

FURD Presents

## Football — A shared sense of belonging?



*Final Report on the Role of Football in the  
Lives of Refugees and Asylum Seekers*

*Dr Chris Stone  
on behalf of Football Unites, Racism Divides (FURD)*

## Acknowledgements

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To all involved, keep up the good work.

Dr Chris Stone

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## **Introduction**

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*According to Article 1 of The 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, a refugee is defined as:*

*“Any person who... owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.”*



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Successive ripples of migration into Britain during the past two decades, as a result of relaxing regulations within Europe as well as large scale conflicts in the Middle East, Central and Eastern Africa, along with political indecision and scaremongering in the mass media has changed the narrative that dominates popular understandings of who refugees are and why they are in this country.

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***Asylum seekers are presumed to be liars and seen as a burden to Britain rather than victims in need of protection. Their identities have become conflated with Muslim fundamentalism and economic migration from Eastern Europe.***

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In a report such as this which is aimed at an audience that may be unaware of such distinctions it is important to provide, by way of introduction, a brief outline of exactly which communities, groups and individuals this research is concerned with.

#### **Asylum seekers**

An asylum seeker in this country is a person who has left their country of origin and formally applied for asylum, for reasons stated in the UN convention quoted above, but whose application has not yet been concluded by the Home Office. Decisions to flee their country of origin are not taken lightly and the journeys that are embarked on are perilous and futures extremely uncertain. A refused asylum seeker is a person whose asylum application has not successfully met the Home Office criteria for claiming protection. Some refused asylum seekers voluntarily return home, others are forcibly returned. For many, despite not meeting the criteria for refugee status, it is not safe or practical for them to return until conditions in their country change and so will be given temporary leave to remain in this country.

#### **Refugees**

In the UK, a person is officially given refugee status when they have their claim for asylum accepted by the government. Refugees are initially granted leave to remain for a period of five years after which they can apply for indefinite leave to remain. Refugees are entitled to work and have similar rights to other UK residents and citizens.

#### **Gateway Protection Programme**

The Gateway Protection programme is the UK's contribution to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) global resettlement programme. The majority of the world's refugees who are fleeing persecution, violence and conflict are unable to travel far beyond the borders of their home country. They often live in refugee camps for years; many children have lived their entire lives in such camps. One of the ways in which the UNHCR seeks to assist such refugees is to offer resettlement to another country.



Sheffield was one of the first cities to welcome refugees through the Gateway Protection Programme, with a group of Liberians arriving in 2004. At the time of writing the Refugee Council has since supported refugees from Liberia, Burma, Congo, Iraq, Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan and Bhutan. Groups of resettled refugees are supported for 12 months by a team of staff which includes project workers, community development workers and volunteer co-ordinators.

### **Refugee Community Organisations**

Voluntary and community organisations play an important role in the reception of asylum seekers and integration of refugees in the UK. Many of these are led by refugees themselves and are crucial in ensuring that refugee communities have access to key services and support. They are often little more than an informal collectivity of refugees and asylum seekers who have come together to support one another and attempt to widen that assistance to other new arrivals. Such commitment is sometimes rewarded through the application of small grants that can help to formalise their existence as a group and financially assist their ability to widen their support.

It is important to state that not all asylum seekers or refugees have the same issues. There are many differences based upon individual experiences before and since arriving in Britain as well as due to national cultures, class positions, education, gender, sexuality and exposure to English language and culture. The transitions that individuals undergo as they move through the system also have the effect of dramatically changing their relative positions. From seeking asylum and the relative hope it instils to being accepted, to becoming a refugee and entering more mainstream society at a much lower level than they may have been used to previously as they search for work and recognition or being refused and entering the appeals process with its unknown outcome. There is a big difference between a new arrival facing destitution because their claim for asylum has just been refused and someone who has been living as a refugee in this country for a number of years. Similarly, there is a big difference between being part of a relatively recent refugee community and that of more established migrant communities or the white majority. The rationale upon which this research is based is that in spite of such differences there are also commonalities that bring people together to create a shared sense of belonging.

