

Right to the Street Podcast - Episode 8: Sport

Introduction

Eve: Welcome to the Right to the Streets edition of the GM Moving Podcast. Join the conversation about what makes our streets, parks, and public spaces joyful, welcoming places for people to be and to be active. Join me, Eve Holt, Strategic Leader at GreaterSport on the journey around the streets. As we explore people's freedom to move about without fear, in each episode we hear about the roles we can all play to make where we live, work, and play places where all women and girls feel they belong and are invited to be active.

We gather stories, experiences, and ideas as we speak to strategic leaders, decision makers, and lots of local people who are creating the conditions in place for everyday moving and active lives for all.

This is the last episode of the current series of the Right to the Streets GM Moving podcast. We certainly couldn't finish the series without exploring one of the biggest attractions in Trafford. Sport. The area is home to two of Greater Manchester's biggest sporting venues, Manchester United's, Old Trafford Ground, and Lancaster Cricket Club's home, also named after the area where it's situated in Old Trafford.

Together, they've got a combined seated capacity of about 96,000 and many, many more when both venues stage music events. With that huge throng of people taken to the streets of old Trafford most weeks. We wanted to explore how sports events like these impact the feelings of safety amongst women and girls who visit or live in the area.

There's a real sense of community during sporting events, but is this community as inclusive as it can be? Who does and doesn't feel they belong? And what role can these huge stadiums play to integrate into and care for the local community? And importantly, for women and girls who want to play sports, who may become the people we see in our stadiums across the country in the future, how do our current facilities, infrastructure, programmes, role models and cultural norms both help and hinder their access and participation.

From pitch to stands, we seek to create the conditions for everyone to feel welcome, safe, and invited to participate in the incredible sporting community that this place is world renowned for. So coming up, we speak to the people who working hard to boost participation of women and girls in grassroots sport, we hear how they are making experiences safe and respectful.

Leigh: At the FA, there is a respect campaign and its tagline is 'We only do positive', young children respond very well to positive feedback.

Eve: And creating welcoming environments that invite everyone to participate.

Hannah: So we have sessions within our BAME areas, making sure that times are not clashing with some people's prayer times or making sure that sessions are safe when they're going through things like Ramadan.

Leigh: At the end of the day, we want a safe and happy environment for everybody to play.

Interview 1

Eve: But before that, I'm joined by Amna Abdullatif, and we're off to the footy to experience firsthand the unique atmosphere that engulfs Old Trafford every other week during the football season. Amna is a local Manchester councillor, a community psychologist, and an anti-racism lead at rape crisis.

As we will hear, she's been raised by a big football fan, her mum, and she's one of the Three Hijabis. Three women who are creating waves in their work to make football a place where everyone feels they belong, tackling racism, misogyny, and violence against women and girls. They've been spurred on by the positive response to their petition to ban all racists from football.

This was launched following a wave of racist abuse aimed at Rashford, Sancho, and Saka after they missed penalties in the shootout at the Euro 2020 final.

So before we head to the match, I ask Amna more about the campaign and movement they started and the impact it's had so far.

Amna: So The Three Hijabis is a bit of a bizarre thing because it was a tweet that went viral during the Euro 2020s during the actual, the quarter finals between England and Ukraine.

And it was the three of us myself and Shaista and Huda who are three friends we'd met up in London at the time and it was the first time we'd seen each other since Covid. So it was when the easing of Covid was starting to happen in 2021, we were watching the game and she tweeted a picture of the three of us saying, the three Hijabis are watching the Three Lions thrash Ukraine, four nil.

I think it was at the time and why it felt exciting to be an England fan at that time, the taking of the knee, the wearing of the rainbow armband, the, the kind of, the real feeling that the team were consciously understanding the platform that they had and, the impact that that would have on their fan base and feeling connected to that.

And it went viral. It then ended up turning into a Guardian article that also then went viral and, and so we were provided with a bit of a platform, which was really bizarre. My Mum laughs at this still today. It's like, you don't know nothing about football. Why the hell are you commentating about football?

And I'm like, well Mum, Here we are talking about the games and, and so forth. Although we were talking about the social elements of the game rather than actually, you know, the technical elements. But then obviously the Euro 2020 finals...

Commentator: *Nineteen years old, Bukayo Saka, step up and take huge responsibility on his young shoulders. Saka has to score. It's saved by Donnarumma, and it's Italy who are the champions of Europe!*

Amna: The three black players miss penalties and the amount of racist abuse that they received was horrendous. And because we had this

platform, it felt like there was a responsibility to do something. But the next morning we decided to do this petition.

The petition was asking to ban all races from football. Obviously, probably unlikely to ever happen, but we thought go big or go home. And within forty eight hours it reached over a million people had signed that petition. It was on literally every newspaper local, national, regional, international newspapers.

We were on interviews for weeks on end, talking about the issues that it was raising. And so then we were trying to put the petition's asks into action, wanting to speak to the FA, wanting to ensure that some of the asks were being put into place. And, it was the first time that the, then Prime Minister Boris Johnson, actually spoke about the petition and the fact that that they were going to extend banning orders on fans who misbehave.

