



INSIGHT SUMMARY

How experiences of sport in childhood & adolescence can influence behaviours, attitudes & wider lives in adulthood

StreetGames & 2CV



THE HUMAN SIDE OF SPORT'S IMPACT: WHAT DO WE ALREADY KNOW?

There is already strong evidence that sport and physical activity can have a lasting positive impact on young people's lives.

Research shows that early experiences of sport can shape:

- **Confidence, wellbeing and resilience**
- **Relationships, belonging and social trust**
- **Skills, aspirations and life opportunities**

These effects can carry forward into adulthood, influencing how people see themselves, connect with others and navigate life.

THE RESEARCH NEED

However, much of this understanding **focuses** on **what sport delivers**, rather than **how those impacts are formed in real lives**, particularly for young people growing up in low-income and underserved communities.

This research brings that missing layer to life, showing how sport interacts with people, places and circumstances to shape long-term outcomes.

Research Objective:

To bring to life the impacts of sport in childhood on young adults today, particularly those growing up in low-income households and underserved communities.

RESEARCH APPROACH

METHOD

A **1-hour depth timeline interview**, covering:

- Key moments, transitions in childhood and adolescence
- Sporting experiences and engagement
- Key people, spaces and opportunities in their journey
- Developmental impacts of sport in who they are today

And for some participants, 2 additional tasks:

- **A visit to a sport ground / centre**
- A **conversation with a friend / family** member

SAMPLE

15 participants from low-income backgrounds or underserved communities

Covering:

- Mix of England & Wales
- Aged 18 – 40
- Mix of men & women
- Mixture of childhood sports
- Wide ranging adult outcomes
- Including some participants/former volunteers from StreetGames network

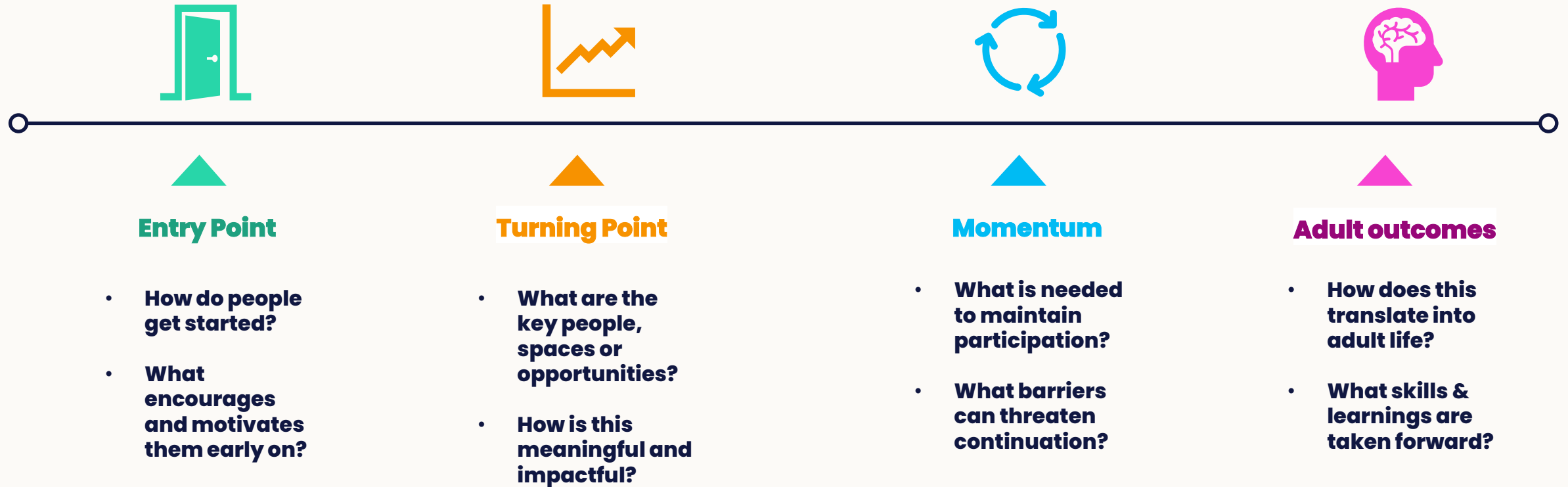
**STREET
GAMES**

CHILDHOOD SPORT JOURNEYS



JOURNEYS

For young people who have been strongly impacted by sport, there are a number of key touchpoints in their journey to get there – the **entry point**, the **turning point** that kick-starts key changes, and the **momentum** that keeps the changes going into adulthood.



ENTRY POINT



Though young people can enter sport via informal or formal pathways, the key factors underpinning entry to sport are accessibility, locality and low-cost offerings.

Both informal and formal pathways can encourage starting sport.

Early entry into sport is made appealing through low-cost, local, easy-access provision.

- School is often the primary gateway (through PE lessons, school games)
- Entry to sport is sometimes driven by lack of other options – “It was just something to do”
- Changing role of technology
- The earlier the entry point, the more likely sport is to feel fully integrated throughout their teenage and adult life

“The later you start, the less likely it is that you’re doing it for enjoyment. There’s probably other elements to it, like for fitness or to be social.”

