Psychodynamic Practice: Individuals, Groups and Organisations

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rpco20

Sport and Thought. Football as therapy: A year in the life of an inner city project

Daniel Smyth

a London, UK

Published online: 28 Mar 2014.

To cite this article: Daniel Smyth (2014) Sport and Thought. Football as therapy: A year in the life of an inner city project, Psychodynamic Practice: Individuals, Groups and Organisations, 20:2, 104-115, DOI: 10.1080/14753634.2014.894222

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14753634.2014.894222

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE
Sport and Thought. Football as therapy: A year in the life of an inner city project

Daniel Smyth*

London, UK

(Received 10 December 2013; accepted 26 January 2014)

‘Sport and Thought. Football as therapy, A year in the life of an inner city project’ is a paper based on a way of working that fuses football and psychodynamic thinking. The project was set up at inner city all-boys secondary school in London and was created in response to the growing need for a therapeutic intervention which was accessible to adolescent boys who would not engage via more traditional therapeutic routes. The project works with adolescents experiencing behavioural and emotional difficulties.

Sport and Thought is a way of working with adolescents that fuses the sport of football, psychodynamic thinking and theory to create a space to encourage thought and act as a catalyst to promote emotional and behavioural change. Sport and Thought believes an individual’s reactions within a sporting context are no different to a societal one, and thus the sport of football can be used to enable participants to consider their own emotional and behavioural traits, and the underlying reasoning behind them.

Keywords: containment; anxiety; football; adolescents; aggression; externalisation

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)

The initial stages

This paper is about a year spent working with a group of 20 adolescent boys aged 13 in inner London. The work took place at an all-boys secondary school in an area experiencing social deprivation and high levels of both street gang activity and the use and distribution of drugs.

The project requested to initially work with 12 boys who the school felt were most at risk. This was the original cohort, which over a number of months was swelled by additional arrivals who found their way to a project that could be of help to them. Our final number was 20 boys.

*Email: daniel@sportandthought.co

© 2014 Taylor & Francis
The boys who engaged with the project were all deemed by their school to be at high risk of educational breakdown or permanent school exclusion. The cohort was made up in its entirety of boys who were either first or second generation migrants to the UK. The majority of the boys who attended the project had difficult home lives. A high percentage of them featured physically or emotionally absent fathers and, in some cases, emotionally disengaged mothers.

The project took place on a Friday afternoon during term time. It ran from 3:30 pm until 5 pm, thus was after school hours. Attendance was by choice and not compulsory.

The team was made up of two Football Association (FA) employees who were trained football coaches, a school mentor/youth worker and I.

I ran this programme jointly with the Brent Centre for Young People, and the FA ‘Get Involved Scheme’. FA employees based at the Wembley National Stadium Complex became actively involved in this project.

The name of the project was Sport and Thought.

My name is Daniel Smyth; I am a psychodynamic counsellor with a background in both youth work and work with adolescents misusing substances. I am the creator of this project and its thinking.

**Why Sport and Thought was created**

The idea to create a project that took therapeutic thinking to an outside, non-clinical environment and onto a football pitch arose due to my own experience of working with adolescent boys expressing quite severe levels of emotional and behavioural disturbance within the London Borough of Brent.

Through my work in secondary schools in different boroughs, I encountered a high number of boys with complex needs who were experiencing developmental difficulties. I came across a group of boys who found it very difficult to think and who experienced any attempt to think about themselves and their difficulties as both humiliating and persecutory.

The way in which this particular group of adolescents coped with such difficulties was externalising what was taking place inside of them through the use of violence and gang affiliation, thus projecting their disturbance out and defending the self against the anxiety that such thoughts and feelings may evoke.

My exposure to this group of boys over a long period of time led me to begin to consider the need to create a way of working that would allow such individuals to gain access to an intervention that would help them therapeutically without raising humiliating or persecutory feelings.

My work experience with such boys in more traditional clinical spaces using both individual and group interventions had shown me that such feelings were very present making the work very difficult. This was in part due to the adolescent’s inability to cope with the space, as they removed themselves from it either mentally or physically by literally walking out.
Also, the decision to attempt to fuse sport and thinking arose in part due to the popularity of football – especially the Premier League amongst many young people. It was very apparent that the popularity of the game amongst adolescents was not necessarily and purely on sporting grounds; it was seen more as a potential way of escape from the reality of their lives into that of the ‘idealised’ footballers and their lavish salaries and 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 role of the premiership footballer as role model, something ‘to aspire to be’.