So I think it built on a national discussion and a national feeling that this is disgraceful. And I think for many people who said to us what is the point, the racism, it isn't the same as it used to be. And things have improved. And actually, I think what that showed, that final game is actually exactly why those players were taking the knee cause their experiences of the game of being black players who have such a high profile was that they were constantly vilified the moment that they don't win a game or score a goal or whatever, even though they're amazing people and amazing players. And I think it gave people some hope, I think, to feel that they could do something, even if it meant just putting their name on a petition.

Because what that did, their name along with the other million people is essentially what gave us a platform to be able to really put pressure, on these different organisations.

Eve: I remember seeing that the count go up and up and up and sitting there as it went up to a million, and then over. Obviously you want deeds, not words. So in terms of action, are there any actions that you can now point to that you think are helping us move in the right direction?

Amna: I think it's really difficult to get these types of really big organisations to really understand actually how to then implement some of that change on the ground, because it's not just about the players, it's also about the fans we knew as soon as they missed those penalties, we sat there and we were like, Ah, this is gonna be hard week.

This is gonna be a hard week for people of color in this country. And it was, unfortunately, I think where we've had more success is when in our second campaign we did an open letter to the FA in the Premier League to start thinking about their responsibility towards violence against women and girls within the game.

So, that response was more positive. We were invited many times to have those conversations with the Premier League particularly. They did then implement the Premier League implemented mandatory consent training for all of their Premier League clubs in June after the petition was launched.

I think we launched it in February, which is a huge win. Then I think around the anti-racism bit, particularly, I think it's become part of the national conversation when it comes to football to really start thinking about how we do better when it comes to anti-racism work. And we see that in some of the clubs. Man City invited us to an Iftar and talked about some of the work that they were doing around why is it that there's such a big gap between South Asian players coming into academies at age five, six, seven, and then suddenly there's a big drop by the time they're fourteen, fifteen, before they would potentially, get into the Premier League clubs.

And why is that and how is it that in a city where we've got well into the forty five, if not 50% of our population is ethnic minority groups, how is it that we've not seen that level of diversity in our MA major teams? For us, it's about how we shift those conversations so that they are being had and that there is some action being taken place.

And we've been we always say that we are very stubborn. It's like even if it's gonna take us the next ten years, If we've asked for X, Y, and Z, we're gonna keep asking for X, Y, and Z until it actually happens. And when you

do it, we're gonna be asking you more detail about how it's been done, because I think this has to be accountability in any of this work.

Eve: What a phenomenal group of women making a real impact their campaign and work is really inspiring and highlights, once again, how small actions like a tweet, can be the catalyst for a movement. So now we're off to Old Trafford football ground to watch Manchester United play Aston Villa. You got a small flavour of how Old Trafford is transformed on Match day in our public spaces episode.

But join me in Amna today, about half an hour before kickoff and the atmosphere is lively to say the least.

Eve: So we're stood here outside Trafford Town Hall, just on the Processional Route to Old Trafford.

And, Amna's there's just arrived.

You got a bit swept away really in the protest.

Amna: Indeed. I was just trying to figure out what it was that they were shouting. That was all it was.

So I was following the crowds a little bit. But yeah, it was a bit surreal, isn't it?

Eve: How do you feel?

Amna: Do you know what large groups of men always a little bit feels intimidating. But there was enough space for me to maneuver around so it didn't feel too bad. But yeah, it's always that fear, isn't it, factor when you have large groups of predominantly men. And particularly as a woman who's very visibly Muslim, that feels like it's like a double thing. Being female and being Muslim in a space that where you're not represented or seen is, is always feels a little bit nervy.

But I think, I've been in so many of these spaces now that it just, you just kind of go with the flow because you know you're meeting people.

Eve: Yeah. It's pretty wet. There's a few umbrellas out and certainly a lot of the scarves that have been put out on the streets looking a little bit soggy Occupational hazard is what one stall holder said to me and I looked at him sympathetically.

It's funny, isn't it? Even though I knew that's what I was coming to, I still had that moment where I'm almost a bit surprised when I realised what I was in the middle of. Did you see Amna in the mix? More people that look a bit like you.

Amna: No. To put it bluntly, I did see one woman, hijabi woman, who was as I was walking up, taking pictures, her husband was, or somebody who was with her, was taking pictures of her, with her Man U top and scarf.

And it was brilliant to see that. But other than her, I can't say that I've seen very many women at all in general, let alone women who look a bit more like I do. But that was nice to see on the way up.

Eve: There is that mix, isn't there a real sense of community, people coming together from different directions and having a shared interest here, being the football, being united predominantly and at the same time, you can't help but notice an increased police presence. The vast majority, but I would say, I mean, I put a number on it. I would say like 96% of the people we're seeing here are white male, quite a mix of ages. But you certainly would find it hard to go against the grain and go in the opposite direction or to not feel a little bit like if you are not part of this community, not necessarily like you belong here right now.

Amna: Yeah. And I mean my, as you know, my Mum's a big Liverpool fan. She was like, oh, you take the Liverpool scarf and take it with you. I was like, ah, I don't think so Mum. That's not gonna happen. But, yeah, she's not very pleased that I'm here to watch a Man U game. Do you know what, I took her to Man City who invited us for Iftar during Ramadan.

And I said to her, behave yourself please. This is not the space for your, what do you call it? Your craziness, for Liverpool. And then when I picked her up, she'd bought a Liverpool Liver bird hijab. So you couldn't

even tell her to take it off because obviously it was around her head and it was really lovely.

