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Can sports clubs help tackle male obesity?

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Executive Summary

Male obesity – a growing problem in the UK

Obesity has become a serious health issue in the UK – not least for men. More than two-thirds of men are overweight or obese and it is predicted that nearly 50% of UK men will be obese by 2030. Men are also less likely to pursue weight management programmes than women. However, an innovative approach suggests that programmes delivered by professional football clubs in a men-only setting can be effective.

Football Fans in Training (FFIT)

Football Fans in Training (FFIT) is a weight management and physical activity group programme developed by Scotland's top professional football clubs. It is a well-designed public health intervention, which attracted many football fans whose BMI was high. A study found that participants lost weight and their health status improved more than non-participants. This evidence-based programme is now widely run by a number of professional sport clubs' foundations for their communities.

Weight loss programmes run by Football Club Foundations

In England, leading sports clubs now often have charitable community foundations. Community foundations from the football premiership and several premiership rugby club foundations are often now running weight loss programmes for middle-aged men. The programmes run by football premiership foundations are mainly for men who are out of shape and haven't been active for a long time. They are 12-16 weeks long and provide healthy diet education and physical activities led by qualified personal trainers and health experts. Support from trainers and the feeling of comradeship generally produces a positive effect on participants' physical and mental health. A few football club foundations, in regions with high type 2 diabetes rates, also have a health programme for those suffering from the illness.

Weight loss programmes run by Rugby Club Foundations

The Move like a Pro programmes run by premiership rugby club foundations are similar to football foundations' programmes. Some are also giving fans the chance to train at their local clubs in sessions run by clubs' own training staff. This is an extra bonus for participants and can help attract men to join the scheme.

The potential influence of sports clubs on public health

Professional sports clubs hold an important place in the lives of many men in the UK. Because professional sports players self-evidently need to be fit, they are also positive role models and there is likely to be a natural interest among fans in being able to learn about and, on a small scale, replicate their training routines when it comes to diet and fitness. While these health interventions have already been widely implemented by some professional football and rugby team foundations, they are not always widely known about and so have the potential to play a bigger part in reducing male obesity in the UK.

Some sports club community foundations have also developed programmes to assist with other aspects of health, such as childhood obesity, mental health and dementia; and some have also developed weight management programmes for women – suggesting an even greater potential contribution to public health.

However, at present, few sports clubs have programmes to encourage health at work among their own employees – an approach they may wish to consider exploring.

Recommendations.

- GPs should consider actively prescribing professional sport club-based weight management and fitness programmes as a social prescription for male patients who need to lose weight.
- Professional sports clubs should consider leading by example and arranging health promotion schemes for their own employees.
- Other industries should consider the model piloted by professional sports clubs and their foundations, for example starting with major sportswear sponsors.

Can sports clubs help tackle male obesity?

The scale of the problem

More than two-thirds of men and around 6 in 10 women are overweight or obese¹. By 2020 it is predicted that one-third of the UK population could be obese². The problem is affecting children too. The rising rate of childhood obesity has been described as a "national emergency"³

Why is obesity such a concern?

Obesity is leading to preventable deaths. The severe health conditions caused by obesity include type 2 diabetes, coronary heart diseases, some types of cancer such as breast cancer, stroke, and more. It is also affecting mental health, for instance increasing the risk of depression⁴. Weight issues erode confidence and lead to social isolation. Obesity is also affecting the UK's economy. For example, the NHS annually spends £6bn on medical conditions related to weight and £10bn a year on treating diabetes, while internationally obesity is responsible for a large fraction of costs, both for health care systems and for society⁵.

Male obesity in the UK

In the UK, men are on average more likely to be obese than women, and rates of male obesity are continuing to rise. The UK male obesity rate is the highest in Europe. On current trends, nearly 50% of UK men will be obese by 2030⁶. Despite this, men are less likely to recognise their weight is an issue and less likely than women to engage with weight loss programmes. This is because men often have a different view of weight loss from women. They view dieting as feminine, are more resistant to healthy eating campaigns, and less aware of the link between diet and ill-health^{7,8}. Innovative programmes that attract overweight/obese men needed to be developed and delivered urgently. One study suggests that a men-only setting, with programmes delivered by professional football clubs could be effective.

Can professional football clubs help with men's obesity issues in the UK?

