

Sport and Thought: development of a sport-based therapeutic intervention

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It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self (Winnicott, 1971, p. 73).

Therapeutic engagement with adolescent boys who experience emotional and behavioral problems is notoriously difficult. The lack of uptake, and hence benefit, from more traditional psychological services often means that such boys end up at the margins of society, where they tend to remain throughout adulthood. Alternative models of service delivery are therefore necessary in order to better engage and retain adolescent boys in therapeutic environments that can provide them with a sense of safety and respect that enables them to develop a more positive life course. The Sport and Thought program was developed in response to the growing need for a therapeutic intervention that was accessible to adolescent boys experiencing behavioral and emotional difficulties who would not engage via more traditional therapeutic routes. It is a novel approach to working with adolescents that fuses the sport of football with psychodynamic thinking and theory to create a space that encourages reflective thought that is measured, deliberate, and attentive to the experience and feelings of oneself and others and acts as a catalyst to promote emotional and behavioral change. Through the playing of football, participants are encouraged to take a measured, big-picture approach to the game that emphasizes taking in all of the pitch, sharing the ball, going backwards with a pass and starting play again if no forward options exist, and showing structured thought to their play. Essential to such efforts is an emphasis on working with others as part of a team and thereby developing a better understanding of oneself and others in a group environment. Underlying Sport and Thought is a belief that an individual's reactions within a sporting context are not different from the person's reactions in other social contexts, so the sport of football can be used to enable participants to explore their own emotional and behavioral tendencies and the motives underlying them.

Initial development of the Sport and Thought program

The idea to create a program that took therapeutic work to an outside, nonclinical environment—specifically, onto a football pitch—arose from my experience of working with adolescent boys suffering from severe levels of emotional and behavioral disturbances. Through my work in secondary schools in different boroughs, I encountered a high number of boys with complex needs who were experiencing developmental challenges. These boys often found it very difficult to talk about their thoughts and feelings, experiencing any attempt to think about themselves and their difficulties as both humiliating and persecutory. These boys tended to cope with emotional difficulties by externalizing what was taking place inside them through the use of violence and gang affiliation, thus projecting their disturbance outward and defending the self against the anxiety that their thoughts and feelings evoked. My exposure to this group of boys over a long period of time led me to consider the need to create a different way of intervening that would help them engage in a therapeutic intervention without raising feelings of humiliation or persecution. Such feelings are common among these boys in more traditional clinical spaces, creating difficulties for their engagement in both individual and group interventions as they often try to remove themselves from the therapeutic arrangement by refusing to verbally communicate in the session, acting out aggressive behavior toward each other or toward an object, or literally walking out of the room.

The attempt to fuse sport and psychodynamic intervention was also informed by the popularity of football—especially the Premier League—among many young people. It was very apparent that the popularity of the game among adolescents was not necessarily or purely on sporting grounds; it was seen more as a potential way of escape from the reality of their lives into that of the idealized footballers with their lavish lifestyles. Through my work with young people and my ongoing attendance at football matches over a period of 30 years, I had become increasingly aware of the Premier League footballer as a role model, something to aspire to be. Yet I often witness the young men who are idolized for their prowess on the football field—and envied for their economic power—acting out their internal difficulties on the football pitch on a weekly basis, at times regressing even to the stage of a red-cheeked toddler who cannot contain his frustrations and at other times being on the front page of weekend tabloid newspapers as a result of various misdemeanors. Such actions by individuals who are held in such high esteem by so many led me to think about their reactions on the football pitch: I wondered whether the way they behaved was mirroring how they generally led their lives away from the sporting contest. I began to see a pattern that footballers who were unable to contain themselves in a sporting context seemed to have the same difficulty in a social context. Consequently, this led to the consideration of using football as a vehicle to enable adolescents to observe and consider their behavior, since it appeared that there was a parallel between the behavior of professional footballers and that of adolescents with complex needs: The only way they could expel their internal difficulties was to act out. The football pitch seemed to hold potential as a space in which behaviors could be observed and contemplated with regard to their underlying determinants.

I sought to create a space where the young people could begin to learn about themselves and their emotional and behavioral difficulties through the use of play (football) in an environment that was both safe and nurturing. We aimed to convert the dimensions of a full-size football pitch into a containing space, similar to a consulting room but without the preconceived connotations that may be attached. The hope was to allow the opportunity for the “enactment of wishes in preparation to growing up and also the mastery of traumatic experiences” (Freud, 1908/1959, p. 142).