TURNING POINTS

People, places and opportunities serve as key catalysts that kickstart these positive outcomes, helping to translate the experience and learnings of sport beyond the activity and into real life.

Turning points unlock a shift in how sport is understood and valued.

Coaches and mentors are often a key catalyst for young people

Spaces can be powerful turning points too

Coaching or mentoring opportunities

MOMENTUM



Sustained engagement in sport is shaped by a combination of social, personal and environmental factors — moving young people from simply showing up to staying for good.

- **Factors that encourage engagement in sport:**
 - **Social encouragement**
 - **Repeated attendance**
 - **Intrinsic enjoyment**
 - **Achievement and recognition**
 - **Roles and responsibilities**

"Sport was my purpose, when I was young. Any place where you can make really good friends, where it provides you with a sense of belonging, where you can help manage your emotions and relationships, that's positive. And sport was that for me"

...AND BARRIERS

At the same time, a combination of environmental, financial, and life-stage factors work as a barrier to participation and engagement.

Barriers that may impact continuation of sport:

- **Lack of access**
- **Financial constraints**
- **Life stage transitions**
- **Friendship shifts**

However, barriers do not always lead to a stop in sporting participation:

- If sport plays a big enough role in a young person's life, their personal drive and self-motivation will encourage them to find workarounds to continue taking part in sport.

"I grew up in an area where there wasn't much sport going on. It was a 20-minute drive to get to anything."

"I was scouted for a running club, but when money came into play, I couldn't do it."

"It was just a feeling I got from playing sport. I was constantly chasing that feeling. I just thought if no one else wants to do it, then at least I can. So, on my lunch breaks, I'd take myself to go play football."

ADULT SPORTING HABITS

Playing and engaging with sport in childhood strongly impacts their relationship with sport in later life

- As they have got older 'life stages' can impact BUT their **'love' and positive feelings towards sport remains.**
- Motivation spurs them on to find **workarounds** to continue taking part in sport
- **Feel confident to get back into sport**
- Not afraid of **trying new activities**
- **Passing on their love** to the next generation



SOLO AND TEAM SPORTS EACH PROVIDE SPECIFIC BENEFITS

The independent nature of solo sports tend to support with discipline and accountability, whereas working collaboratively through team sports supports development of empathy, communication and leadership.

SOLO SPORTS

e.g. running, Taekwondo, swimming

- Discipline
- Personal accountability
- Mental clarity
- Resilience

TEAM SPORTS

e.g. football, netball, hockey, basketball

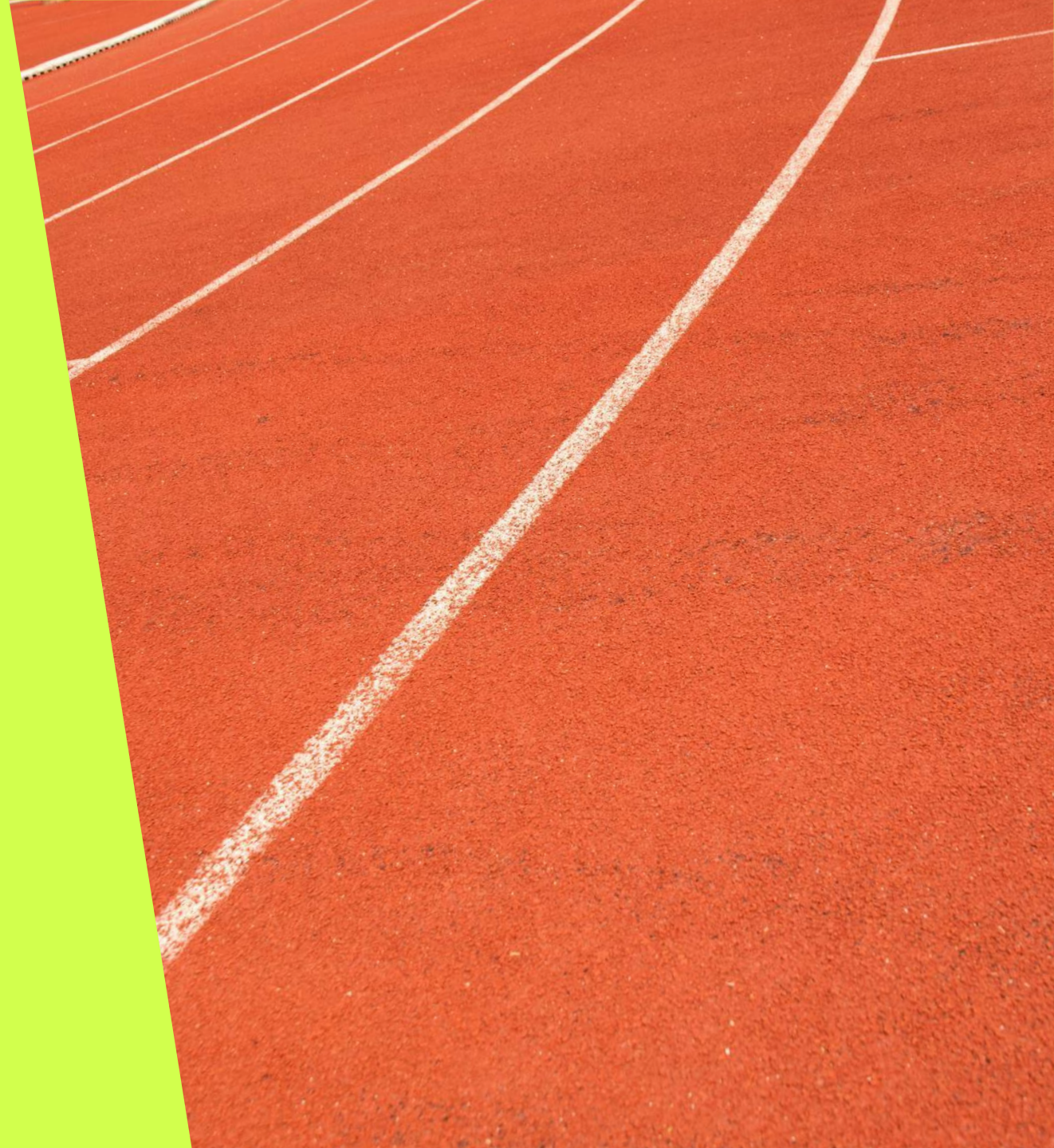
- Teamwork
- Empathy & emotion regulation
- Perspective taking
- Communication
- Leadership skills
- Friendship-forming