This report focuses on one specific aspect that may help in breaking down barriers by exploring the role of football in the lives of refugees and asylum seekers living in Sheffield. It is assumed that findings can be extrapolated to be relevant to organisations working in other towns and cities but certain fairly unique features of Sheffield should be noted. The city has historically been very supportive of refugee populations and is where the 'City of Sanctuary' movement was instigated. Football Unites, Racism Divides (FURD) have had a very prominent role in challenging prejudice within the sport and promoting equal opportunities for ethnic minorities for the last two decades. That is not to say that similar organisations do not exist in other places but it may be that they do not have the same fortitude or longevity. Whilst the focus of the research is football and its role in helping to create a sense of belonging it is recognised that this is one aspect that will be of greater or lesser importance to different people in conjunction with other activities and relationships that contribute to such feelings.

## Background

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***Football Unites, Racism Divides (FURD) is primarily a youth and social inclusion organisation based in Sheffield, England, which works locally, nationally and internationally to combat racism and increase understanding between different communities. Fundamental to these aims has been a belief that football, as the world's most popular sport, can help break down barriers created by ignorance or prejudice and bring together people from different backgrounds to play, watch and enjoy the game.<sup>1</sup>***

1. See [www.furd.org](http://www.furd.org)

Having successfully worked to integrate a number of asylum seekers into local football teams and the structures of football more widely, including employing some refugees as community coaches, FURD were in a good position to make use of these existing relationships to examine the extent to which football helped new arrivals feel more at ease in their new lives. Through funding received as part of the Big Lottery Research Fund, the organisation was able to undertake a three year research project the aims of which were as follows:

- To examine the role of football in the lives of refugees and asylum seekers
- To raise awareness of the specific issues faced by refugees and asylum seekers
- To give voice to an often unheard minority population

The research was funded by the Big Lottery Research Programme which provided a unique opportunity for third sector organisations to undertake research in an area that would be of direct value to their on-going work. Unlike much 'research' in this realm which tends to be directed by funding bodies and produces evaluative results set against specific criteria, this programme had the aim of funding 'academic' research that would widen knowledge within the field in which the organisation works.

It is to FURD's credit and the Big Lottery that they were willing to undertake such a wide reaching investigation without the support of an academic institution. Not only did it provide a unique opportunity for research to be embedded within the daily practices of a community organisation it provided the possibility for frontline staff to have a proactive role in the design and direction of academically orientated research.

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## Rationale

The Commission for Integration and Cohesion's report 'Our Shared Future' recommended that all levels of government should do more to welcome and integrate new migrants, and to enable new residents and existing residents to adjust to one another. The report identified a number of gaps for both migrants and settled communities in making the adjustment.<sup>2</sup>

Of particular note is the 'lack of opportunities to meet and integrate with existing population', 'public hostility and ignorance' and 'lack of understanding of other cultures'; elements that are counterproductive to the Department of Communities and Local Government's (DCLG) vision of integrated and cohesive communities.<sup>3</sup>

The 'Review of Migrant Integration Policy in the UK' carried out by the DCLG maps the complexity and range of government departments, agencies and other bodies which have a role in the integration of new migrants.<sup>4</sup> Missing from their diagram is any mention of leisure providers, either at the level of DCMS or local government services.

Nonetheless, the DCLG recommends sport as a possible source of community cohesion, citing the Charlton Athletic Race Equality Partnership as an example of good practice.<sup>5</sup> This is just one of numerous examples of sport, and football in particular, being used as an intervention to aid social cohesion. Recent research has begun to challenge the acceptance of football as an uncritical source of social cohesion and integration but calls for more evidence of the sport's abilities and limitations in such a role.<sup>6</sup>

As other studies<sup>7</sup> have discovered, what should not be underestimated is the importance of engaging in mundane activities and the informal connections that such interaction creates in understanding the wellbeing of communities and the actors through which they are formed.