A public health intervention in football club settings attracted many fans at risk of ill-health due to obesity. The intervention is called Football Fans in Training (FFIT, pronounced FIT), a weight management and physical activity group programme at Scotland's top professional football clubs. Participants gained support from community coaches trained in diet, nutrition, physical activity and behaviour change techniques⁹. The participants were successful in losing weight, on average about 5 kg each, and their health status improved. The aspects of the programme associated with successful weight loss for men included:

- it exploited their existing loyalty to football teams
- a men-only environment generated a sense of camaraderie
- a combination of healthy diet and exercise
- encouragement from the coaches.

This suggests that professional sport clubs can affect fans' attitude towards a healthy lifestyle. In the UK, many leading sport clubs, such as football premier league or premierships rugby teams now have charity foundations and offer health promotion activities for their communities.

The most prominent weight control programmes for communities and fans are provided by the premier league football team foundations, followed by the premierships rugby club foundations. Fewer programmes are provided by professional cricket foundations. The weight management programmes are mostly provided for men aged over 30. Several clubs have programmes for children, to help prevent obesity. There are very few weight management programmes for women and the elderly.

Premier League football club foundations

- Men only health promotion programmes

11 premier league foundations run weight management programmes specifically for men. The programmes are mainly for those who are out of shape and haven't been active for a long time. They are 12-16 weeks long, providing healthy diet education and physical activities led by qualified personal trainers and health experts. The health activities they organise are able to attract club fans who have a high BMI, to get together to play football and learn about a healthy diet.

Examples of positive feedback from participants include:

Tony at Newcastle United foundation: *"I was unfit and doing no exercise. I got involved with the Foundation Health Programme and had a Health Check, where the staff were really helpful and informative. I started doing Walking Football, which has made a massive difference. I recommend anyone gets involved."*

Rob at Watford FC's Community Sports and Education Trust: *"I can't recommend this course highly enough, do it! Take 90 minutes out of your weekly routine, change your life; take small steps but you will reap the benefits. I have!"*

Mark at Burnley FC in the Community: *"I have really enjoyed this course. I look forward to it every week. It's the fun aspect of being fit with diet, food swaps and exercise tips throughout."*

Taking Burnley FC in the Community (BFCitC) as an example, the impact of healthy weight management on the participants has been positive. It is a free programme for 12 weeks, supported by clothes company boohooMAN. It offers exercise and regular health checks that assess body weight, hydration, visceral fat, body fat, muscle mass and physical age. The presence of other members and staff encourage the participants to go through the session, and they generally enjoy the programme. The programme gives benefit not only physically but also mentally. Participants report that they sleep better, feel more energy, and have improved confidence. Moreover, it has an impact on daily life. For example, participants started to walk

more, go to the gym more often, cut unhealthy food, and drink more fluid -

<https://www.burnleyfccommunity.org/health/mens-weight-management-project/>

BFCitC also runs a weight-loss programme for women. The programme's content is the same as the men's programme. Some of the men's participants' partners have witnessed the positive change in their male partners, which has inspired them to join the session.

These are part of a range of community health initiatives the club is engaged in, alongside Extra Time (to help tackle loneliness and social isolation among the over 50s), a Schools Mental Health Wellbeing Project and a Dementia Café.

- Inspiring children to stay healthy

7 Premier League foundations (Aston Villa, Brighton & Hove Albion, Burnley, Crystal Palace, Liverpool, Manchester City, Manchester United, and Norwich) have a weight control programme for children. Those club activities reflect the statistics of childhood obesity in the UK, such as in Manchester and Croydon, where children aged 10-11 have the highest obesity rate in the UK⁷. The programmes run by these foundations are not only for children but also for their family members. They teach intensively about health and nutrition, how to cook, and ultimately increase the awareness of being fit to prevent becoming obese. Also, the programme covers physical activities, including football. The football players and club doctors are also invited to speak about what they eat and how to stay healthy to encourage children to be healthy. Manchester United conducted research on the outcome of their activity, showing that their programme was beneficial for children's health. 27% more children became positive about eating fruit and vegetables and 91% of children recognised crisps and cake contain high fat and/or sugar after completing the programme -

<https://www.mufoundation.org/en/Projects/Eat-Well>

- Diabetes prevention

Brighton & Hove Albion, Leicester, West Ham, and Wolves have programmes specifically focused on type 2 diabetes mitigation and prevention. Prevalence of type 2 diabetes is very high in Leicester, Birmingham, and London and the prevention programmes provided by these football foundations reflect the communities' needs. Wolves have a very structured educational programme, called X-PERT. It consists of 6 weeks offering extensive knowledge about type 2 diabetes for those who are living with that condition. It provides a good knowledge of type 2 diabetes and food choice (what people should eat and what they should avoid) and a better understanding of nutrition.