"In solo sports, what you put in is what you get out"

[In paired sports] "As a duo, you're holding each other accountable. Things you may not notice yourself, your teammate could notice. Even as a team, you have a kind of rivalry going on."



**OUTCOMES:
WIDER LIVES &
CASE STUDIES**



WIDER OUTCOMES

The impact of childhood sport can show up in someone's wider life, in a number of more indirect and sometime subtle ways. This can feature across all different aspects of their personal and professional lives.

CONFIDENCE

**LEADERSHIP &
COMMUNICATION**

**COLLECTIVE
BELONGING**

**OPENING EYES
TO CAREER
OPPORTUNITY**

**BROADENING
HORIZONS**

**IDENTITY
SHAPING**

**PROVIDING
STRUCTURE &
EMOTIONAL
STABILITY**

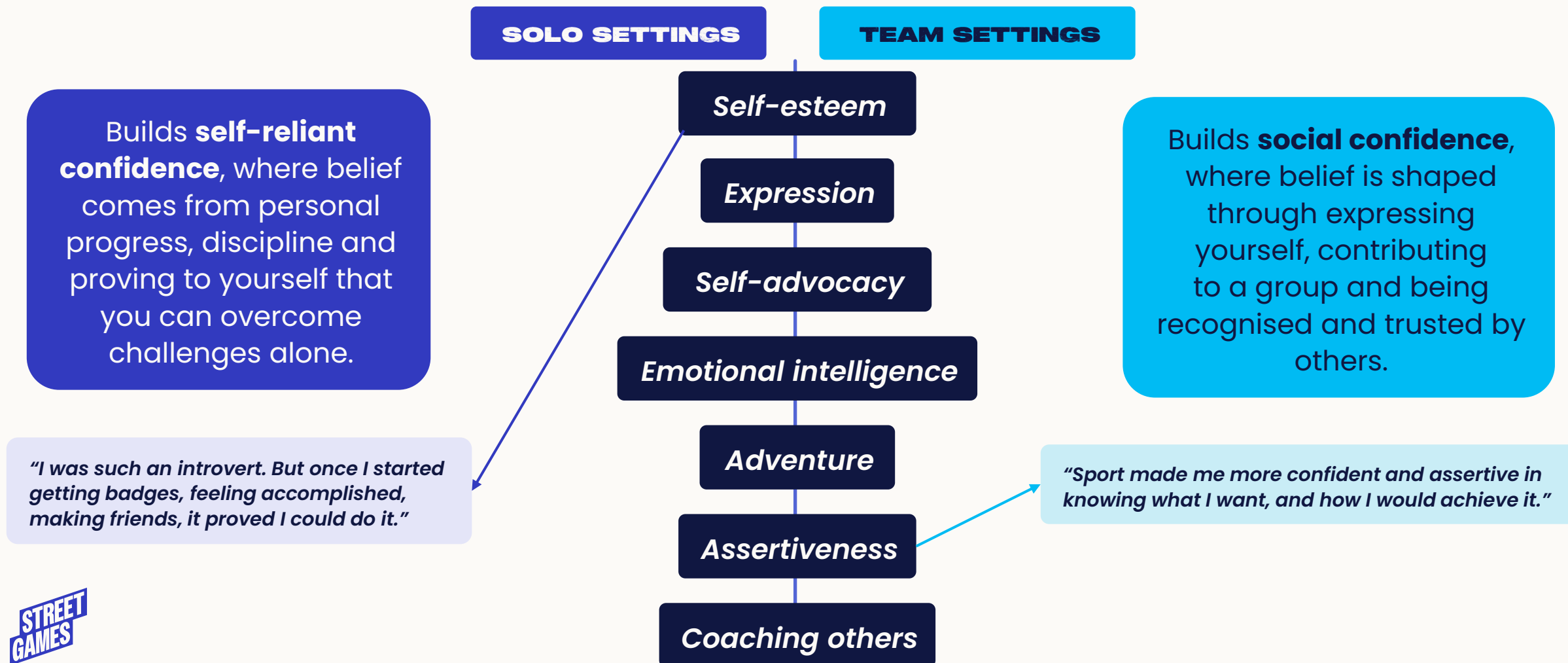
CONFIDENCE

Sport builds confidence that extends beyond the activity itself, shaping how young people navigate social, personal and professional situations.