2. Commission for Integration and Cohesion (2007) *Our Shared Future*. Wetherby: Communities and Local Government Publications

3. Department of Communities and Local Government (2009) *Improving Opportunity, Strengthening Society – 3rd Progress Report*. Wetherby: Communities and Local Government Publications

4. Department of Communities and Local Government (2008) *Review of Migrant Integration Policy in the UK*. Wetherby: Communities and Local Government Publications

5. Department of Communities and Local Government (2009) *Guidance on building a local sense of belonging*. Wetherby: Communities and Local Government Publications

6. Tacon, R. (2007) 'Football and social inclusion: Evaluating social policy' *Managing Leisure* 12; Mueller, F. & Van Zoanen, I. (2008) 'The Soccer Myth: An Investigation of Soccer's Imagined Potential for Social Change' Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, TBA, Montreal, Quebec, Canada, May 21, 2008

7. Craig, G., Dawson, A., Kilkey, M. & Martin G. (2004) *A safe place to be? The quality of life of asylum seekers in Sheffield and Wakefield*. Hull: University of Hull Social Policy Department; Rutter, J., Cooley, L., Reynolds, S. & Sheldon, R. (2007) *From Refugee to Citizen: 'Standing on my own two feet': A research report on integration, 'Britishness' and citizenship*. London: Institute for Public Policy Research; Rutter, J., Cooley, L., Jones, N. & Pillai, R. (2008) *Moving Up Together: Promoting equality and integration among the UK's diverse communities*. London: Institute for Public Policy Research

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8. See, for example, Bauman, Z. (2001) *Community: seeking safety in an insecure world*. Cambridge: Polity; Mallett, S. (2004) 'Understanding home: a critical review of the literature' *Sociological Review* 52(1):62-89

## **Belonging**

The notion of 'belonging' is, similarly to the idea of 'community' or 'home', an elusive ideal<sup>8</sup> that can mean different things to different people at different times of their lives. We all know what these terms mean but for analytical purposes there is no clear definition. Furthermore, meanings become conflated and interchangeable within the complexities of people's everyday lives and within political agendas.

At the heart of any discussion of belonging, particularly with regard to new migrants, is that related to the nation-state and the idea of citizenship. This is, after all, how belonging is legitimated in the legal sense and civil, political and social rights or obligations are democratically conveyed. In contrast (though also inherently linked to this) are personal feelings of belonging that emerge through the activities undertaken and the interpersonal relationships that are formed in our ongoing daily lives.

Of interest with regard to this research project are those aspects of belonging that transcend the legalities of British citizenship. Whilst it may be true that arguably the ultimate certification of belonging is citizenship, as the philosopher Michael Dummett suggests it is ultimately decided by whether an individual feels that they fully belong.<sup>9</sup> There are plenty of people classed as British citizens who do not necessarily have such feelings. There are also those who do not fully 'belong' to the British nation-state but for whom there is some sense of belonging within these borders.

It is through repetition and routine from one day to the next that individual lives become structured and manageable, leading to some sense of stability and belongingness.<sup>10</sup> According to Michael Skey, author of 'National Belonging and Everyday Life', the key elements in the ongoing production of a relatively consistent everyday realm can be summarised as follows: shared knowledge/assumptions expressed through language and social practice, spatial limits, temporal regularities and institutional settings.<sup>11</sup> He suggests that:

9. Dummett, M. (2001) *On Immigration and Refugees*. London: Routledge

10. See Young, M. (1997) 'Time, Habit and Repetition in Day-to-Day Life', in A. Giddens (ed.) *Sociology: Introductory Readings*. Cambridge: Polity; Chaney, D. (2002) *Cultural Change and Everyday Life*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan; Skey, M. (2011) *National Belonging and Everyday Life*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

11. Skey, M. (2011) *National Belonging and Everyday Life*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

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***“Established national frameworks, which are (re)produced through ordered continuities of language, habit, symbols and the material environment, continue to be a crucial element in sustaining a stable sense of self, maintaining trust in daily interactions with other people and social institutions, and familiarising the social settings and landscapes that allow certain groups to feel ‘at home’.”***

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The connection between football and belonging is the extent to which it can offer some continuity across different national frameworks as individuals move from one nation to another, whether it helps overcome differences that may threaten daily interactions between new arrivals and those whom they meet, and its ability to provide ontological security for individuals whose identities may have been undermined by forced migration.