She did enjoy herself, but I was like, oh God, this is what my mother does. She's been a Liverpool fan since she was about ten years old. So it's a bit, for her it's a very emotional, personal thing. She always talks about football as being her family, Liverpool being her family.

Eve: So she's a hijabi wear wearing woman. Supporting Liverpool, living in Manchester in Trafford, living in Trafford. And have you actually been to football games together in Manchester?

Amna: No. No, not in Manchester. I mean, for one, it's really expensive to buy, games, where Manchester, where Liverpool are playing Manchester United or, Man City plus she always prefers to go to Anfield. So where we've been watching games, I mean, she's only been to a couple now. I mean, the first game she did see was donated by somebody who when her Tweet went viral, of her going to Anfield, offered us seats so that she could go and watch her first match in Anfield, which was really special for her to go with my dad and myself and, and see that first match in Anfield.

And yeah, she still goes on about the atmosphere and how it was the most amazing time day of her life because it just felt like she was home, which is what she says that when she goes to Anfield, it feels like home, which is a really special feeling. And I think, I hope that lots of people feel that sense of community, whether that's in football or in other spaces, that they feel that connected to something that they're so passionate about. That is so good to hear. And I think that's part of why we're all here isn't it, is trying to cultivate those spaces for women to feel like that actually they belong in these spaces as well.

Football teams and football clubs have a responsibility to their female fans as much as they have responsibility for their male fans, I think is a really important thing to be able to talk about and to think about how we change that.

Eve: We now head to the ground to pick up our tickets from the office.

It's really close to kickoff time, but we've been directed by the steward into the Munich tunnel underneath the south stand of the stadium. We finally make our way to our seats. By this time it's about twenty minutes after kickoff.

Next to us is a woman sitting with her family. She's called Sophie, and we have a chat trying to hear ourselves over the noisy tannoy.

What's your experience of coming to a match? And we've been noticing really, I guess, how few women there are and how few women of color there are. And how does that feel for you?

Sophie: Very, very few women and definitely of color. I think it's the football society and I think. It's the environment, not everyone's happy or feels comfortable coming to a game. Would I come on my own? No. As a family then, yeah, I feel a lot safer, but I probably wouldn't come on my own.

Eve: And have you always been a United supporter?

Sophie: Yes, I have always been a United supporter, but live nowhere near Manchester.

Eve: So it's quite a big commitment to all come today, come and support, support your team. Big day, whole family come from Birmingham. So are there things that you think could change that would make it even better as a great day out?

Sophie: Yea, I think there could be, I mean, there's a lot of people, but there's no courtesy in the football arena there's nobody, being courteous cause you're a woman or that children are around. It is literally dog eat dog in the crowd. And that's why I think women won't come to football matches unless they're probably with family or I don't know. It's a different environment. It's not for everyone. I mean, my friends think I'm crazy, come into football matches, but I think you've gotta be a real football supporter to ignore, the lack of probably diversity, the arena of people that you're probably not used to spending your time with, and just really focus on the reason why you're here, which is really cause of the football and the team.

Eve: So have you managed, persuaded of your friends to kind of get involved?

Sophie: They would never, they feel a lot outnumbered and obviously, like I say, in terms of being a woman of colour, you, you can count how many, you've probably seen a football match and it's very few and far and, and as well, a lot of the racism that's in football at the moment makes people a bit reluctant.

We see our football stars who have. England, they're, some of them are valuable players and there's no loyalty is there. If they have a bad game. There's a lot of racial abuse and you're very outnumbered in an environment like this. So I can see why people would decide not to come. Unfortunately, that's a horrible side of football, isn't it?

Eve: It's the reality, isn't it? Yeah, and it really is. We leave Sophie to enjoy the match of her family, and we get fully involved in watching this quite thrilling game of football.

As the final whistle blows with a one nil victory to Man United, we head to the Manchester United Foundation building to recap the match with Amna.

So we sat now in MU Foundation, just outside the football ground. You can see the throngs of people leaving after the game. And yea, just be good to get your thoughts, Amna on the atmosphere, both getting in. And then once we were in there,

Amna: I think the getting in was a bit problematic. I think partly because there's obviously a lot of passion and protest around the issues around the sale of the club, which is fair enough. But it did feel a little bit intimidating as we were going in because we weren't sure exactly what was going on or why there was loads of flares.

There seemed to be a lot of people waiting and getting a bit annoyed at the fact that they were missing, the start of the match. But actually when we got in there, it was, it was really nice. It nice to see to be going down and seeing the pitch and seeing the game and people enjoying it.

And it did feel like a very different atmosphere inside the stadium. People were very friendly and very nice, and it felt like we really got drawn into, drawn into the game. And, but yeah, so I really enjoyed the game actually. I thought it was a really good match, great atmosphere.

Eve: So it's a bit unfortunate, wasn't it really, that we got stuck in the protest and the flares were being set off in the Munich tunnel, which meant there was a twenty minutes after kickoff by the time we actually managed to get into the stadium. But yea, once, once you're in. I mean we couldn't resist. But joining in the collapse and the chants, because there is that sense of community and in community you want to do what everybody else around you is doing. You want to be a part of that.

Amna: Yeah, I mean, women's football matches, I think have a very different atmosphere even outside of the game. As you're going in, you see way more families. Way more kind of that variation in age group from very young children with their mothers and fathers, you know, attending the games.