OUTCOME:

CONFIDENCE

Through sport, not only do young people become more confident in their sporting abilities, but they also find that confidence spills into many corners of their lives and helping them in different ways.



FROM BYSTANDER TO PARTICIPANT TO LEADER

While many young people arrive in sport already confident and comfortable taking part, Michelle's journey started on the edges – watching rather than joining in. What followed wasn't instant, but a gradual shift from presence to participation, as confidence was built through encouragement, familiarity and trust.

Passive participant

Despite a keen interest in sport, Michelle's involvement was limited by a lack of personal confidence. She struggled with self-belief, where fear of the unknown (ie. Who the coach was, how the sessions ran) was preventing her from getting started. Without the comfort of friends to attend with her, Michelle opted to stay in the background.



"I was really quiet and shy. I had no one to go with... so, I just stood in the hall and watched the session."

Coach's belief

Through a subtle, but intentional act of encouragement from her coach, they helped to invite inclusion, support and a space to explore.



"My coach put their arm round my shoulder and said, 'look we really want you to take part'. I wouldn't be where I am now if it wasn't for that."

Active participant

Though not an instantaneous process, after a while, as she became more comfortable and capable, her confidence grew. She became actively engaged in sessions.



"Once I got into volunteering that's really when my confidence came out."

Active leader

Taking on active leadership roles further developed her confidence, offering a trajectory into a full-time development officer role.