Thus, belonging, or the absence thereof, emerges from the interconnection of personal identity, group attachment and cultural background. These characteristics are by no means independent from one another but emerge at different times to greater or lesser degrees to create feelings of belonging within individuals.

### **Method**

The funding allowed for a social researcher to be embedded within FURD for three years and for the organisation to arrange a number of events as part of a participatory action research approach to carrying out the investigation.<sup>12</sup> This involved working with refugees and asylum seekers as 'co-researchers' and providing opportunities throughout the duration of the research programme for participants to voice their opinions and contribute to activities that would make them feel more involved. It is in some ways a pro-active approach to understanding processes of 'belonging' by creating opportunities that may assist in providing such feelings as well as giving voice to an underrepresented minority in debates that often dominate political and media discussions.

Events, that were nominally labelled 'research road-shows', ranged from the more formal such as, public speaking, conferences and classroom based presentations to more informal activities including a film festival, quiz night, multi-cultural festivals, televised match nights, live match-day experiences and on-field participation. Some events were more successful than others at bringing together individuals that would not ordinarily meet but such a methodology has shown the benefits of these kinds of engagement strategies.

12. For an explanation of such an approach see McIntyre, A. (2008) *Participatory Action Research*. London: Sage



## Case Study: **FURD Football Citizenship Quiz**

On the eve of the African Cup of Nations, FURD hosted a quiz night which aimed indirectly to raise awareness about some of the issues facing asylum seekers and new migrants, celebrate the contribution of African football to the global game and offer an entertaining evening of fun for local people, new arrivals and those interested in football trivia.

The FURD based quiz team had spent all week trying to coerce those setting the questions into revealing the answers or providing some clues as to what some of the topics might be. First prize was a complimentary meal for four, kindly donated by a local Indian restaurant, and the team comprised of FURD staff and volunteers were as keen as always to treat themselves by winning the competition. They were eyed with good natured suspicion by the other contestants as they amusingly tried to intimidate the other quiz teams with fabrications of having insider knowledge.

Their early confidence was shattered as their acquaintance with the African Cup of Nations, on which round one was based, left them falling behind teams consisting of asylum seekers from the likes of Sudan, Zimbabwe and Somalia. The second round further favoured the teams consisting of refugees, focusing as it did on questions about human rights and asylum issues.

An educational if somewhat intense set of interrogations were followed by a well needed break and refreshments provided by the same local restaurant were thoroughly enjoyed.

In the General Football Knowledge round some of the more obscure questions favoured local people but that did not stop the refugee based teams from maintaining their advantage as their knowledge of Premier League and European football was second to none. The final round featured questions from the 'Life in the UK' test which all migrants face should they wish to become British citizens. Questions such as, 'How many countries are members of the European Union?' and 'When did the civil war begin between King Charles I and Parliament?' had everyone stumped, but a local neighbourhood team proved their immaculate knowledge of British culture and history and were rewarded with a prize of vouchers for a local sports shop.

Second prize of four tickets to a Sheffield United match went to a team consisting of two asylum seekers and a local resident, who happened to be a Sheffield Wednesday supporter. He was more than happy to give up his ticket so his teammates could invite a friend to go with them.

The aim of this 'research road-show' event was not to directly disseminate the findings of the project but to provide a context that would encourage interaction between refugees and non-refugees. Teams of four were invited from local football organisations, supporters' groups, refugee support agencies and the local community as well as refugees and asylum seekers with whom FURD have been engaging. There was extremely positive feedback from those who attended:

"I wouldn't normally come into contact with guys like that. Why would I? But the two I met [at the event] were very interesting. They were very knowledgeable... knew a lot more about football than I did!" (long term local resident)

"We should do this again. Like Question of Sport, isn't it. We don't need prizes... it's just a bit of fun." (Sudanese asylum seeker)

"Thank you for inviting me... a fabulous event. I really understand a lot more about how important football is to refugees and asylum seekers... I really didn't get it before." (Refugee support worker)

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This approach was supported by in-depth interviews with more than 50 refugees and asylum seekers living in Sheffield and its environs who were originally from the following countries: Afghanistan, Burundi, Cameroon, Chile, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Georgia, Iran, Iraq, Liberia, Libya, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Yemen, Zimbabwe. Interviews were also carried out with refugee support workers from the Northern Refugee Centre, the Refugee Council Gateway Protection Programme, the Children's Society, the City of Sanctuary, development staff at Sheffield & Hallamshire County Football Association and with FURD community coaches.