And I don't know how you explain it's like going to a community centre or something. It's like that doesn't feel like that there's that tension or that fear of something potentially going to happen. And I guess it's because the women's game is relatively new in terms of, it got banned under the FA didn't it?

And, so I guess you can build a culture from scratch, which I think that's where the difficulty is with the men's game is that so much of the culture has been so ingrained over so many years and there's. Often a resistance to how we actually shift that culture so that it does become much more open to a diverse range of people to be able to feel safe and comfortable and feel like they belong in these spaces as well. That it's not just the product of white men who of a particular age or whatever that have access to these spaces.

Eve: I noticed the women's game, just a number of women more generally who were commentating and who were on the cameras. And I don't know how deliberate that is, but it was really quite striking that you saw women in all sorts of roles in that stadium in the way that I didn't see today.

It felt that whether it was. The marshals, the police or some, a number of police, women, men, but predominantly in security is quite male dominated inside the stadium and outside the stadium. So it's some of those things within our control, aren't they?

Amna: And I saw that when The Three Hijabis work started to go viral and, we were trying to put pressure on the FA to respond to some of the asks. And, then later on another petition. Well, it wasn't a petition, an open letter to the Premier League and the FA, to respond. And even though we were getting meetings, They just really weren't used to talking to women like us. It's that atmosphere within that industry and, that is really difficult then if you have that very closed industry.

Well, how do women then get into it? And how do other minoritised groups that aren't accessing those spaces actually make it in there? So there's a lot of work. There's a lot of work that football has to do to open up its space.

Eve: Another observation, I suppose, is we know there's been a culture. Within football, that has been very negative in terms of women. There has been misogyny, there has been experiences of violence and street harassment and they continue. So what is the opportunity there? If, football as a sport and celebrities within football were to really help take a stand to say it's not okay. Do you think that's something that's possible?

Amna: I think so, and I think the platform that players have, I mean they're so highly regarded so their actions mean so much to so many people, and particularly younger generations. I think we saw the three boys that were sat in front of us, how excited they were when their favorite players would get close to where we were sat and stuff.

I think that there is opportunity, I think they have been much more vocal than probably in previous years. We've got players who are very open about some of the social issues that they want to tackle, and talking about Rashford and his, campaigns around free school meals. Many people were saying that he was the opposition government at the time in terms of shifting, some of the policies that the government, was trying to push.

It's a time where, Should footballers be talking about social change issues, social justice issues, and I think it's a high time that they really started to think about violence against women and girls as their issue. Because unfortunately, there are far too many cases currently of domestic violence, of sexual violence, of rape, where footballers, very high profile footballers in our teams, unfortunately, have court cases ongoing or have been accused of these crimes. I don't think it's good enough for clubs to hide behind this issue anymore. We need to really be tackling it and I think players have a really big position and role to play in this.

Eve: Have you got any thoughts as somebody who's worked a lot with women who've been survivors of domestic violence, of rape, of assault, is there anything that you think can be done that would help to actually shift the way that the space looks and feels that would one, make women generally feel like it's a safe and more welcoming place, but particularly that could help it be more trauma informed by women who have experienced possibly, sexual assault or harassment of some sort, and for whom this must be an even more intimidating place to be in as it is at the moment.

Amna: I think the environment and the atmosphere of something so compact with so many people is really, problematic for women who might have experienced, violence in their lives. And, particularly where there the mass of the numbers is predominantly men, in that space. And unfortunately, a lot of the violence perpetrated against women is by men.

A lot of the violence perpetrated against men is by men, unfortunately, as well, but, Thinking about this physical space and I think just that funneling through the tunnel is really problematic. Really problematic. So many people in such a tight space that's quite dark it felt unsafe.

Eve: I'd certainly agree that the point that I felt most on edge was going into the tunnel where there was a sense of feeling trapped. And we've heard that repeated through the project, whether it's about parks or public spaces where people can see any limited number of entrances and exits, that that creates a heightened sense of fear.

But it's interesting that it then took having waited there for significant amount of time, fifteen minutes after kickoff for us to then go and ask specifically was there no other way. And then of course what we did is we then took the much longer route. Which is quite symbolic of what women are doing all the time.

Also, just noticed from an accessibility perspective, we have seen some people, as wheelchair users, it was good to see there was a specific entrance, that said about for the accessibility purposes, did leave you with the question just on the approach and getting here of how hard it would be to navigate if you wheelchair user, how hard it'd be to navigate if you had any mobility difficulties. Certainly as well, if you had smaller kids that you'd want to try and bring in, it isn't an easy space to get around. So good to see that they have made some decisions there to try and make that easier for people.

And I wonder, you know, whether there's other things that can be done intentionally to make sure that groups of people who want to come here and maybe currently don't feel this is a space that is inclusive for them could be designed in rather than feeling like they're being designed out.

Amna: I mean if you are wanting to go to a game as a woman, you probably wouldn't be going on your own and you probably wouldn't necessarily feel safe on your own.

And so thinking about actually, well, how do you make something inclusive? Well, the current prices don't make it particularly inclusive to attend. Particularly if you're following a Premier League team thinking about actually, well, people will need to come in groups and, be supported. And I think there's a lot more potentially around training around how the people that work here can support fans that are coming through.

Eve: So thank you Amna for joining us. It's been a great afternoon. It was fun.

