

Intro –“Football – More than just a game, it’s therapy”

What I’ll be doing:

- putting recreational activities into some sort of TC perspective,
- looking at some of the therapeutic benefits of a team sport within a TC,
- sharing some findings which came from pre and post season questionnaires completed by players and
- giving a coach’s perspective on the team.

It would be great to have all of the players here today but of course that couldn’t happen. So, we’ve got the next best thing: here are some of the Blues to introduce themselves and to answer the question I posed to them “What do you like most about playing for the Blues?”

We’ll hear from some more players later. By the end of the season, we had about 34 players having a run and a football team has only 18 players on the ground at any one time but even so, this is a good problem to have. Out of a TC of approx. 68 adults, 34 residents were players, another 8 or so had regular support roles such as scorer, goal umpire, water carriers, timekeeper, BBQ cooks etc...and several staff were involved in organizing, training, coaching, first aid, driving and so on. It’s a huge undertaking and without a number of staff being involved, it could easily take you away from your primary role within the TC and become quite overwhelming.

To start at the start, the TC offers a range of recreational activities, many of which are available all year round e.g. Art, Music, Boxcercise, Table Tennis and Women’s Recreation. Some are one-off events such as House soccer and cricket matches. Some happen more than once a year e.g. 3 day camps for Phase 1 residents as well as one a year for Phase 2 residents. (We used to have regular Genesis camps but the venue for these overnight camps was destroyed in the Black Saturday fires.) Some are sports which are conducted as special events e.g. the Melbourne/Sydney Olympics and the in-house Mini-Olympics where the community is divided into four teams which compete in a range of fun activities. There’s an organized cricket competition in January and February and then the attention turns to football which starts in March and finishes at the end of August.

The Odyssey Blues have been playing in the Reclink competition for 11 seasons. (Reclink is a comp set up for socially disadvantaged people who would otherwise not have the opportunity to play sport. The teams represent a variety of Salvation Army agencies, alliances of local community groups sometimes co-ordinated by local Police, a Correctional Services institution, a Catholic Church mission and others.

Odyssey is the only TC in Victoria to field a team in the Reclink football comp. In order to truly represent our TC, our team is made up of male and female players unlike most of the other teams. (Only a couple of teams have any female players at all. We regularly have 5 or 6 female players and in one game this season, had seven female players on the ground together.)

One of the other differences between us and the other teams is that we play by the TC's Cardinal Rules and that includes threats and acts of violence. A lot of people connected with football will tell you that a certain amount of rough stuff is "all part of the game" – well, not to us it isn't. Our team culture directly reflects the TC's culture and rules and the point is made to all players regularly throughout the season that we expect nothing less than exemplary behaviour and that we treat the football field as simply another stage on which players can practise what they are learning about themselves in their programs. This applies particularly to issues of anger and self-discipline.

Therapeutic Issues in Team Sport

**(The Capacity to) Strive and Achieve**  
**Leadership**  
**Discipline**  
**Physical Fitness**  
**Attitudes to Team-Based Activities**  
**Enjoyment vs Winning & Losing**  
**Sportsmanship**  
**Sense of Belonging**

In discussing each of these, I'll be referring to the responses I received to pre and post season questionnaires in which I asked questions about each of these issues. At face value, the responses were very gratifying. At the end of the season, 30 of the 43 respondents who completed the pre-season questionnaire were still with us. (Another therapeutic issue is that the team appears capable of holding people who might otherwise leave.) If the responses are relatively consistent – as they are in most areas - that suggests that the "core" of the team has managed to inculcate the new members with the culture and expectations of the team.

In addition to those responses, I also used a different questionnaire which I distributed to some former players, most of whom are now graduates or close to graduation. They enjoyed the chance to reflect on their footy experience at Odyssey and had some very interesting comments.

(The capacity to) **Strive and Achieve**

Sport offers our residents an opportunity to rise to a challenge. Sometimes that challenge is terrifying just as every other challenge in their life has been terrifying.

Our people give themselves all kinds of negative messages that they *can't* or they *won't*, often echoing the messages given to them in their childhood.

Sport is an opportunity to experiment with something which the participant might be particularly anxious about either because it's new to them or because it appears too difficult.

We need to stress right from the start that for us, the whole point of playing football is enjoyment. I often tell new players that they've joined a very unusual football team because we're not all about winning.