The original Sport and Thought model conceptualized football as therapy, moving the consultation room to the football pitch and creating a space in which one could see the internal self through the playing of a game, thereby creating live therapy or therapy in action. Such a forum facilitates the development of some understanding of behavioral drives within a group (i.e., team) dynamic. Furthermore, because the focus is on “us” and not “me,” it helps to remove the feeling of persecution that is often evoked in these young adolescents in one-to-one therapies. In the program we see the ball as a prism, an object for all thoughts and comments to pass through before they can be received within the self, considered, and digested, allowing for internal understanding and emotional and behavioral progression. The ball is the vehicle that is the symbolic catalyst that allows for change. As the boys develop thoughtfulness about their handling of the ball and interactions on the pitch, they develop similar qualities of thought in regard to their behaviors in school, at home, and in other important areas of their lives.

How Sport and Thought works

Sport and Thought works with adolescents by fusing psychodynamic thinking and the actual playing of football to encourage thought about one’s self and to act as a stimulant and a catalyst to emotional and behavioral change. The playing of sport allows for the creation of opportunities for the participant to experience proximity, anxiety, and aggression, which are the main foci of our work. The ethos of Sport and Thought is that an individual’s reactions on a sporting field will be no different from their reaction in a societal situation. If one reacts aggressively to a perceived wrong on the field of play or has difficulty with another player being in proximity to one, it is quite likely such a reaction will be mirrored within the classroom and life in general. Within Sport and Thought, the ball is seen as an externalization of the individual’s mind, and the way the person treats the football—how the individual works with it—is very much in synchronicity with the person’s internal state of being. The majority of the work—because this is a sporting project, we call them “drills”—takes place within coned-out squares. The idea of creating coned spaces in which to work comes from the thought that these spaces offer containment and a boundary, like that of our mind. The coned-out contained area represents a space for us to work in, an arena in which what takes place (our external difficulties) can be interpreted, thought about, and held safely, much like that of a consulting room.

Sport and Thought concentrates on engaging the individual with the football in an attempt to begin bringing an internal structure to what is otherwise a chaotic state of being. The program encourages its participants to play football in a very controlled and thoughtful fashion. The ball is to remain on the ground as much as possible. There is great emphasis on short passing and movement into space, on being constantly moving and thinking or, as we state within the program, to be “on your toes.” This is to ensure that you are always ready to receive the football and not be flat-footed in sporting terms or flat of mind in a psychological way. Our belief is that to effectively play the ball on the ground and to move into space to receive a pass or to give another player an option, one requires an internal understanding of what one is attempting to achieve, and one must be in an ongoing state of psychological awareness of the tasks required of oneself and others to achieve the desired outcome. This is something that the boys found very difficult at the beginning of the program, manifested as an inability to play football in a thoughtful, controlled fashion. Instead, they tended to kick the ball with full brute force wildly in the air and over distance, allowing a visual perspective of the difficulties that are taking place within the player’s mind and how he is projecting such difficulties as far away as possible from the self. The ball is then chased chaotically by the group in a very individualistic way, reflecting difficulty in thinking about what is taking place and actually seeing what is happening. The boys treated the ball as if it was there to be punished or to be hit as hard as possible because of how they were feeling internally. In other words, the boys literally smashed the football as hard as possible in an attempt to alleviate their internal violent and chaotic feelings; through this we could see externally what was taking place inside them. This was not encouraged by the coaches but was the default position for the boys and how they chose to play the game. [Oberndorf \(1951\)](#) described this phenomenon in one of his patients who played golf, stating, “The only pleasure derived from golf consisted in the moment when he (the patient) struck the ball and all his viciousness, bitter aggression, and latent sadism found release” ([Oberndorf, 1951](#) cited in [Adatto, 1964](#), p. 835). The ball is perceived as an extension of the mind, and the ability to control the ball (or, in the case of the adolescents when we first begin to work with them, lack of control of the ball and inability to remain within the coned-out box) allows us to gain a sense of the level of internal difficulty and chaos that the individual is experiencing. When thinking about the game of golf, [Robbins \(1963\)](#) writes, “In order to swing the golf club correctly, it must anatomically become an extension of the left arm” (p. 828). The same applies to the football in Sport and Thought: It becomes an extension of the mind and allows the boys who participate in the session to express their difficulties. Also, it allows them to see their internal emotional progression, as well as their external technical progression, over the duration of the work. As the boys become more contained through their weekly attendance at sessions that offer both external and internal structure, they begin to understand themselves and their difficulties more. This internal shift is shown to the therapist through the boys’ increased ability to think and cope with the session and space. Progress is exemplified not only as technical development in drills and games, which provides for obvious gratification for individuals and the group, but

also as improved ability of the participants to communicate, work together, and cope with proximity, aggression, and anxiety.