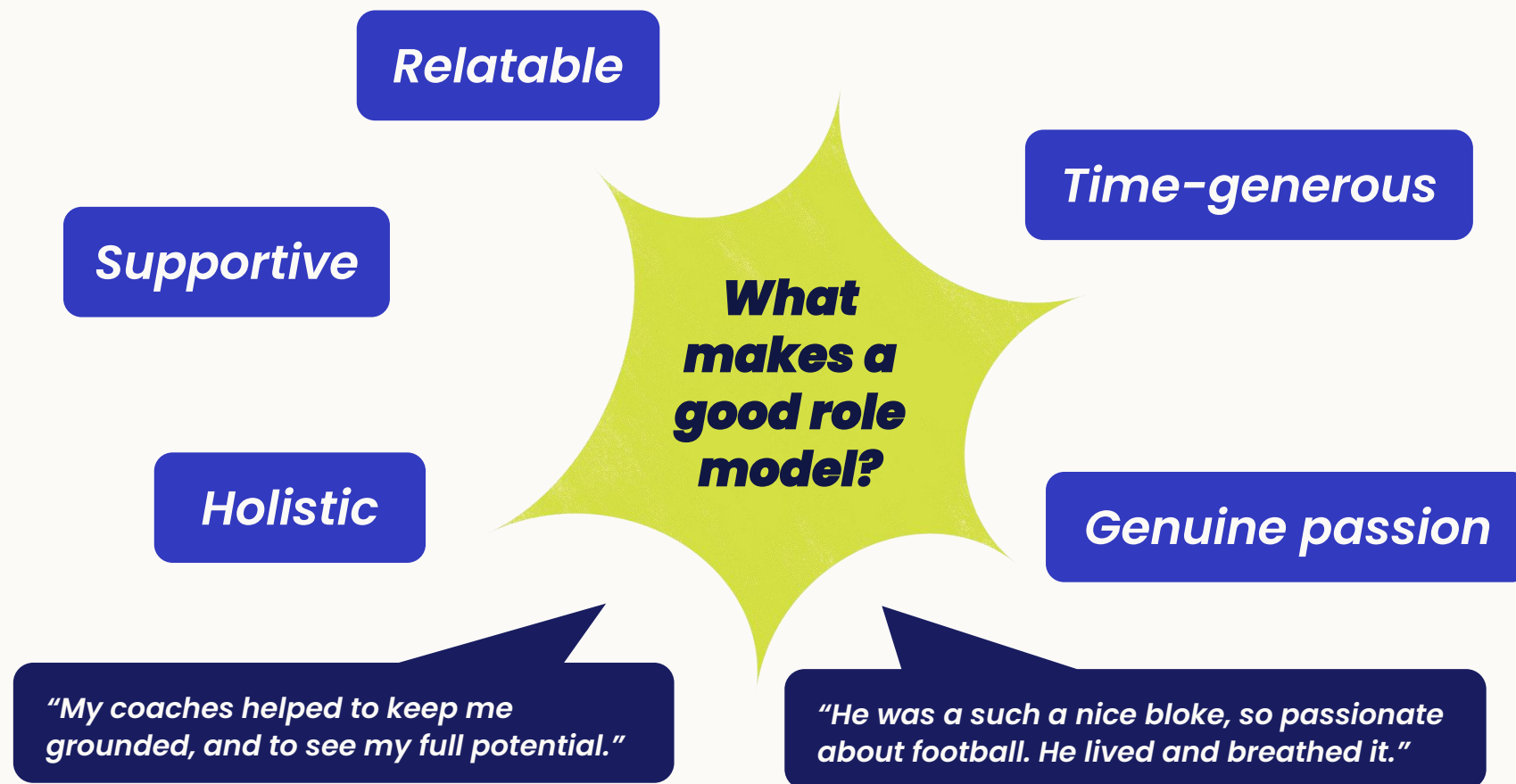


LEADERSHIP & COMMUNICATION

Sport provides real-world opportunities to practise leading, collaborating and expressing oneself, building transferable life skills.

KEY INGREDIENTS: THE ROLE MODEL

For many young people, having a strong role model in sport was a key catalyst to becoming confident and capable leaders and communicators themselves.



LESSONS FROM A ROLE MODEL

Role models look different for everyone. Both Nirushan and Jason gained valuable outcomes from their role model – but through different mechanisms, from hands-on mentoring to seeing what's possible.

Nirushan's role model: His school coach (formal support)

- Nirushan knew his school basketball coach for many years from early primary school through to adulthood.
- His coach mentored him with a holistic approach, not just teaching him about showing up in sport, but also within his academic and home life.
- Valuable life lessons were embedded into the very set-up of sports games. For example, his coach would make sure that less-skilled players got to take the shots, teaching collaboration and shared success. In this subtle way, his coach would teach him important life lessons beyond basketball.



"He was like Coach Carter, not just talking about basketball but finding out what you're doing outside of school...helping make you better in all aspects of life."

Jason's role model: His teammate (indirect support)

- For Jason, his role model was his teammate in his disability rugby team, who was also a famous national TV host – both an inspirational public figure and peer on the pitch.
- Though he was not a coach or mentor in the formal sense, he was a key role model for Jason in his approach and attitude towards disability.
 - In an indirect way, just through seeing someone like himself living openly and successfully as a disabled rugby player, this was hugely motivating for Jason.
- For Jason, it was more about visibility and representation than any kind of formal, or direct guidance.

"I had a real role model in my team who was very open about his disability, and he probably made me open up about it more, which was helpful"



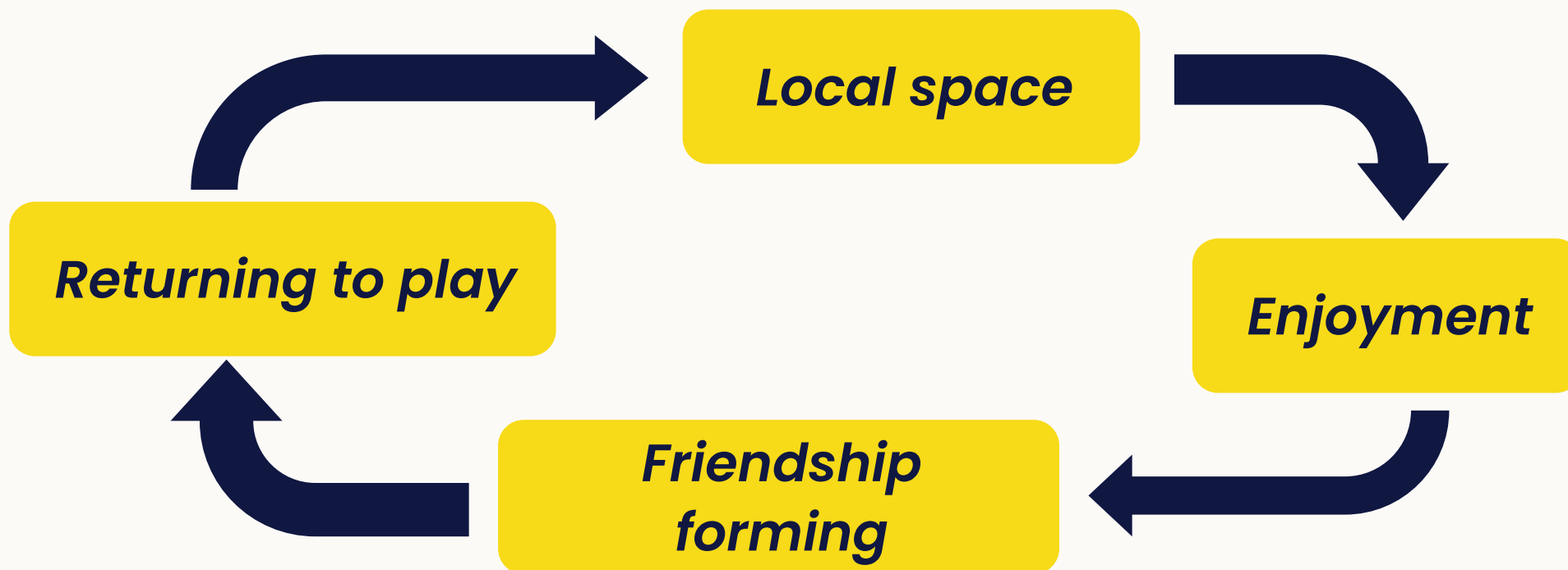


COLLECTIVE BELONGING

Shared sporting experiences create strong social bonds and a lasting sense of belonging within a community.