Amna: It was. Thank you for having me, and thank you for taking me to Man U match. My Mum will be very disappointed, but that's all right. We enjoyed the match and I'm glad that Man United won.

Interview 2

Eve: I have to say that was a lot of fun and a big thanks to Amna for spending the afternoon with us. Going to the football is a weekly tradition for millions of people across the country and has been the same for hundreds of years. It really is quite a ritual, but more workload needs to be done to welcome a greater diversity of fans into the joyous community of being a spectator and making the game much more inclusive across the board from players and officials to the stands.

Now, let's take the sports conversation to a grassroots level and speak to a group of people who are working hard to make the sports world in Trafford and beyond more inclusive by involving people in their communities. We know that the main access point for people who are looking to be more active and involved in sports is often through their local community facilities and clubs.

So what role do grassroots sports play to create the more inclusive sports world for everyone to enjoy and participate in. So joining me online is Hannah.

Hannah: Hello, I'm Hannah Mitchell. I work at Man United Foundation as Female Development Officer in the community engagement.

Eve: Hannah's been involved with the Manchester United Community Foundation since she was ten years old.

The Foundation Rich was founded in 2007 Football to engage and inspire young people to build a better life for themselves and to unite their communities. They do this through educational and community outreach programs. We also have Leigh.

Leigh: My name's Leigh Gell. I currently work at Manchester FA as a football development officer leading on women and girls football.

Eve: The Manchester FA is the home of grassroots, non-professional and association football in Greater Manchester. They help to develop, regulates, and grow the sport. It's one of fifty associations across England.

At the last count, they've represented 397 clubs and almost 3,000 teams. And finally, we're also joined by Dan.

Dan: Hi everyone. I'm Dan Landstrom. I'm the Community Programmes Manager at Lancaster Cricket Foundation.

Eve: The Lancaster County Cricket Club Foundation is the official charity of Lancaster Cricket. They work across the northwest to develop and deliver projects, programs, and events design to engage, excite, inspire, and improve individuals and communities through cricket.

I start by asking Dan why Safer Streets matter to him.

Dan: What I was thinking about was people visiting Emirates, Old Trafford, really, whether you're a fan or you wanted to access one of our community programmes that you wanna feel safe, don't you? Traveling, to watch a game. or if you're just walking around the local area, you don't wanna have any fears really, or worries of being abused or, experiencing discrimination as well as the physical environment be being safe and, well lit and, in good condition, et cetera.

Eve: Definitely, and I was at the cricket ground just earlier this week. So it just is interesting on the way there to have a think about how different it feels, doesn't it? Depending on the time of day, depending on how you get there. Obviously depending on the individual as well, we can have a very different experience, which immediately might set the tone for whether it's a place that you feel you belong and you are already feeling excited about or you are on guard.

Dan: No, exactly. And did you feel safe?

Eve: I did. I was there in the daytime and I arrived and left on my bike. Immediately I saw somebody I knew. So that helps, doesn't it? So there was quite quickly, there was a sense of community, which I think feels different. How about you, Hannah? Why does Safer Streets matter to you in your role?

Hannah: My role is to have football sessions accessible to all females, girls from age eight to eighteen across the whole of Greater Manchester. So for me, it's massive in that they have to be safe, they have to feel like they can go to these sessions and also safe when they're at the session. Not just getting to, getting from, and I work with all different types of people.

A lot of people might be from deprived backgrounds, so they might have to get a lot of public transports. These sessions, they might not come with parents. And for me it's, it's really important that the streets are safe for them to get to and they want to come to the session and they feel that they can get home safely, otherwise they're not gonna come. And that defeats the whole object in my role really.

Eve: And Leigh, anything to add?

Leigh: We govern the game across Greater Manchester. We service hundreds of clubs, so it's really important that there is a safe route for them to access that session, both to and from. And whilst they are there, sometimes clubs can put on brilliant sessions and unfortunately, routes to and from will be what deter people from taking part.

And sometimes this isn't necessarily if it's safe, but traffic can play a part. And obviously we wanna find different ways, of commuting to and from. But also we want activity local to everybody because at the end of the day, that's how they're more likely to stay active.

Eve: Great point. So yeah, where things are located, how local it's to you, which makes it easier doesn't it, to get there in an active and sustainable way.

Hannah: I think girls probably feel safe when they're in the session with us, and then it might be just a worry when they are going home, whether it's late at night. A lot of our sessions are in the evening because of their parents being worried as well.

Eve: And what sort of age range are you working with generally?

Hannah: They are eight to eighteen, so a whole mixture of ages, but we tend to have like the younger ages are at earlier times, so five till six o'clock. But still, like we know in the winter it's still dark these times.

Eve: So would you say that even for some of the older girls that they're relying on being picked up and dropped off?

Hannah: I see a lot of people doing that rather than coming themselves, getting on public transport, but there is still a majority of our girls probably don't have that access to cars. Parents might not drive, so they're having to come on public transport or walking, which creates barriers.

Eve: And of course, we keen aren't we to make sure this is about access for everyone and active lives for all. So that 30% of, young people who are most likely to be inactive are also less likely to have parents who have access to a a car, or who have the time as well to provide that sort of taxi service.

