

Out of Hours

How disability can win England the World Cup

The Football Association's disability football programme looks beyond the traditional medical model of disability, and focuses on ability and what an individual (and team) can achieve through sport. There are numerous disability football centres across the country, with inclusive participation in a diverse range of adapted formats of football including: cerebral palsy football, hearing-impaired football, visually-impaired football, partially-sighted football, learning disability football, and wheelchair football. Playing these versions of the game results in regular sociable competitive exercise and numerous health and social benefits.¹

People living with a disability are less physically active and therefore more unfit than the general population, with these low levels of fitness serving as a significant predictor of premature death and morbidity.² Rates of inactivity are as high as 92% for individuals living with a disability, compared to between 53–70% for individuals without a disability.³ The UK has over 11 million people living with impairment or disability. This is a considerable number of inactive people and this situation generates consequential health risks. It is logical that increased physical activity could undoubtedly reduce these health inequalities and improve the lifestyle of people living with a disability.

As with many areas of holistic care, GPs are able to influence the quality of their patients' lives. This role includes promoting physical activity to the inactive and unfit, however it is acknowledged that addressing this issue within a 10-minute consultation is difficult. One method of facilitating regular physical activity is through organised sport, and given that football is the world's most popular sport then this may be a natural route that people with a disability may choose to follow. All GPs will consult with patients in primary care who are living with a disability, and perhaps when building rapport with these patients an interest in football may materialise? If so then 'signposting' this interest and supporting the next step in behaviour change by participating in football could serve as a valuable lifestyle adjustment for these individuals.

Depending on the skill and desire of the individual, disability football can lead to regional and national representative trials, progression to the development football teams, and ultimately representing the country and pulling on the 'Three Lions'

for a senior England football squad. These England teams (traditionally away from the glare of publicity) have had notable successes including the Learning Disability squad winning their World Cup in Japan in 2002, and more recently the Under 20s Cerebral Palsy squad winning the Parolimpiadas Escolares tournament in Sao Paolo in 2013. Encouraging increasing numbers of people to get active and participate in disability football will not only lead to a larger pool of talent from which to select England disability football players, but will also address inactivity in people with disabilities and thus help to tackle one of this generation's key public health issues.⁴

St Georges Park is the Football Association's state-of-the-art training facility in Staffordshire which hosts the training camps for the England disability squads. The medical facilities have been recognised by FIFA as among the best in the world, and it is here that the Football Association Centre for Disability Football Research (FACDFR) is operating with the aim of reducing the risk of injury for those participating in disability football. No sport is without risk of injury, and at present little research has been conducted on injury patterns in disability football.⁵ It is anticipated that the work of the FACDFR at St Georges Park in analysing injuries and developing prevention strategies will result in the development of practices that will ensure a safer sport will be developed.

Should you consult with anyone in your practice with a disability whom wants to get involved with football, details of your local disability officer can be found by visiting your local county FA website: www.theFA.com.

Richard Stones,

Freelance GP and Team Doctor to the England Learning Disability Football Team, St Georges Park, Burton-Upon Trent.

Osman Hassan Ahmed,

Itinerant Physiotherapist to the Football Association, The FA Centre for Disability Football Research, St Georges Park, Burton-Upon-Trent.

Richard Weiler,

Locum GP and Consultant in Sport and Exercise Medicine, Institute of Sport, Exercise and Health, University College London Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, London.

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ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE

Richard Stones

The FA Centre for Disability Football Research, St Georges Park, Burton-Upon Trent, Staffordshire DE13 9PD, UK.

E-mail: gegg@live.co.uk

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