It's amazing what you can get back when you take away the pressure of having to win. For most experienced players, it "re-programs" football from an *opportunity to fail* to an *opportunity to have fun* and be involved in something good.

Still, there are those players who will beat themselves up about missing a goal or dropping a mark etc...

Because we repeatedly say that "it's only a game", a perceived "failure" is not the end of the world. This makes it a little easier to motivate the resident and help them to face the challenge and if it doesn't come off, it's easier as a coach to make it OK and that there'll be another opportunity in the next quarter or the next game to have another try.

When it does come off, it's a confidence booster and can serve as a useful reference when they're faced with another new or overwhelming situation in the future and can reflect upon how they dealt with a potential problem when they experienced it in the context of a game and then apply that to their current situation.

In terms of achievement, the pre-season questionnaire asked players the open question "***What do we need to achieve in order for this to be a successful season?***" and then post-season, "***Do you feel it was a successful season? What did we achieve as a team?***" The responses were very consistent:

	Pre-Season		Post- Season
28%	Teamwork/Playing as a team/Working together	34%	Working together/Playing as a team.
13%	Communication	15%	Football results
11%	Train regularly	11%	Inclusiveness
9%	Care for/Support each other	11%	Upholding Odyssey values.
7%	Acknowledging effort and encouraging each other.	6%	(We gave) Maximum effort

Often the reason that people don't play competitive sport is because of a fundamental lack of confidence. Part of what we're offering with the football team is an opportunity to overcome fears and develop confidence in self and others. In both the pre and post season questionnaires, we asked "***How confident are you in playing competitive sport?***" and gave people a six point scale to rate their confidence levels. The results were very encouraging.

Rating	Pre-Season	Post-Season
0-1 “It scares me”	9% (Half of these people had moved into the middle category by the end of the season.)	3%
2-3 “OK but maybe a few worries”	36%	26%
4-5 “No problems at all”	55%	71%

Even though Odyssey football is about a team approach, there are a few rewards for individual achievement at the end of the season.

Our Best & Fairest medal (named after the founder of Odyssey House in Australia, Milton Luger) is presented to the player judged to be the most consistent as well as demonstrating all of the qualities we rate highly such as enthusiasm, team spirit, sportsmanship and performing to the maximum of their ability, whatever that is.

## Leadership

Sport also offers leadership opportunities. Teams need leaders: captains, vice captains, mentors and role models.

We have a “rotating captain” policy. For each game, a captain and vice-captain are appointed (by the coaches) and have the opportunity to experience the extra responsibility that leadership entails.

Some players’ faces light up when they are appointed captain for the game whereas some players get that look of dread on their faces as if they’re thinking “Oh no!”

Mostly, we look to the leaders to be encouraging of their teammates and to set the standard and reinforce the high standards of behaviour that are team and TC expectations.

After giving a number of people experience in the leadership of the team, the coaches appoint a captain for the Grand Final.

In answer to a question in the pre-season questionnaire “*Do you feel you could lead a team?*” it was almost a 50/50 split between positive and negative responses. Of the negative responses, nearly half of those considered themselves unable to lead because of football-related reasons e.g. ‘I don’t know the rules well enough’ or ‘I’m not a good enough player’.

Of course, football ability is not a pre-requisite to play in the team or even lead the team. It’s an attitude that we’re looking for but others simply didn’t consider themselves leadership material and that provides a challenge for us to address that lack of confidence.

	Positive Responses	Negative Responses
Pre-Season	42% (More than half of these people were experienced footballers.)	58% (Almost half of these people cited football reasons. Nearly half had changed their response in the EOS.)
Post-Season	62% (Almost half of these people had been a Capt or Vice Capt through the season.)	38%

There are many leadership positions within the TC and it seems that experience leading a football team can give people the confidence to lead another team and vice versa.

### Discipline

Sport – and life in general - requires discipline: self discipline and a team discipline.

Our expectation – which is made very clear to all a number of times during the season – is that violence is not tolerated. Violence is one of the cardinal rules of the TC and we can't have a situation where it's not tolerated in the TC but it's OK on the football field. What sort of message would that be sending about personal boundaries or about sport?

In answer to the open question *“How would you respond if someone was intimidating you verbally or physically?”* it seemed that our message was well understood. Given that we had about a dozen new players at the end of the year, there was still a clear understanding of the team's expectations of each other.