Leigh: We don't see this as an isolated issue as such just for young people and children. Since the well pre Euros. And then we see a really big influx during and post Euros is recreational women's football to keep fit, socialise, and to have fun. And these women don't necessarily feel safe. A lot of the sessions are finishing at nine, ten pm potentially, and sometimes it's even like they do have a car, but you have to walk fifty metres from the really lit 3G in the then pitch black during most of winter, into your car.

And obviously some people cycle. so we try and support clubs and find ways for people to car share or get public transport together because the last thing we want is whether it's a female coach or females that have taken part in sessions, making their own way home at that time of night.

Unfortunately, from probably about October, November to now, it is very dark at that time, and a priority is not necessarily funding lights for a car park, especially with the barriers and facility issues we are facing as well. But that can definitely put women off of taking part.

Hannah: I think for us, we sometimes do put on transport depending on times.

Also, it's our duty of care really to make sure it's not just while they're at our session and the session finishes, we've gotta make sure that they get home and sometimes we're just banking on the next time we see them to know that we don't know if they're gonna get home or if they're not. So for us, it can be a bit of a worry as well.

Dan: I think something that we were looking at was, you know how at school they have the walk-in bus where the kids pick each other up on the school run That sort of same concept really. So we do one of these warm hubs at the ground and we could potentially do a pick people up on a walk to the ground to make them feel safer and encourage them to access Emirate's Old Trafford really.

Leigh: I'd love to have sessions available for everybody to walk to and have well lit routes that they can walk to. The simple things that we do is meet people at bus stops, tram stops, and it's even as simple as provide them with detailed instructions on how to get there. Can be daunting to go to a session for the first time, especially if that's the first time you've ever tried that sport.

And sometimes you'll turn up to a 3G pitch and there could be six sessions going on. So just providing that information or having someone on the gate to say, oh, hi, are you here for this? Like, that's a real game changer. And that can bring people back week in, week out.

Eve: So simple stuff hey, but a nice warm welcome when you arrive often. It's some of the simple stuff, isn't it, really? And I guess it's some good news, isn't there? I mean, you'll, you can maybe tell me more about some of the things that are coming in Greater Manchester and nationally that are trying to help create more of those opportunities. For example, girls and football, so that it is more available to people locally.

Leigh: I mean, I don't wanna be here all day. From schools four years old up until eighty, ninety, a hundred years of age, there is now a football offer for every female. There's a lot of different programmes rolled out by the FA and provided by a number of our clubs and community organisations that we work with. I'm sure everybody saw the announcement by the

government about the further investment to create equal access for girls in schools.

That is so important. For a lot of our girls, that's their first engagement with football, and then that's where they start to love it. Then they can turn to clubs. What provisions do we have? Girl might kick her football in a local school and then she'll see a session put on by MU Foundation. Then she might start playing there.

Perhaps Weetabix Wildcats or Squad Girls if they're in high school. Probably once they've been to a recreational session, they then wanna play affiliated grassroots football playing once a week in a local league. And then of course you've got talent pathway for them as well. So that's just girls alone.

And now women's football has grown even further as well. We did have like that Sunday League offer if you wanna play football, but I think now there's the acceptance that some people wanna play football and they wanna play matches, but not as competitively as committing to every Sunday. Women work, may have, children have lives and they might still wanna train and play football, but with less commitment.

So like we run a flexi, it's called Manchester Women's Flexi League. Play once a fortnight on a day that works for you in a nine v nine format. And we have over 600 women competing in that. We'd love to launch vets, whether it's like thirty five plus just a relaxed, I don't, I wanna say relaxed, but it's probably still quite competitive.

That format of the game is something we do wanna launch as well. And then we have walking football. I do feel strongly that there is now opportunities for everyone, but this isn't necessarily in every geographical area that we'd like it, and that's something that we're working on.

Eve: Fantastic. So lots of reasons to be hopeful. And there's investment coming isn't there as well around open school facilities, which I guess again helps because young people will be more familiar with their route to and from school. It's already a space that they feel safe. So again, if they can access football, but also cricket, multi-sport, after school in that

environment is more equitable. Access and spread of facilities across Greater Manchester and we don't have these sort of deserts where actually you can't access anything on your doorstep.

Dan: I do feel that facilities in Football and probably in Cricket as well, is gonna be a challenge going forward as participation grows and people are fighting to access the facilities and you're gonna need support from the football foundation.

And local authority to develop or, or like I say, get more access to facilities in schools. So you can actually play the game cuz uh, potentially you could have as many females as males playing the game, couldn't you? And then you've got a real challenge there.

Eve: Or More. More.

Dan: Yeah, exactly. I think Cricket is behind Football in terms of female participation, but getting access to cricket pitches and cricket grounds is a challenge anyway. I think so. Yeah, I agree with your point. It's gonna be a challenge moving forward.

Eve: So in terms of respect, we talked about respect a lot, don't we, in grassroots sports and there's lots of structures that are put in place and governance that's put in place and making sure that when you've got parents watching or you are there as a coach and participants, that we really making sure that there's a constant sense of respect.

Leigh: Yes. So at the FA, there is a a respect campaign and it's tagline is 'we only do positive', young children respond very well to positive feedback when people are learning to play football. If they've got the coach chatting one thing their parents telling them something else to do, they'll end up just standing there and doing nothing or just kicking the ball as far as they can.