Difficulties that are expressed within sessions are reframed and shared with the group as common challenges that many people experience and are linked to external situations outside of the football pitch, thus permitting participants to make connections between their behaviors and difficulties. For example, if the participants have difficulty in listening and internalizing what is being said within the session, we would link it to the classroom, put forward a possible reason why it is hard to listen, and get the participants to think about possible outcomes, stressing that within our session there would be no negative outcome, only a chance to think about it. Such thoughts are always placed into and left with the group. We never seek answers, though sometimes they are given. By working in this way, we remove the more persecutory or humiliating feelings that may be evoked in more traditional therapeutic interventions, where it is just the patient and therapist, with such relationships having the potential to cause difficulty for an individual who is internally brittle. We allow the emphasis to remain on the football and less so on the self.

Progression: from pitch to class

The pitch-based work of Sport and Thought had several outcomes among the boys who engaged in the program, including increased school attendance, reduced negative behavior at school, and increased learning retention and academic progression. Encouraged by the impact of our practical, pitch-based work and the ability of the adolescents who were referred to the program to not only engage but also actively use the space and time allotted weekly to initiate internal change, we began to consider next steps for the program. We discussed with one of our host schools—the school in which the very first program was run—the idea of going directly into the school's classrooms and engaging with adolescents in their educational environment. The idea behind this initiative was that instead of using the ball as the symbolic object through which uncomfortable thoughts or feelings were to pass, within the classroom we as coaches could take on that role and act as “the ball” between the adolescent learner and the teacher/subject/peer/environment with which the learner had difficulty that was manifesting as emotional, behavioral, and educational breakdowns within the classroom environment.

Winnicott's writings on the role of the mother in helping the infant cope with moments of difficulty via her presence and adaption inspired our thinking about the role of the coach within the classroom environment and the coach's ability to create a good-enough space to encourage development and reduce acting out internal difficulties.

At some theoretical point early in the development of every human individual an infant in a certain setting provided by the mother is capable of conceiving of the idea of something which would meet the growing need which arises out of

instinctual tension. The infant cannot be said to know at first what is to be created. At this point in time the mother presents herself. In the ordinary way she gives her breast and her potential feeding urge. The mother's adaption to the infant's needs, when good enough, gives the infant the illusion that there is an external reality that corresponds to the infant's own capacity to create (Winnicott, 1958, p. 239).

We conceptualized the coach, whether male or female, as becoming the “good breast,” whose ability to support and contain is the food that the adolescents digest to quell their internal difficulties with their external environment. Schools may argue that such a process already takes place within the classroom in the form of teaching assistants, individuals who are presented with the task of supporting learners deemed to have difficulty. However, unlike teachers and teaching assistants, who may be seen as symbols of discipline and authority, the coach, in his or her tracksuit, is seen as an accessible and nonpersecutory figure, helping to create a good-enough environment in which the child can cope and prosper. The tracksuit and running shoes of the football coach, in contrast to the more formal mode of dress expected of teaching staff, ensure a visible presence and allow for a clear separation of roles within the learning environment. The role of the coach is to support the individual, ensuring that the individual is thinking about himself or herself in the context of the group and questioning why one may act out or not engage with the group. This is the same principle as our work on the football pitch.

Winnicott (1968) discusses the importance of joint play between the child and the therapist in his writings concerning the Squiggle Game:

The fact that the consultant freely plays his own part in the exchange of drawings certainly has a great importance for the success of the technique; such a procedure does not make a patient feel inferior in any way as, for instance, a patient feels when being examined by a doctor in respect of physical health, or, often, when being given a psychological test (Winnicott, 1968, cited in Winnicott, 1989, p. 301).