In addition there were numerous informal interviews and conversations that emerged as part of an ethnographic approach. Participant observation was carried out over the three year duration of the project at football centred events such as one off tournaments, amateur league matches, training sessions, televised games and attending live matches at Sheffield United as well as at drop-in sessions, conversation clubs, TESOL classes and other events specifically aimed at the refugee population. The anonymity of participants is maintained through labelling interviewees by their national identity and their political status as these characteristics seem pertinent to the discussion in hand. Where they refer to others by name appropriate pseudonyms are used in keeping with the anthroponymy of those to whom the speaker is referring.

Interviews were structured around the two main themes of the research: football and belonging. Direct questioning of participants about belonging often led to extremely wide ranging discussions. Some participants were very clear about what belonging meant to them but it could also cause confusion as participants grappled with the abstract ideas that the concept invokes and the challenges of finding an elusive ideal. The findings contained herein, the result of a grounded theoretical approach<sup>13</sup>, concentrate on the connections that the author has found during the research process, in its entirety, between football and belonging in order to supplement existing knowledge about the social capabilities of sport.

13. See Bryant, A. & Charmaz, K. (Eds.) (2007) *The SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory*. Los Angeles: Sage

In acknowledgement of particular recurring themes related to general attitudes towards life in Britain, and more specifically Sheffield, that emerged during interviews it should be noted that the majority are very positive about their lives in this country. It is not with British people, for example, that asylum seekers have problems but with the authorities; the British Government as represented by the Home Office. When questioned about negative experiences, all research participants were quick to praise the welcome they feel when they do meet local people. Very few had experienced what they consider to be racist or bigoted abuse. If they had they used examples of such behaviour to positively compare their current life in Sheffield with previous experiences of other cities. One of the major frustrations for refugees is the inability to find work and contribute or 'pay-back' to the national treasury.

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There are always limitations with research processes and it is possible that their positivity is due to a desire to not come across as ungrateful or negative to someone (representative of an organisation) that is taking the time to engage with them. It could also be because the majority with whom they engage on a regular basis are sympathetic to their plight, working or volunteering for support agencies. The individuals who work for the Home Office with whom they may have had numerous interviews are also not personally held responsible but they are representatives of a regime by which many feel let down. The reason this is important is that belonging is in part about forming connections at the human level, whether as friends or strangers, and greater understanding of difference only comes through interactions at a personal level. It is this philosophy that underpins these research findings.



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14. See FURD (2012) *Football – A shared sense of belonging? Interim Conference Report*. <http://www.furd.org/resources/FASSOB%20Interim%20conference%20report.pdf>

## **Summary of Key Findings**

Conceptualising belonging as the intersection of personal identity, community interactions and expression of culture<sup>14</sup>, the key ingredients that football can provide in this process are as follows:

### **Routine**

Football provides a consistency in lives that are anything but consistent in so many other ways. It provides a connection between the past and the present. There is a regularity to football based activities that builds relationships with other participants. The very fact that it is recognisable and unremarkable creates for a short period some kind of normality. The activity is fairly unchanging across different cultures but provides a routine form for expressing a particular cultural and personal presence amongst others.

### **Catharsis**

There is an embodied connection between the self and others that alleviates the pressures associated with understanding a new culture and seeking a place within it. Cultures of watching or playing football are expressed in a pre-reflexive fashion that seems almost instinctive. In lives that are unfamiliar in so many other ways, this unthinking understanding of what is taking place during a match relieves the constant pressures of managing daily life. The emotions and experiences are carried through the week to provide positive means of reflection and anticipation.

### **Sociality**

Football provides an alternative form through which to communicate with others that avoids the reduction of identity to that of ethnicity or political status. Connections are centred upon a shared interest around a particular activity. Differences can be overlooked allowing connections to be made between individuals from various cultural backgrounds. They can also be reinforced creating stronger in-group belonging whilst potentially reinforcing stereotypes about the 'other' as not wanting to belong to the wider British society as defined by the ethnic majority.