I had seen personally the young men who were idolised 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 their frustrations, other times reacting to the decisions of the referee during match time or being on the front page of weekend tabloid newspapers due to various misdemeanours.

Such actions by those who are held in such high esteem by so many led me to think about individual’s reactions on the football pitch. I wondered if the way they behaved was mirroring how they generally led their lives away from the sporting contest. I began to see a pattern, to notice that those that were unable to contain themselves in a sporting context had the same difficulty in a societal one.

Consequently, this thought process led me to consider the possibility of working with adolescents using football as the vehicle to enable them to consider their behaviour, as from my observations I concluded that the behaviour of both the professional footballers and the adolescents I was working with was the same: the only way they could expel their internal difficulties was to act out.

I sought to create a space where the young people could begin to learn about themselves and their emotional and behavioural 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 pre-conceived 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).

**How Sport and Thought works**

*Sport and Thought* is a way of working with adolescents that fuses psychodynamic thinking and the actual playing of football to encourage thought about one’s self and to encourage emotional and behavioural change.

The ethos of *Sport and Thought* is that an individual’s reactions on a sporting field will be no different to their reaction in a societal situation. If one
reacts aggressively to a perceived wrong in the field of play or has difficulty with another player being within their proximity, 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 externalisation of the individual’s mind, and the way the person treats the football, how they work with it, is very much in synchronicity with their internal state of being.

The majority of the work – as 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 they offer containment and a boundary – like that of our mind.

The coned out ‘contained’ space 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 in a safe space much like that of a consulting room.

*Sport and Thought* concentrates on engaging the individual with the football in an attempt to begin to bring an internal structure to what is otherwise a chaotic state of being.

The project encourages its cohort 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, to be constantly moving and thinking, or as we state within the project, to be ‘on your toes’. This is to ensure 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 thought is that to play the ball on the ground and to move into space to receive a pass, or to give another player an option, takes an ability to think. This is something that the boys found very difficult at the beginning of the project.

This difficulty is due to their internal state of mind, and is visualised via the inability to play football in the thoughtful fashion that we promote. Instead, the ball is kicked with full brute force wildly in the air and over distance, allowing a visual perspective of the difficulties that are taking place within the mind and attempting to project such difficulties as far away as possible from the self. It is then chased by the group in a very chaotic and singular way due to the difficulty in both thinking about what is taking place and also the difficulty in 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 due to how they were feeling internally. That was their initial approach to the game of football.

As a result, we felt the only answer to the boys’ internal difficulties was to literally smash the football as hard as possible in an attempt to alleviate internal violent and chaotic feelings, but also as a way to ensure that we at *Sport and Thought* could externally see what was taking place inside them.

Oberndorf (1951) makes a very interesting point when discussing his patient and his playing of the ball game golf. He stated:

> 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

The ball is 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 see and measure the level of internal difficulty and chaos that the individual is experiencing.

When thinking about the game of golf, F. Robbins writes in the Journal of American Psychoanalytic Association (1963, p. 828): ‘In order to swing the golf club correctly, it must anatomically become an extension of the left arm’. The same applies to the football in Sport and Thought. It becomes an extension of the mind and allows the boys who partake 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, with the outcome being their ability to work within the coned out box and to not seep beyond its boundary. This internal shift is shown to the therapist through the increased ability of the boys to think and cope with the session and space. Initially, the boys can see their progression via their increased technical ability with the football.

The difficulties that are expressed within the session are verbalised back to the adolescents. They are stressed but generally not to the individual, and those difficulties are always linked to external situations outside of the football pitch. This allows the cohort to link their behaviours and difficulties.

For example, if the cohort have difficulty in listening and internalising 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 also get the cohort to think about what the possible outcome would be, stressing that within our session there would be no negative outcome, only a chance to think about it. Such thoughts are always placed and left into 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, and allow the emphasis to remain on the football and less so on the self.

The work

Winnicott’s thoughts were the inspiration for the thinking and way of working that was to become the backbone to Sport and Thought. I wondered about the boy’s ability to allow themselves to play and also how we would interpret what we saw taking place. This difficulty was only magnified when, after
many months of preparation, we undertook the first *Sport and Thought* session on 5 February 2011.