It is our belief that the same idea applies to the role of the Sport and Thought coach, the freely playing consultant who interacts with the child within the classroom space in a way that teachers and teaching assistants do not. We are not there to teach the child in the traditional educational sense but are available to all within the learning environment to facilitate thinking about behavior and to act as a catalyst to support the learning process.

The creation of a good external object (Klein, 1975)—the coach in the classroom, the ball on the pitch—is needed because of the ongoing developmental difficulties of many of the adolescents with whom we come into contact, difficulties that have evolved out of very early life experiences in which the child's internal needs were not met and gratified by a parent or other caring figure. For many of the young people who participate in Sport and Thought, basic child development did not fully take place because of emotionally or physically absent parents. Daily difficulties feel like a reenactment of one's early years. Thus current life situations that pose threat, discomfort, or anxiety or in which gratification is not found the

moment it is sought are responded to through externalization of such discomfort via maladaptive behaviors.

Many infants, however, have massive aggressive potential that belongs to reaction to impingement, that becomes activated by persecution: in so far as this is true the infant welcomes persecution, and feels real in reacting to it. But this represents a false mode of development since the infant needs continued persecution. The quantity of this reactive potential is not dependent on biological factors (which determine motility and erotism) but it is dependent on the chance of early environmental impingement, and therefore, often, on the mother's psychiatric abnormalities, and the state of the mother's emotional environment (Winnicott, 1958, p. 217–218).

Winnicott's comments above are relevant to the persecutory like reenactments—evoked by feelings of not being held, gratified, or understood—that we sometimes witness among some adolescents boys in their interactions with the teacher or learning environment in classroom settings. The presence of a coach alongside adolescents who experience such internal persecutory thoughts and feelings creates a buffer or a prism, like the ball on the pitch, allowing for a significant degree of class-based emotional and behavioral change. The coach helps the learner's thought processing, offering possible reasoning behind a difficulty and gently questioning maladaptive behavior. This ability to support, to hold an individual mentally and physically via continued presence, helps to facilitate both internal and external change.

Class-based outcomes

Initially, Sport and Thought in the classroom was run for 3 hours per day, Monday through Friday. One member of the Sport and Thought coaching team was to enter the classroom space to support adolescents directly referred to the program because of emotional and behavioral difficulties that had resulted in disruption within the classroom and subsequent removal to the school's internal behavioral unit. Some students in the more extreme cases of difficult behavior had been removed from school life completely for a set period of time. The terms used within the British educational system for such outcomes are *internal exclusion* and *external exclusion*. The objective of the Sport and Thought program was to reduce both forms of exclusion. Indeed, a decrease in both internal and external exclusions has been observed, coinciding with the implementation of the class-based Sport and Thought program in the 2016–2017 academic year (see Table 26.1), suggesting that the ethos of the program has begun to affect both the whole school and individual dynamics.

We are still refining this element of the Sport and Thought program, yet the available data on exclusions give reason for optimism and validation of our efforts to extend the program from the football pitch to the classroom. The rate of change observed in the school setting has been slower than that demonstrated on the pitch

Table 26.1 Number of internal and external exclusions from 2014 to 2017.

Educational year 2014/15. Total number of internal exclusions: 28	Total number of external exclusions: 5
Educational year 2015/16. Total number of internal exclusions: 27	Total number of external exclusions: 15
Educational year 2016/17. Total number of internal exclusions: 14	Total number of external exclusions: 6

as we work with institutional dynamics and convert ourselves into the prism between the adolescent and their environment, yet change is occurring, and we hope it will continue to do so as we work to create a good-enough environment for understanding, learning, and progression to take place.

Conclusion

Sport and Thought is a unique program that attempts to engage young people who would otherwise not enter into more traditional therapeutic interventions. Its psychodynamically informed, sport-based delivery approach provides a novel therapeutic environment that facilitates understanding of the self in the context of a group in order to support a higher level of engagement in education and life. Although the program has not been subjected to thorough empirical evaluation at this time, the available evidence regarding reductions of school exclusions gives cause for hope, suggesting that Sport and Thought may be an effective complement to traditional services for adolescents who experience emotional and behavioral difficulties. We hope that as we continue to expand our work to ensure wider accessibility to the Sport and Thought program, our efforts will inspire others to consider alternative delivery models that can better serve individuals who fail to engage with conventional therapeutic services.

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