OUTCOME:**COLLECTIVE BELONGING**

Collective belonging isn't created in a single moment – it builds through repeated, positive experiences that keep young people coming back.



"My mates and I lived nearby. So, every night, I would just knock on my mates' door and say, 'Come and play football at the turf.'"

COLLECTIVE & SAFE SPACE

WHAT IS NEEDED?

These spaces work because they remove barriers and create a natural pull – making participation easy, social and part of everyday life.

Low-cost or free

Accessible

"Aged 12, my sister and I stumbled across Fight for Peace. We went in just to look around and see what it is, out of curiosity, and we ended up taking part in a Muay Thai session."

Effortless

"The Turf"
"The Hub"

Anchored by sport

"It's a 5-minute walk from my house. I just stumbled across it."

DIFFERENT SPACE, RICH CONNECTIONS

Informal, laid-back, peer-led

SOFIA

- Sofia's local 'turf' was an informal, basic, student-led area with no structure, but strong social pull.
- It thrived on spontaneity, where showing up was easy and participation felt natural rather than organised.
- The turf became a self-sustaining social space, where friendships formed through repeated, shared experiences without the need for staff or facilitation.



"Someone would bring a football and we'd all just be there."

"The astroturf was where all the sporty people went. It was really good, and that's where I made most of my friends even till now."

**STREET
GAMES**

Both Sofia and Aladdin found community spaces that were local, welcoming and meaningful. Though different in structure – one informal and peer-led, the other structured and staff-led – both created the conditions for connection, belonging and lasting friendships.

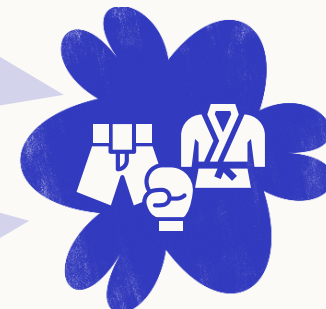
Structured, staff-led

ALADDIN

- His local Fight for Peace academy was an established, staff-run martial arts space, providing structure, consistency and guidance.
- It thrived on routine and regular participation, creating a sense of stability and progression.
- The presence of staff and mixed peer groups created a supported environment for connection, helping Aladdin build confidence and form friendships.

"It was the frontline staff that kept me coming back. They made the space memorable and enjoyable."

"I ended up finding a community that I was very comfortable with. I wasn't really good at making friends or finding my people until I came to the [boxing] academy."



[2CV]

OPENED EYES TO CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

Childhood sport can expand young people's sense of what's possible, opening up new and often unexpected career pathways.

MELISSA'S JOURNEY

...From setback to springboard

The Passion

Melissa's whole world was centred around playing sport.

She wanted to be a PE teacher when she grew up.



The Breaking Point

One day, she suffered an injury in high school.

She thought she would not be able to play sport again.



"I thought my life was over, and she [coach] said, your life is not over, there are lots of other things, you can do other than sports."

The Reframe

Two female coaches acted as key role models.

They encouraged her to be involved in sport in other ways – trying coaching.



The Discovery

With the motivation and guidance of her coaches, a difficult injury led to the discovery of new paths in sport, ultimately shaping her adult career.



"It opened my eyes to what sport could look like when I couldn't compete."

"There was an expectation that many of us [kids] would not go very far. So, it was nice to have that sense of achievement and hard work."

SPORT GROUND AS A SANCTUARY

Melissa's local sports centre wasn't just somewhere to play – it became a psychological anchor point in her life. A space where she felt safe, seen and able to express herself, helping her build confidence, identity and a sense of possibility.



WHY WAS THIS SPACE MEANINGFUL?

- The space provided psychological safety – a place where she could be herself without judgement or pressure.
- It offered a sense of belonging and social acceptance, helping her form meaningful peer connections.
- Playing sport, like netball, hockey and gymnastics, acted as an emotional outlet and form of regulation, providing escape, structure and stability.

"This was my sanctuary, where I felt most at home. A place where I could fully feel like I could be myself."

"This space represents hope... I was always championed to look outside of my bubble."

HOW DID THIS SPACE PROVIDE POSITIVE OUTCOMES?

- Consistency and proximity reduced friction, allowing repeated exposure – critical for building confidence and habit.
- Familiar coaches created trusted relationships, reinforcing feelings of safety and encouragement.
- Positive reinforcement from adults helped shape her self-perception and belief in her own ability.
- Exposure to different roles and pathways expanded her sense of what was possible for someone like her.

"I learnt that it's not just about what you do as an individual but it's how you impact others. I learnt that a lot in this location."

WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF THIS AS AN ADULT?

- Developed a strong internal sense of self-belief, rooted in early experiences of success and encouragement
- Built the confidence to express herself and take up space in different environments
- Learned to navigate and connect with different people, shaping her social confidence and leadership style

"Sport has given me opportunities I would never have had otherwise."



BROADENING HORIZONS

Sport exposes young people to new people, places and perspectives, building empathy and widening their view of the world.

VANESSA'S JOURNEY

...sparking social curiosity

What began as a limited, local experience of the world was expanded through exposure to new people and environments, ultimately shaping Vanessa into a more empathetic, outward-looking individual.

"The world is small"

Vanessa's early life was made up of the community in her immediate surroundings – family, friends, school. This was a relatively homogenous community, with limited opportunity to interact with diverse people, and few occasions to expand her world view beyond her surroundings.



Exposure

In high school, she attended StreetGames residentials. StreetGames residentials introduced her to people from different backgrounds, acting as a pivotal catalyst for perspective shift.

"I met young people from different backgrounds, who were experiencing things like being in care...they were from all walks of life"



"The world is big"

Through repeated interaction, she built empathy, communication skills and confidence in navigating difference. She took this curiosity further, becoming a mentor and volunteer.

She channelled the collaborative, empathetic approach with others.



Ripple Effect

These skills carried into adulthood, shaping her career in youth and social work and her desire to support others.



IN THE WORDS OF HER OWN TEACHER:

"Now that you're a coach, you've helped other children to achieve. You've changed many lives, just like how it impacted yours."



THE POWER OF SOCIAL MIXING

StreetGames residentials were a pivotal first step in opening up Vanessa's world, exposing her to people, perspectives and experiences that challenged her assumptions and reshaped how she saw herself and others.



WHY WAS THIS OPPORTUNITY IMPORTANT?

- Bringing together young people from different backgrounds disrupted her "normal", exposing her to ways of living and thinking beyond her immediate environment.
- This created a shift from familiarity → curiosity, helping her become more open to difference and enabling perspective-taking and comparison.
- Vanessa began to re-evaluate her own experiences.

HOW DID THIS SPACE PROVIDE POSITIVE OUTCOMES?

- StreetGames staff played a pivotal role, working collaboratively to support young people.
- Carefully facilitated mixing created meaningful interactions (not just exposure) helping young people open up and share their experiences.
- **"Individually all the staff played a part, but together it made them greater. They all bounced off each other."**

WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF THIS AS AN ADULT?

- Developed a more open and empathetic world view, shaping how she relates to people from different backgrounds
- Gained the ability to contextualise her own experiences, building resilience and perspective
- Chose a career in social care/youth work, driven by a desire to support others navigating similar challenges
- Carries forward a belief in the importance of exposure, connection and opportunity for young people

"You thought your situation and environment was one way and then someone else talks about their place. It made you think maybe my experiences aren't as bad because there's others that ultimately are experiencing worse."

IDENTITY SHAPING THROUGH SPORT

Through participation, sport becomes a key space where young people develop a sense of self, confidence and personal identity.

JASON'S JOURNEY

...sport as the canvas for identity development.

While Jason's life changed around him, sport stayed constant, giving him the space to move from fitting in, to accepting himself, to advocating for others.

I am confident

Through playing local football alongside his older brother, he gained confidence to be on the pitch, and work as a team.



I am capable

He was motivated to prove himself and match others' skill levels.
Learning how to adapt, rather than withdraw.



I am proud of who I am

Discovering disability sport in his 20s shifted his mindset from adapting to the "norm" to pride in difference.
"Disability sport helped me celebrate my difference, not hide it"



I am a leader

Taking on responsibility to coach, both in school and for his disability rugby team, leadership and communication skills became part of his identity.



I am a father

Now as a father, sport is not just something tied to his identity but now his family and young daughter's.



"I had to learn to catch a ball on my chest instead. It's important to have the space to fail and to bounce back from that; it builds resilience."

"The lessons taught in sport, and the attitudes gained through sport, have really set me up personally and professionally."



PROVIDING STRUCTURE & EMOTIONAL STABILITY

Sport works alongside stabilising structures like school to provide emotional release, routine and enrichment that support young people through challenging circumstances.

VICTORIA'S JOURNEY

...sport as enrichment.

As instability at home created uncertainty, school provided a necessary structure. Sport became an enrichment activity, layering an emotional release and purpose, working with school to support Victoria from coping to thriving.

Functioning

At home, life was unpredictable, finances were tight and opportunities for activities were very limited. For Victoria, growing up more about functioning, than thriving.



Stability

At school, the routine, and consistency it provided gave Victoria a sense of stability in life that she did not have at home.



Safety

Not only for routine, but by attending various after school clubs this offered an external space, away from home, that felt safe and secure from harm.



Thriving

Ultimately, through regular involvement in sport, physical activity became more than just safety and routine, it was transformative – helping with emotion regulation, resilience and motivation.



STREET GAMES

"Growing up in a broken home, it was quite negative in my household."