Also, West Ham United Foundation has a programme called 150 club, which includes physical activities. They now are working with NHS Newham Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) and Newham Council on the Newham Community Prescription Scheme. GPs across the borough refer patients aged 18 and over who are at the risk of type 2 diabetes or heart diseases to the 150 club. The referred person will receive lifestyle advice and support from an advisor to make sure the programme will be beneficial for the participant.

The weight management programmes run by Premiership Rugby foundations

- Move like a Pro

This is a 12-week programme designed by Premiership Rugby's professional coaches for people who haven't been active recently, aiming to inspire a legacy of long-term lifestyle change across the rugby fan community. It is funded by the Movember foundation and is a 12-week programme for men aged 30-55. Within a supportive environment, participants explore healthy food choice, cooking, and exercise that can be done anywhere. It also gives fans the chance to train at their local clubs in sessions run by clubs' own training staff. The Premiership rugby clubs which offer Move like a Pro programmes are; Newcastle Falcons, Northampton Saints, Saracens, and Wasps.

- Tackling Health

This is a UK-wide initiative run by Premiership Rugby in a partnership with the Greggs Foundation. It is a school programme taking a holistic approach for children aged 7-8, teaching about their health and exposing the children to physical activity through playing rugby. The programme is targeting children in school years 3 and 4, as the evidence suggests that childhood obesity often starts from these school ages. The scheme is hoping to embed good eating and activity habits before the children gain bad habits which might lead to obesity. The Premiership rugby teams which offer Tackling Health programmes are; Bath, Bristol Bears, Exeter Chiefs, Newcastle Falcons, Northampton Saints, Saracens, Wasps and Worcester Warriors.

As well as these initiatives, a few Premier League rugby club foundations have their own weight management programmes.

Professional cricket foundations

Among 18 professional cricket club foundations, 4 foundations run health promotion programmes for their communities. They are the Derbyshire, Lancashire, Nottinghamshire, and Yorkshire cricket foundations.

Employees health

Among all professional sports club foundations, only the Yorkshire Cricket Foundation (YCF) has its own programme specifically for employees' health promotion. YCF has a strong belief in workplace wellbeing, including offering several physical activity opportunities to employees, to reduce possible stress in the workplace. The physical exercises include participating in the YCF Running Club, weekly yoga sessions and table tennis.

Health at Work programmes for employees is a possible missed opportunity for sports clubs more generally. Where employers in other sectors have introduced such schemes they have often found this to be a win-win approach, as health at work programmes usually mean healthier staff, taking less sick leave and being more motivated and productive^{10,11}.

Conclusion

Studies suggest that football club-initiated weight management programmes have a positive impact on middle-aged obese/over-weight men who haven't been active. In the UK, some professional rugby and cricket club foundations also have weight management schemes for fans and communities. As professional sport clubs can influence their communities positively, in particular male supporters, this suggests more should be done to actively promote these health promotion schemes, both through their own channels and via health professionals.

Recommendations.

- GPs should actively consider prescribing professional sport club-based weight management programmes as a social prescription for patients who are seeking to lose weight or at risk of type 2 diabetes. FFIT is an evidence-based, effective method for combating obesity particularly among men.
- Professional sports clubs should also consider leading by example and arranging health promotion schemes for their employees. This is likely to be a win win approach, as health at work programmes usually mean healthier staff, taking less sick leave, reducing presenteeism and being more motivated and productive¹⁰.
- More studies are needed into the potential for sports clubs to help reduce childhood obesity, as well as adult male obesity, working alongside schools, parents and communities.
- Professional sports clubs and their foundations provide a model to be followed by other industries in initiating socially responsible weight loss programmes. Companies linked with fitness or health, such as sporting brands, would be a useful next step – for instance extending health promotion schemes which some, like Nike, already have for their employees, to local communities.

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