	Pre-Season		Post Season
41%	Ignore/Walk away.	59%	Ignore/Walk away.
19%	Play harder	9%	Come off the ground
13%	Could manage the confrontation OK	6%	Play harder
7%	Would be upset, nervous or anxious but wouldn't feed into it.	6%	Laugh
5%	Respond badly.	6%	Respond badly

### Physical Fitness

Sport offers opportunities to become physically fitter. Considering the state of our residents' health when they first join us, it is a really gratifying sight to see them being able to run faster, run for longer or run at all through their involvement in sport.

Some of our players use a fairly revolutionary method of improving their fitness – “wishing” e.g. “I wish I was fitter” sometimes said while smoking a cigarette. (They also apply the wishing strategy to smoking.)

We have a great football oval at the House and as I often remind players, it’s there seven days a week and 24 hours a day. Some have taken the opportunity to get out onto the oval in their spare time and run laps or practise skills.

In answer to the question “How would you rate your physical fitness?” the responses were probably pretty predictable. People appeared reluctant to put themselves in either the top or bottom category however we did achieve movement for all remaining players from very unfit in pre-season to reasonable in post-season.

Rating	Pre-Season	Post-Season
0-1 Very unfit	16%	9%
2-3 Reasonable	68%	82%
4-5 Pretty fit	16%	9%

We also hope that the experience of playing in a team will give people more motivation to improve their fitness for life, not just sport. Again, an aim of therapy is improved self-care and in answer to the open question “*Apart from football, can you think of any other benefits of being fitter?*” the responses were encouraging in as much as people were starting to think about longer term health issues and how sport could help them achieve better fitness levels and more stable emotional states.

	Pre-Season		Post-Season
23%	Being healthy/Long term health	35%	Being healthier
15%	Having more energy for daily tasks.	20%	Having more energy
15%	Feeling better in general	15%	Feeling happier/Better mood
11%	Feel positive/Self-esteem	12%	Better concentration and focus
9%	Clearer mind	5%	“Better than drugs”

Let’s meet some more of the Blues and hear what they like about playing for the Blues.

### **Team-Based Activities**

Sport is usually played in teams but many of our residents have never been part of a team before. Many have been socially isolated individuals who assumed that they couldn’t be part of a team because of the expectations placed on team members.

For some it’s simply through a lack of confidence: they thought they’d let the team down.

I’m still surprised at the number of people who tell me that they’ve never played for a team before and cite all kinds of reasons from parental apathy, their own apathy, their

lack of sporting ability or their lack of resources not forgetting that the cost of kitting out a kid for football can often be beyond struggling or dysfunctional families.

The open question “*What do you like/dislike about team-based activities?*” attempts to gauge our residents’ general attitudes to team-based activities and identify any obstacles.

	Pre-Season		Post-Season
14%	Sense of team	15%	Working together
14%	Bringing people together & build relationships	15%	Bonding as a team
9%	Feeling of accomplishment	9%	Camaraderie
9%	Feeling “part of”	9%	Getting to know people
9%	People who don’t play as a team/Selfish players	6%	Letting teammates down
	<b>Positive responses 76%</b>		<b>Positive responses 82%</b>

Again, one of our former players – now a graduate – summed it up best:

“A great lesson in life is to be a team player...families play as a team and if they don’t, there’s problems. Work is about teamwork. Relationships, friendships... ‘we need each other’ and Odyssey Blues allows us to play in this valuable lesson.”

Another former player – also a Milton Luger Medal winner, a graduate and a new staff member – had this to say:

“The biggest thing I gained was confidence as a person...The football team helped me with my confidence and finding my voice.”

### **Enjoyment vs Winning & Losing**

Part of our team ethos is that’s not all about winning – it’s about participating, enjoying, doing your best and being a good sport. This is an attitude that relates to the philosophical idea that it’s not about the destination as much as it’s about the journey.

Former players were asked to compare their experience of playing in other teams with their experience of playing with Odyssey and the consistent theme to the responses was that it was much more fun to play in a team where winning wasn’t everything.

The stereotypical footballer is a “win at all costs” player who seems to derive pleasure only from winning. When you see elite sportsmen in defeat, they appear crushed. We are trying to have fun and while it’s nice to win a few, if it’s not about fun, we’re simply giving the residents one more source of pressure.