They're not able to learn and develop and part of football when you're young, and even at like my age as well, it's making mistakes. I don't think I've ever seen a hundred percent of a team's passing accuracy be achieved,

be very boring if a team had possession for ninety minutes. So that's something that we need to.

Ensure we allow children to do. And so yeah, part of our respect campaign is as county FA members of staff, we go out and we call them safeguarding visits. We go and check which officials are on the side at grassroots games, check behaviours. We ask questions to the parents to make sure they know who to report safeguarding concerns to.

Of course, ourselves would report any discipline that we see as well. And encourage people to do so, and unfortunately, majority of grassroots football is played in a really positive environment, but there are people that ruin that for everybody else, and I think that the minority is what has given grassroots football and even from a professional's point of view as well, given it a bad name.

And it's about not punishing everybody for the minorities actions, but how can we educate? How can we train people and how can we prevent this happening? Of course, we can't be at every game, but we urge people to report to challenge if they feel safe to do so, and at the end of the day, we want a safe and happy environment for everybody to play.

Hannah: When I've been down and seen some of the games going on, a lot of games actually going on at the same time, the sidelines are always behind a respect barrier. Like parents are really respectful and coaches are, and people will challenge if people aren't. And I think that comes from the values set by Manchester FA with the league and the committee, and that's just how the league's ran. And it's great and it's come on leaps and bounds compared to when I was young and I was playing. I've had some abuse from parents on the sideline or coaches, other coaches and you don't see as much as it now. And a lot of like parents are quiet, coaches are quiet and just let the kids play. That's all they wanna do.

Eve: Love that. Just let the kids play. Let's have some fun. So, it was good to hear, yeah. I guess your optimism around this positive shifts. and, you've all spoken there to the role that everyone plays. Is there anything you'd say, Dan, I guess, particularly the role of men and boys and then calling out bad behaviour when they see it or hear it?

Dan: I think it doesn't matter really. Whether it's in a male game, female game, it's just about being a decent person. If you see something you don't agree with. You, you should challenge it really and be an ally for people really.

Eve: And do you see people stepping up and calling out?

Dan: Do you know? I do actually. Yeah. I run a grassroots team under eleven girls and sometimes the parents do speak up. They're probably more vocal than me, really. But yeah, if they don't agree with something, they speak out, which is great.

Leigh: And then I guess even from a coaching and volunteers perspective, we've run various CPDs. So that's continuous professional development, for people to expand their knowledge, expand their network, and sometimes that gives them the confidence to challenge this behaviour. It can be as simple as emailing us. If it's discrimination, there's a kick it out link date, and all the cases go directly to the FA.

You don't have to put yourself in any danger, but it's just really important that things are reported through the appropriate means. A lot of people come to us with, what did you do about this? And if we aren't told because nobody's reported it to us, there unfortunately isn't anything we can do. So that's what I'd urge people to do, report things through the appropriate means.

Hannah: One of our challenges that we've had is trying to get more females being officials, referees, and probably most of the abuse does come to referees. I don't know if you'd agree with me, Dan, and Lee, that a lot of that is, is with young referees and it's great that now have an armband if they're under eighteen.

Leigh: Yellow armband. Yeah.

Hannah: Yeah. And I think that's been great in terms of us being able to get females more comfortable and confident in that they've got this armband and a lot of people tend to, not that it should, not that they need an

armband for people, not to give them abuse, but people do think twice and think, oh, they're only a kid actually.

Eve: Yeah, it'd be great wouldn't it? To see far more women, as refereeing and refereeing both women's and men's games and you know, you can't be what you can't see. And we just need that representation that we saw across the Euros, for example, really helped shift in net perception of, it's not just about playing, there's a whole load of potential jobs and opportunities across football, but also across sport more generally, that need to be open to women and girls.

And I guess on that point, it's then, yeah, we know that diversity more broadly as well continues to be an issue. So, you know, we know there's ongoing issues around racism still across football and across other sports, across cricket, and that we know that we need to do a lot more, don't we to increase the access and participation of girls in their full diversity, in particular, for example, with girls of colour.

And of all various initiatives, is there anything that you would want to point to in particular about what you're doing or what we need to be doing so that all girls feel that it's space, that they're welcome and they belong?

Hannah: I think something that we do is we're in near enough every borough of Greater Manchester now, so we're in like central of a borough and that means that it's accessible for everyone in that area.

So we have sessions within BAME areas, ethnic backgrounds. A lot of them are coming and a lot of work that we've done is probably with parents around the culture, around religion and making sure that times are. Not clashing with some people's prayer times or making sure that sessions are safe when they're going through things like Ramadan.

So for us, I think I totally agree, it's football seems to be at the minute a white, British middle class game, but we're trying to target those areas in Greater Manchester that allows everybody to access it no matter what colour, no matter what age, and girls, women, and also getting parents involved in doing refereeing or doing some coaching, volunteering. So for

us, I see a diverse range of people at our sessions, but football in general isn't that way.

Eve: So what would great look like in the next couple of years?

Dan: First of all, there's been loads of great work done, hasn't it, over the last ten, fifteen years, and I don't think women's sports been in a better place, really, in terms of invisible on television, the investment into all sorts of sports, the role models, so you see, like Jill Scott winning, I'm a Celebrity, the profile's never been as high as it.