At the beginning of the project the boys were uncontained in their behaviour, expressing their inability to work as a team and desire to just ‘smash’ the football forwards. The sessions were dominated by flying footballs, venomous words and fists. (Extract from diary of the project)

The session was a harsh reality to the fantasy I had created in my own mind about how I hoped we could work with these boys. My idea of thoughtful contained football, with a space to interject verbally and add comment about what may be taking place, was quite brutally taken apart in the space of one hour and thirty minutes. This group of boys showed all of their internal pain and difficulty by the way they physically and verbally flooded the space.

Yet, upon reflection, it was clear to see that the boys who had partaken in this very first session had worked very hard through their play and had given us the opportunity ‘to get to know the child’s various reactions, the strength of its aggressive impulses or of its sympathies’ (Freud, 1946/1959).

During the weeks following our first session, my team and I worked to create a safe space for the boys to bring their difficulties. The boys were aware from my continued discussion with them that nobody would be removed from my session, punished or reported to the school if they expressed difficulties such as fighting. Instead, the boys would be asked about why such a situation may have developed. I would put my thoughts about the possible reasoning behind the behaviour out to the group or the individuals involved, never seeking an answer, just letting the thought sit in the arena and let the boys do with it what they pleased. In the words of Robbins (1963), the sporting arena and the game played become a space for ‘adaption and working out conflict’.

**Think, not act**

Aside from creating a safe environment for the boys, the basis of *Sport and Thought* was to encourage the ability to think, and to think at all times. Our mantra became ‘think, not act’.

At all times the boys were encouraged to consider what was taking place within the session, why a pass went astray or a drill broke down. This was the complete opposite to the norm for them, where acting on their anxieties and impulses was what they did.

The drills we devised for the project were designed to encourage the boys to engage the brain and to focus on the task at hand. The emphasis at all times was on controlling the football and their anxieties. We encouraged the boys to put a foot on the ball, to slow things down and make space and time for themselves on the pitch. Not to get caught up in the anxiety of what was going on around them. To step back for a split second and think, then pick the pass they wanted to play.
We would talk about famous football players who were always able to make ‘mental’ time for themselves during the chaos of the sporting contest, and literally put a foot on the ball and look around the pitch and think about their array of choices prior to moving the ball on to the next team member. Questions were thrown out to the group about why this may be, but also during all drills and games we vocalised to the boys the need to slow down their thinking to gain control of the football, constantly communicating with them throughout the duration of the session and supporting them in their learning.

Therefore, the way Sport and Thought works with such thought processes is encouraging the boys to make space in their minds and link the drills to the external situations away from the here and now. We encourage them to link up, for example, a classroom situation that provokes anxiety or difficult feelings with the same feeling or anxiety arisen on the football pitch. Thus, the boys are able to think about the situation and difficulty without it feeling persecutory or humiliating in any way.

Sport and Thought: more than a game

The opening months of the project highlighted the level of difficulty the boys had in listening, thinking, observing and sharing. Many of their internal difficulties were externalised within the sessions with footballs being literally smashed in all directions, instructions being completely ignored, and constant acting out behaviour between the group members such as punching, pushing, kicking, and verbal humiliation of each other. At the most basic level, the boys could not manage to bring the appropriate kit or footwear. During the early part of the project we were running the sessions in an indoor gymnasium and we had a number of boys playing in school shoes or in their socks, wearing trousers and shirts. As the project progressed the group members gradually began playing in trainers, with many wearing appropriate clothing, which was a significant shift from the initial sessions. (Extract from diary of the project)

In contrast to the difficulties that were being expressed to my coaches and I on a weekly basis via the physical sessions at the school, the group membership continued to expand and grow. The additional members began to appear at the start of the sessions, accompanying boys who had been engaging with us via the referral system that we had put into place. We chose to accept these new arrivals without any referral process due to them ‘finding’ the project and attempting to access a source of help. The boys – whether consciously or not – were aware that Sport and Thought was more than a game of football after school: it was something that could be of help to the individual and the group.

The increase of the cohort size brought with it additional difficulties due to the inability to share both physical and emotional space. The original group members vocalised their concerns about the group growing in size, verbally attacking new members – who were also school peers. It felt very much that the boys were concerned that with the increase in membership, my team and I
would not be able to continue to feed them and to offer them a containing and nurturing space – very much like Melanie Klein’s (1975) ‘good breast’.

The boys’ choice of words to put another group member down was very much racially related, concerning the darkness of the skin. The boys chose to use the Afrikaan word of ‘blick’ also to push other group members out of the project.

