

School of Hard Knocks



School of Hard Knocks has become a well known and loved charity in a relatively short period of time (founded in 2012) because its rugby themed course that supports unemployed adults has been documented annually by Sky Sports.

In January 2015, the charity launched a new programme, 'SOHK for Schools' in East London, which is now being delivered further across the capital and most recently in Cardiff, South Wales. Most of the children we work with are struggling for motivation and a sense of engagement with school; others are in need of increased personal confidence and a sense of wellbeing. Others still are on the cusp of permanent exclusion from mainstream education. Many are a combination of all three.

The courses for adults are necessarily short (just eight weeks) as our aim is to get participants into full time employment as quickly as possible, although ongoing mentoring is offered as post-course support. Our approach to working with children is very different in respect to the length of time we work with them which is one session per week, *every* week of the school year from year 9 through to year 11. The essential thinking however, is the same; that is, to use sport – specifically rugby and boxing – as the means of personal transformation.

The results of an independent study at the Glasgow Caledonian University Department of Forensic Psychology suggested that the success of School of Hard Knocks delivery is founded upon three well-established psychological principles: self control, social bonds and self efficacy.

Self control

Consider for a moment what happens every weekend in the inner cities of the UK when people, for whatever reason, square up to each other with violent intent. The outcomes are seldom positive. A desire not to lose face, especially when fuelled by alcohol or even the encouragement of bystanders – all too often leads to serious injury, possible imprisonment and the resulting loss of employment or at least a loss of prospects. This isn't a small problem in our country: in the year ending June 2015, the police recorded 26,535 offences involving a knife or sharp instrument, a 4% increase compared with the previous year (Source: Office of National Statistics).

Now consider what happens when a defender playing Rugby Union lines up their ball-carrying opponent. To the casual or uninitiated viewer, Rugby can appear anything *but* controlled at this point of

contact, but that would be a complete misunderstanding of what is actually happening, because even before that moment of ‘violent’ collision, both players are thinking about what needs to be done in order to serve the overarching goal of their respective teams: the ball carrier is considering how to manage his body through the tackle in such a way that the ball is presented towards his own team mates, thus giving them every chance to maintain possession. The defender is thinking about completing the tackle and then, in accordance with the law of the game, releasing the player he has tackled and then getting out of the way despite the almost overwhelming urge to do otherwise and get hold of the ball!

Do rugby players manage to do this perfectly? Of course not! However there is a discipline and thinking process that is coached into the minds of players that for the most part trumps the desire to transgress.

When participants go through the SOHK course, we are encouraging them through the rugby coaching to recalibrate their responses to those moments of confrontation with a disciplined mindset. This comes through repetition and practice, just like most learned behaviours.

Interviewing SOHK course graduates in Glasgow more than six months after they finished, Kate Thompson (of GCU) found this newly accessed sense of self-control to be a recurring theme amongst the cohort. One participant said a:

“I’m not as angry as I used to be... I don’t need to voice every opinion... I don’t get as agitated... it’s down to that [SOHK].”

Another said: *“It gave me control back. I think if SOHK hadn’t of come along then... I don’t know..”*

The early evidence is that this approach to consciously use the physicality of the sport to increase self control is working in SOHK for Schools where there has been, in just two terms, a 71% reduction in referrals for behaviour amongst the most disengaged year 9 pupils.

Social Bonds

It never ceases to amaze me how quickly SOHK participants within weeks of joining a course become such a tightly knitted group. Even this week when coaching a session, I brought the lads together and asked what they had learned from the morning’s session. Hoping for some feedback even vaguely to do with rucking, I got something far better when someone said: *“That we are becoming a team.”* Three weeks earlier, most of the group had never met each other before.

How does this happen? Part of the answer lies in creating a corporate sense of purpose. We give participants on our rugby courses a somewhat sobering challenge: *“In eight weeks time, even if you have never held a rugby ball before – you are going to play a game against an established team.”* This really focuses the mind and, more often than not, produces the goods in rugby terms. The real and lasting change comes however in the creation of powerful and positive social bonds amongst the players as they realise that the only way to meet this challenge is to work together. To become a team.

