are inevitable.

Because of thinking about life indirectly through football, David was able to consider his own predicament, including his relationship with his mother and the lack of opportunities to develop a secure personal identity in his childhood. David discovered that some of his fears concerned with displeasing others were related to his own anger because of his life situation. He also recognized ways in which this situation maintained his feelings of low mood, anxiety and a sense of isolation, preventing him from gaining any sense of achievement or personal comfort.

Finally, some absurdities, which define success for young men in Western societies, were rendered open to our mutual scrutiny. Among other topics of concern, David reevaluated his contributions and moral obligations to his family and society and subsequently felt much less of a failure as a young person. As far as was possible, he addressed difficult issues concerning the absence of his father in his formative years by making contact and building up better relations with him.

David eventually became efficient at monitoring his mental health and overall well-being. He took seriously his obligations to continue supportive relationships with family and friends and recog-

nized the importance of sustaining a balanced life so helping him become aware of the relevance of a moral framework for healthy living.

### Recovery

According to Rethink, a UK-based national mental health membership charity, a recovery approach to addressing mental ill-health requires a change from tradition and encompasses the following guiding principles:

- a focus on goals rather than problems;
- valuing the strengths people bring to their personal recovery;
- respecting self-directedness;
- creating an environment that supports personal recovery and valuing small steps (Rethink 2008).

Fundamental to a recovery approach are the ideas of appropriate hope and self-management together with developing the ability to identify strategies for self-help. Allied to these principles one might usefully add values clarification, evolving an appropriate and helpful sense of identity and harnessing creativity. As a final point, establishing a beneficial shared language might provide opportunities to discover a reality for oneself rather than one imposed by others (Walker 2006). Psychological therapy regardless of theoretical orientation embodies all of these principles and so has much to contribute to promoting mental health within communities.

### Postscript

I have no further knowledge of David's life at the time of writing this account. Notwithstanding likely difficult periods, I have no reason to believe that he is anything other than well and getting on with living in a more socially connected way. There were of course other therapeutic factors which contributed to the benefit of psychological therapy for David. Nonetheless, because of talking about football as an allegory for life and taking time in therapy to think about relationships, including his relationship with himself, David regained his sense of dignity and self-respect allowing him to enjoy social acquaintances in ways he was previously unable to do.

Regular contact with friends and re-establishing good relations with his father contributed to protect David from becoming preoccupied with harmful negative ruminations, and also helped him develop

techniques for regulating his potentially disabling anxiety. Working with football similes encouraged David to engage with regular psychological therapy and so gain maximum benefits. Successful psychological therapy assisted not only David's recovery from emotional ill-health but also his sense of renewal as a young man.

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