"Where we lived wasn't very safe, so my mum signed me up to as many after school clubs as possible to keep me safe. That's where I found out I was quite fast at running."

"For me, I liked running not just because I was good at it, but because of the freedom of it."

WHEN STRUCTURE MATTERS MOST

For Victoria, home chaos created a need, school provided a structure, and sport gave enrichment



WHY WAS STRUCTURE IMPORTANT?

- The structure provided through school and school sports clubs, like Athletics, created predictability and a sense of safety she didn't experience at home.
- The school track became a space where she could step away from instability and regain a sense of control.

"School gave me routine and structure, that I didn't have at home. I never knew what was going on."

HOW DID THIS PROVIDE POSITIVE OUTCOMES?

- Victoria's school coach was fundamental in encouraging her and building her confidence, particularly during the transition from primary to secondary school, helping her rebuild belief during a period of change.
- School offered accessible, free access to sport, where financial constraints had limited her opportunities, this became her consistent and reliable route into sport.

"Coming into high school was a big change. There are a lot of new people, and suddenly you're not the fastest anymore. My coach really helped to build back my confidence."

WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF THIS AS AN ADULT?

- Emotional regulation: using sport and running as a way to restore calm, process emotions and reset.
- Resilience: developing a "not giving up" mentality and the ability to recover from setbacks and keep going.

"Running has really had an impact on me in terms of helping me feel better, and with my mental health, as well as developing resilience."



**STREET
GAMES**

SUMMARY



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

1

Early entry into sport is made possible via accessible, local & low-cost opportunities – both through informal spaces like ‘turfs’ as well as formal spaces like school or clubs.

2

Unlocking impact goes beyond just sport – coaches, mentors and role models are the critical catalysts that help to transform sport from participation into life skill development.

3

A single moment can change a journey – whether through a coach’s behaviour, a new opportunity, or exposure to something new, this can act as a turning point which unlocks a new perspective within young people.

4

Sport becomes a vehicle for identity and personal development – the activity is the vessel for which confidence, leadership, resilience and self-expression emerge.

5

The impact of sport compounds over time – the benefits of sport often go beyond the individual. As young people go on to become volunteers, mentors and coaches, a ripple effect is created where those positive experiences are multiplied and passed on.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE SPORT SECTOR

Real impact sits at the intersection of the individual, the relationships around them, and the system they exist within — where access creates opportunity, people unlock it, and key moments turn it into lasting change.

1

**ARE WE MAKING IT EASY
ENOUGH TO GET IN AND
STAY IN?**

How can we remove friction across the journey, from first access through to sustained participation, especially for those most at risk of dropping out?

2

**ARE WE INVESTING
ENOUGH IN PEOPLE, NOT
JUST PROVISION?**

What would change if we prioritised recruiting, training and supporting the right adults as much as delivering the activity itself?

3

**ARE WE DESIGNING FOR
MOMENTS THAT MATTER?**

How can we intentionally create and recognise the small, pivotal moments that shift how young people see themselves and their futures?

IN THE WORDS OF OUR PARTICIPANTS

"It was great to be introspective; I hadn't really thought about the impact of sport and clubs I was part of when I was young, so it gave me a chance to understand how the experiences shaped the coaches who inspired me."

What have you gained or learned as a result of taking part in this research?

"What stayed with me most was realising the long-term impact those experiences have had on my life, both personally and professionally. Hearing different perspectives alongside revisiting my own memories gave me a new appreciation of how important sport, community and the opportunities available during childhood can be."

"It highlighted the importance of confidence, friendships, discipline and having positive adult role models. The thing that has stayed with me most is that the quality of the people leading programmes can have a lasting impact on young people, sometimes more than the sport itself."

IN THE WORDS OF OUR PARTICIPANTS

"It always has to be people before programme, so you can deliver long-term lasting impact where people feel equipped to deliver the interventions."

Do you think sport and youth sectors are investing enough in people, not just provision of programmes?

"If the sector placed as much emphasis on recruiting, training and supporting good people as it does on delivering programmes, I think we would see more young people developing confidence, skills and a lasting involvement in sport. Programmes can get people through the door, but it is often the support, guidance and influence that keep them there."

"Better recruitment, training and ongoing support for staff would likely improve participation, wellbeing and long-term outcomes because young people are more likely to stay engaged when they have positive relationships with the adults around them."

IN THE WORDS OF OUR PARTICIPANTS

"They need more support, collaboration between schools and organisations, and a whole-neighbourhood approach to make this work. That's through a shared vision, resources to equip each partner, and complementing each other's strengths."

**Are sport and youth
organisations making it
easy enough for young
people to get in and stay
in sport?**

"Ultimately, young people are more likely to stay involved when they feel valued, supported and part of something. Sport should adapt to meet their needs, rather than expecting them to adapt to the sport."

"Cost, transport, lack of awareness, confidence and feeling like you don't fit in can all stop young people from taking part. Organisations could remove these barriers by offering more affordable sessions, providing equipment, making activities easier to access, offering flexible programmes and creating welcoming, inclusive environments."



Let's talk.

Intelligent Insights. Bold Decisions.

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