We repeatedly challenged the boys on the use of this word and questioned the reasoning behind their use of it. We explained its origins and verbalised why we may put another down. At no point were any members removed from the session but, instead, once we had spoken with the group, they would then have to partake in a group run around the diameters of the football pitch. The boys would have to run alongside another group member (in a pair) and the group would run as a unit, one pair after another, having to keep in position and at the same pace. The idea was that the boys had an opportunity to think about what we had just spoken about. And more importantly, that by running along the lines of the pitch they would internalise its box like containing structure, a structure that would relax them and contain their internal difficulties without the need to project them outwards into the group.

This drill was and continues to be used within sessions when the cohort become unfocussed or have difficulties listening to what is being said, as well as thinking. Although it is not a punishment in the traditional sense, it allows the boys to see and feel the boundary of our work together, and allows them to understand when they have crossed the boundary and why.

**Receiving and feeling worthy**

A further difficulty arose for the boys when, due to having obtained a small amount of funding, the project was able to provide a piece of fruit and drink for each group member upon completion of the session. What was to be an opportunity to finish each weekly programme with something nice in the form of the fruit and drink initially caused the group great difficulty in allowing themselves to receive and feel worthy of the gift.

Although happy to receive drinks and fruit, the boys found the experience difficult, spraying the drinks around and throwing the bottles and fruit on the floor as if they felt not worthy of being looked after. After one session in which the boys had displayed difficult behaviour, one of the boys spoke to the therapist as he was about to distribute the end of session fruit, saying that they ‘did not deserve to be treated’. This comment reflected his awareness of the difficulties within the group, but also maybe the confusion about the way the adults continued to work with them and ‘treat’ them even when there had been a difficult session. (Extract from diary of the project)

Very much like the behaviour that the group displayed via the practical football sessions, the boys managed to continue to allow us to see their level of internal
disturbance through their actions with the food that we were able to provide. Again, through verbalising what may possibly have been taking place for the group and their reasoning behind an inability to accept a gift and need to spoil something that may be good, we witnessed both internal and external progression. As the weeks developed, and in line with the boys’ footballing progression, so did the ability of the boys to accept the food each week and gradually begin to place the rubbish in a bag provided. Initially not all were able to manage the task, but by the end of the project litter was no longer an issue, as on a weekly basis the boys put their rubbish in a bag and placed it in the bin.

In my mind, this progression signalled an internal shift away from feeling rubbish and needing to project this feeling outwards by literally rubbishing the environment in which they were, to an ability to begin to think more and be self aware, and thus reducing the need to externalise all internal difficulties.

Throughout the time spent working with this group of boys, our ability to offer stability and containment was repeatedly tested. The expectations of adults, and adult males, were such that the group expected to be dropped at any time in a re-enactment of their experiences of absent fathers, either in a practical sense or an emotional one.

Authority and roles

When the facilitating environment is good enough, then the maturational process has its chance. (Winnicott, 1965, p. 239)

When giving thought to how we would run the Sport and Thought sessions, I was heavily influenced by the working structure of ‘thinking’ groups that I had run in various schools over the previous five years alongside both male and female mentors. These groups worked with adolescent boys aged 13 or 14 deemed to be at high risk of educational and societal exclusion.

Such groups would have the mentor actively engaging in conversation within the group with myself offering thoughts or simple interpretations at various points within the session. The thoughts or interpretations offered would be relevant to the discussion that had been taking place.

The structure of these groups, with two adults taking leadership, but differing roles, aided the creation of a ‘parental’ structure with the two leads being split into mother and father roles even if they were of the same sex.

This same structure was implemented with the Sport and Thought project.

The coaches and mentors were to have hands on, nurturing relationship with the boys. Actively working alongside the cohort in the development of their footballing technique much like a mother playing with her young child to facilitate their cognitive and physical development.

My role, although active in a practical sense within the session, taking part in the various drills, was also to stand back and observe what was taking place.
within both positive and negative connotations and to verbally offer thought on what may be taking place. In doing so it felt that my role within the group was to take the position of father, the figure of paternal authority, holding the anxiety of both the group and coaches, and thus allowing the work to be undertaken.