Some participants have immense and complex barriers standing in the way of where they want to be in life; one such person is Adam who went through a SOHK course in 2014: *“For me, it has gone a long way in terms of building new friendships. With rugby came true acceptance even for all my faults. It gave me a sense of belonging and with that, a sense of purpose as well.”*

Andy in Glasgow said: *“SOHK helped me get back control of my life and gave me something to belong to – it’s like a family.”*

Of course this is not a unique claim - there is no end of evidence across all team sports that shared powerful experiences in sport, be they positive or negative, create strong bonds. One of the challenges

we make to participants is to take hold of that new found appreciation of these social bonds and apply it to other areas of their lives: their neighbours, their families, their friends and eventually, their colleagues.

Self efficacy

One former participant wrote about life before the course:

"I had nothing to wake up to in the morning. So I was just sitting about the house with no money, not really being able to do stuff for myself...I used to sleep till 3:00 or 4:00 in the afternoon, because I didn't feel like there was anything to get up for in the first place."

This is not untypical. Many, if not the vast majority of SOHK participants are disengaged and consequently feel utterly disempowered. A lack of self belief is a recurring theme amongst both age groups we work with. In many ways, this is our biggest challenge, as that lack of belief combined with a lack of structure and sense of purpose becomes a huge barrier to employment. The third psychological principle that SOHK is based upon therefore is that of self efficacy. This is essentially about an individual's belief in his or her ability and capacity to accomplish a task or to deal with the challenges of life.

It is vital that our coaches and staff truly believe this and, generally, in human potential as, through every aspect of delivery, this key message is constantly repeated: *"You are capable of achieving far more than you can imagine, if you put in the necessary amount of work"*.

The sporting element of our programmes reinforce this. In rugby especially, participants are usually able to reflect back on the journey they have made and see remarkable progress in a relatively short period of time. After the initial 'high' that comes from the first week of rugby related games that are essentially high octane and 'fun', there is usually a temporary 'dip' in terms of sheer enjoyment as they grapple with the fundamentals of passing backwards to take the ball forwards! By the time they have played their final game however they can see the progress and this enables the coaches to say to them:

"Remember what you were like just eight weeks ago – and see what you have done today! If you can achieve this much on a rugby pitch in just two months, can you imagine what you are capable of achieving in the next two years in all areas of life?"

This is an incredibly empowering message that becomes deeply embedded in the minds of participants as they continue their life's journey. This is more than a 'pre-match' motivational talk however; we have a very clearly defined 'SOHK psychology' that is applied to every coaching session, classroom session and one to one conversation which ensures that we go way beyond that of mere diversionary activity. A key part of this is the promotion of a 'growth mindset'.

A *fixed* mindset assumes that a person's situation is fixed and can't change; therefore there is no point in making an effort to change at all. With a growth mindset, the assumption is that things can change and that skills can be both acquired and developed. Here the individual acknowledges the choice they have in everything they do and the responsibility they have for their own individual situation. In other words, realistic ambitions can be achieved with hard work and effective, deliberate practice.

Programmes Manager, Nathan Persaud, says: *"At SOHK, we challenge fixed mindsets from the outset. Within the sports coaching sessions this can be put across in fairly robust terms but in the one-to-one conversations we can do this a little less confrontationally. Both settings enable participants to get an awareness of where they are holding themselves back by having a fixed view of something."*

When a participant starts to access this mindset, through constant coaching and practice on the sports field or in the boxing gym, it slowly begins to take root in other areas of where they start to take responsibility and work that bit harder. Their sense of self efficacy begins to grow because they are getting praise and positive feedback.

The day to day reality of course is not always that neat. Many people we work with have multiple and often complex barriers between where they are now and where they want to be. One year 9 pupil who was incredibly quiet and seemed more or less disinterested in the weekly rugby sessions recently opened up to the coach/mentor. It transpired that social services had removed him from his own home and placed him into temporary fostering care. He said: “School of Hard Knocks is the only thing in my life I look forward to.” This is at once, gut-wrenchingly sad but also hugely encouraging – because while we are the first to admit we are ourselves still on a steep learning curve, we know that we are on to something that works. A lot of care, a lot of discipline and a lot of sport - it’s not rocket science!

Ken Cowen, CEO & Founder