To test the players’ tolerance to sport’s inherent capacity to disappoint, we asked a number of questions. When asked “*How do feel about losing?*” responses were

remarkably consistent between the pre-season and post-season groups, showing that the attitude we were hoping for was in fact the prevalent attitude:

Rating	Pre-Season	Post-Season
0-1 Can't tolerate it	2%	2% (Same person)
2-3 Disappointing	35%	32%
4-5 OK as long as we did our best	62%	65%

When asked the corresponding question framed in terms of winning “*How important is winning in competitive sport?*” again the results were very consistent:

Rating	Pre-Season	Post-Season
0-1 It's the only thing	7% (One of these people completed the EOS Q and went from a 1 to a 4.)	0%
2-3 Prefer it to losing	51%	44%
4-5 As long as we enjoy ourselves	42%	56%

These results back up the responses to other questions which attempted to identify what people like and dislike about competitive sport.

People *disliked* the overly competitive nature of some sports and the non-sportsmanlike behaviour such as “sledging” opponents.

People *liked* the challenge that competition offers, the excitement and adrenalin rush of sport but any notion of winning was a long way down the list. In fact, what people really want is simply to be “part of”.

That phrase is particularly popular as a response to the open question asked in the pre-season questionnaire “*The thing I am most looking forward to this footy season is...*” and again post-season in answer to “*The thing I enjoyed most this footy season was...*”

	Pre-Season		Post-Season
25%	Playing in and being part of a team.	34%	Being part of a team
16%	Bonding/Camaraderie	12%	Team spirit
12%	Playing the game	10%	Getting closer to peers/Making friends
9%	Becoming fitter	8%	Playing the game
8%	Having fun	6%	Supporting teammates
4%	Winning	6%	Winning

If there's a single most significant point to all of this, it's that people simply want to be “part of”. The responses were very consistent with the video excerpts you've seen.

## Sportsmanship

One of the aims of involving people in team sports is to give them an experience of winning and losing, each of which must be handled graciously.

In answer to the questionnaire statement ***“It is important to be able to lose graciously as well as win graciously”***,

Rating	Pre-Season	Post-Season
0-1 Strongly agree	83%	88%
2-3 Don't really care	12%	12%
4-5 Strongly disagree	5%	0%

It's gratifying to know that this is something the residents see as a given. During the year, our winning sides have celebrated with some appropriate modesty and the losing sides were able to give the traditional three cheers for the winners and shake hands all round.

We also have a sausage sizzle or a pie and soft drink with the opposition after most games so it gives the players a chance to spend some time together. This tends to tone down any inclination to gloat and brings our players face to face with people rather than just another footy team.

## Sense of Belonging

A similarly worded question to an earlier one really brings the whole issue of “sense of belonging” into focus. Players were asked pre-season ***“I want to be part of the football team because...”*** and were again asked post-season ***“What did you get out of being part of the football team?”***

	Pre-Season		Post-Season
33%	Wanting to be “part of” and experience being in a team.	31%	Being “part of” and experiencing team spirit.
21%	Like sport in general or football in particular.	19%	Closer relationships/Bonding
12%	A way of building relationships with other people.	12%	Making friends
6%	Camaraderie/Mateship	10%	Fun
6%	Fun	8%	Fitness

We also asked whether people would like to join a team and play some sort of sport when they're ready to leave the TC. The responses seem to back up the sentiment that being part of a team is something they very much enjoy:

Rating	Pre-Season	Post-Season
0-1 No	3%	0%
2-3 Maybe	29%	43%
4-5 Definitely	68%	57%

Even allowing for being swept up in the anticipation of the season or the sense of satisfaction at the end of the season, at least all players are either considering playing for a team or making plans to join teams.

Clearly, a team provides an opportunity to experience or re-experience the feeling of inclusion and affiliation for a lot of people who have been excluded from a lot of opportunities.

I have already quoted this former player a few times but I think he should have the last word on this topic:

“I was never in a football team. I only played at Primary School and hated it...My memories of football were painful...Playing for the Odyssey Blues helped me to ‘re-program’ football. I felt for the first time like I was part of a team which felt wonderful for me. I wasn’t the sissy anymore. I was a team member who contributed and made an effort...and the most important comparison was that the team wanted me there too...I’ve never felt I belonged anywhere, especially not a football team. I wasn’t that different after all.”

In closing, I would now like to show you something which takes three and a half minutes to show what it would take me hours to try to explain and that is how much fun it is to see the Odyssey Blues in action.

Thank you.