Initially the boys were everywhere but the box in which we wanted them to work. We verbalised what we could see and that it appeared difficult to stay within a more confined space and why this may be. The boys spoke of it feeling claustrophobic. We linked this to how class may feel at times and how it could result in more difficult feelings and behaviour for the boys. (Extract from diary of the project)

The vignette underlines how roles were taken and is an example of how we worked within the programme. The coaches would run drills, working with the cohort and I would make comment on the task and its potential difficulties. By working in such a way I felt it allowed for a positive split in the groups leadership, enabling the cohort to work within an arena facilitated by a strong boundary (my role/position) but with a softer more nurturing core (coaches/mentors). The resulting different working styles allowed for a level of attachment between the cohort, coaches (mothers) and myself (father) to develop due to offering a stable ‘good enough’ parental couple.

For many of the cohorts, this would have been a very new experience, especially, with regards to their experience of fathers either present or absent and their expectation of adult males.

Outcomes from the year spent together

By Christmas 2011 I was informed by the lead school mentor that the boys who have been attending the project had been progressing well at school, becoming more able to remain in class, with less acting out behaviour. I was slightly surprised by the mention of certain group members who were now doing well, as they were the individuals who were having difficulties at the Friday sessions. It appeared that the boys were now appropriately bringing their more difficult behaviour to the sessions and feeling more able to cope with school. We felt this very much showed the group’s ability to now think and not act.

One issue that has been consistent throughout the running of the programme has been the high number of group members who are not present at the start of the session due to being in detention.

For our penultimate session of the term we had a full group membership from the start of the group with not one member in detention. This felt very pivotal in the life of the project. This would have meant that the group members would have had to behave in every lesson for the whole academic week and showed my team and I, the school and the boys, how far they have come. We spoke about this with the group, who were very proud of their achievement.
This trend was to continue all the way through to the end of the project in July 2012. (Extract from diary of the project)

As the diary extract above shows, by the end of December 2011, the cohort had begun to make significant internal changes. Changes that were not only being shown to us via their ability to undertake the drills within the weekly *Sport and Thought* sessions, and play football in a very thoughtful and contained way, but more importantly their learning from our work was crossing over into their everyday lives.

The school and I began to collate data with regards to those boys who were working with the *Sport and Thought* programme. We initially recorded classroom removal data from April 2011 and continued to record the data each month until July 2012. We also recorded individual school attendance during this time frame.

Our findings were promising. During the first month of recording the behavioural data (April 2011), the 20 boys who made up the projects cohort were involved in 120 classroom removals and school-related behavioural incidents. By December 2011, these incidents were reduced to 36 for the entire cohort: a reduction of 70%. By the end of the project in July 2012, that number had reduced to just 10 incidents: a reduction of 92.3%.

Each month from April 2011 when we first started recording the data, there was a month on month decrease in behavioural-related school-based incidents. During this time, the cohort also managed to increase their ability to attend school by 61%, averaging an attendance record of 95% compared to the rest of the school average of 91%.

At the time of writing (April 2013), all of the boys who worked with the project remain in school and their ability to think about themselves and their behaviour remains strong. I continue to follow the boys, collecting their behavioural data on a termly basis.

For the autumn term of 2012, the first term that the boys had to stand alone following the conclusion of the project, the highest number of classroom removals was, not surprisingly, at the start and end of the term, with 19 and 22 removals for the 20 boys over a monthly period. The remaining months of the term saw the removal data be consistent at 15 removals for the cohort per month.

Aligned to the vast reduction in behavioural incidents, the school also provided the educational data during the period that the group ran for the core subjects of Maths and English. The national expectation of progression in both subjects for the time period that the *Sport and Thought* programme ran was two sub-levels of progress or .67 progressions. The minimum progression during this time for the adolescents engaged with *Sport and Thought* was one whole level, with some group members progressing by more than three levels. This has allowed us to see the link between the individual’s internal state of mind and educational achievement.
One of the group members who the school had placed in the category of being at high risk of permanent school removal at the start of the project has since gone on to take a GCSE exam early, passing with a C grade.

Although the original Sport and Thought project on which this paper is based has finished, a new cohort of 19 boys started working with the programme at the Harlesden-based school in the autumn of 2012 and are making behavioural and emotional progress. The project has now started a second programme in a secondary school in south-east London, and by September 2013 had expanded to a total of six projects across London.

Acknowledgements
The author would like to thank the coaches and mentors for all of the hard work, the Football Association for supporting the programme and all those who supported the writing of this paper.

Notes on contributor
Daniel Smyth is a psychodynamic counsellor based in London. This is his first published paper. He works full-time running Sport and Thought, Football as Therapy as a Social Enterprise.

References