So I've got two daughters and, they both play football, play netball and gymnastics and you know, the world's their oyster really. They could go and be a presenter on Sky TV. They could play sport, and I think a lot of the barriers have been knocked down, haven't they? I think there's a few challenges around access to facilities moving forward.

Definitely around the intersectionality of, so if you look at the England national team for the women, predominantly white females. So it's looking at why people aren't necessarily, getting to that level from diverse communities. But I think in another ten years you'll see the fruits of your labour, really.

So all the great works going on at, at clubs and at the county FA's, you know, as these, these girls get older and turn into women, hopefully the landscape will look a lot different really.

Leigh: Well, a lot of our elite pathway, a lot of the elite players. They come from grassroots football. People don't, just the first time they, they kick a ball, then end up at Manchester City or Manchester United, for example.

So I do think that the changes that are being made in grassroots football and having it more accessible to more communities, more girls, it will have an impact. Something that the FA are doing is really restructuring the talent pathway as well. That's where we've seen the development of emerging talent centres and also the referral windows.

So anybody can see a player and thinks, oh, they have potential. Let's refer them to get a scout out to see them play. And then we also run various 'discover my talent', which is trials essentially, but an opportunity for these girls to be discovered. And that's how we want to have a diverse representation from grassroots level all the way up to the elite.

Dan: I think it's just very similar, really, we're delivering similar programs to football. The actual participation might look slightly more diverse in terms of like the Asian population accessing cricket. But yeah, I generally think it's very similar to football.

You can start playing cricket as soon as you can walk and you can go all the way through to walking cricket, similar to walking football. So, I think, yeah, the sports worked hard, doesn't it to be inclusive and adapt.

Eve: I love the fact that I can go to, I live near Alexandra Park in Whalley Range, Whalley Range and Moss Side, and when I go through there, particularly saw it during Covid, you'd often get some smiling community out playing football, get some local South Asian community playing cricket and then all interacting with each other and you'd get every other local community ethnicity all represented in that park in a space. So that piece around as well, I guess the quality of our parks and those spaces are spaces that people can formally or informally hit a ball or kick a ball and join in. Really it was just joyful.

Dan: And we've discovered, cuz obviously we work across Lancashire, there's lots of, um, sort of pop-up leagues that the Asian community are just doing on their own bat really, that we, we just weren't aware of and then have just come across through our network really. So Yeah, like you say, they're working in parks and, and community venues, et cetera.

Eve: Yeah. Fantastic.

Hannah: I echo that. But also we're all in a crisis like what the government's going through and money's going up. So people, the blessing they're probably gonna think about is actually, if my child's got to football and it costs this amount, that's gonna be a big issue to a lot of people, whether they've got a lot of money.

Not got a lot of money still affecting everybody. So I think for me it's great that it's accessible, but also we are lucky that all our sessions are free. And I think it'd just be great if there was more free sessions around, whether that's at leisure centers, that's so for football camps, whatever it is, I hope that doesn't create barriers for people to attend.

Outro

Eve: Well, that's a great final point to end on. The cost of living, unfortunately, is going to continue to create barriers for people to participate in sport and to lead an active life. But if these grassroots sports organisations have anything to go by, there are lots of reasons to be hopeful.

Thanks for listening to this episode of the Right to the Streets edition of the GM Moving podcast. We've heard about some of the things that make sport at both a grassroots and elite level, so special and appealing to people, and how sport can be a positive catalyst and platform for wider societal change.

We've also heard how sport, sports grounds and the crowds they attract sometimes bring out the worst in people and can create hostile places and spaces for women and girls, and people who experience racism and other forms of hate and prejudice. There is clearly lots that can and must be done to make sport more inclusive. From the pitch to the stands to the streets around.

As this podcast is just the start of the conversation, we'd love to hear more from you. Tell us about a local grassroots club that you are involved in what are they doing to help increase access and participation for women and girls? Or if your love of sport is as a spectator, then tell us what it is that makes watching live sport so special.

What makes you feel welcome, safe, and part of a particular club or sports community? Or if you don't feel you belong, what would you like to see change? Whatever it is, let us know and we'll share your thoughts on the next series of the GM Moving Podcast.

We've got a few ways you can get in touch. You can tell us on social media, we are on Twitter and LinkedIn.

Simply search GM Moving or GreaterSport, or you can leave as a voicemail. It's really simple and free. And you can record on your computer or phone. You can find the link in this episode show notes, and on our GM moving website. Just search Right to the Streets podcast.

This was the last episode of this series, but don't worry, we'll be back very soon!

Our next series will once again focus on the Right to the Streets as I ask people and partners involved in the project to share more about what they've been doing, their learning and their aspirations for the future. Until then, you can stay in touch via our website and socials or drop me an email eve@GMmoving.co.uk.

And don't forget to check out the Right to the Streets campaign on Instagram at [RighttotheStreets_](https://www.instagram.com/RighttotheStreets_).

A big thanks to everyone who has contributed to this episode. We'll be releasing more episodes throughout the next few months, so keep an eye on our social media pages for when the next one will be released, or simply hit follow or subscribe on whatever podcast player you're listening to right now.

This means the latest episode will go straight into your library as soon as it's released. This Right to the Street series, the GM Moving podcast is one element of the right streets project. Led by GreaterSport Trafford Council, Open Data Manchester and other GM Moving partners. Thanks to funding from the Home Office for Safer Streets.

This series is a MIC Media production.