### **Empowerment**

Football is an activity in which it is possible to exert some control in lives that seem socio-politically powerless. At a fundamental level it is possible to be a winner. There is also a likelihood of improvement, in skill level, fitness and respect amongst fellow players. Furthermore, a football team is a very physical manifestation of a community's presence within the 'melting pot' of British multiculturalism.

Developmental possibilities need to be made more available through a more considered understanding of the transition from recreational to competitive football.

### **Plurality**

The very development of football and its place in contemporary culture means it has a multiplicity of meanings. It provides a contested space for negotiating difference and reinforcing sameness, consolidating existing identities and presenting alternative ones, creating unpredictable outcomes within repetitively familiar formulations, challenging self capabilities whilst remaining in the comfort zone, releasing pent up emotions and managing competitive frustrations, being better than others but still being beaten. The strength of football as a development tool is the combination of these competing factors, but only through strong organisational structures that recognise how the diverse interconnections can lead to positive interactions.



## **Recreational Football Participation**

*'Kicking a ball about' is something children commonly do from a young age whether they grow up in Europe, America, Africa, the Middle East, the Far East or anywhere in between. For many, this will lead to more formal forms of play and participation in sporting activities. Such activities are global in nature, the skills needed to participate and the rules governing play transferable across cultural and national boundaries.<sup>15</sup> For some, these skills are maintained and developed into adulthood so that football continues to be a regular activity beyond childhood. For others, the desire and opportunities to play football wanes as they grow up and other aspects of life take priority. Despite that, for those who did not have negative experiences of playing when they were younger, football can provide an entertaining and familiar activity with social and physical benefits. The caveat is the importance of participation at a level appropriate to the physical capabilities and competitive desire of those involved.*

15. That is not to deny that the global popularity of football is not shaped by post-colonial or neocolonial processes. See Bale, J. & Cronin, M. (2003) *Sport and Postcolonialism*. Oxford: Berg; Giulianotti, R. (1999) *Football: A Sociology of the Global Game*. Cambridge: Polity Press; Maguire, J. (2008) 'Real Politic' or 'Ethically Based': Sport, Globalization, Migration and Nation-State Policies. *Sport in Society* 11(4):443-458



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Whilst the professional game gets the majority of media attention and the competitive amateur league structures benefit from the support of national governing bodies, it is at a recreational level that most people actively 'play football'. For the benefit of this research, recreational football has been defined as that which is not part of the regular Football Association (FA) affiliated seasonal league structure that, in Britain, begins in August/September and runs through the winter ending in April/May of the following calendar year. So, it includes casual football in the park, open 'training' sessions, small-sided or full 11-a-side matches organised amongst friends at commercial facilities on a regular basis or

on 'one-off' occasions and individual day/ weekend tournaments. It does not mean that matches themselves are necessarily any less competitive for their informal nature. Competition however tends to be motivated more by intrinsic desire than tangible extrinsic rewards.

Regardless of ability, what recreational football can provide is some relief for those who have been forced to leave home, move to a foreign country, change their hopes for the future and whose sense of self has been systematically undermined by the process of doing so.

***"Most of us are people [for whom] life has let them down; [who] feel they are not winners in any way... through the asylum system and being far from home, you lose your confidence... Everyone thinks, 'the only way I can feel good about myself is scoring more goals'."***

***(Somali asylum seeker)***



## Park Football

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Asylum seekers arrive in a new city often with little knowledge of their environment, possibly no experience of urban living and no choice of where they will be housed. In Sheffield, support agencies such as the Northern Refugee Centre can help signpost them to mandatory services such as health and housing as well as various activities to meet their needs and occupy their time, such as TESOL classes or conversation clubs. Much of a new arrival's day-to-day activity is spent becoming accustomed to a new way of life. This often involves walking around the neighbourhoods of their new city.

"There is [a] park near to where my house [is]. I walk there and see people... football, they play football... many, many time. I watch and I say [to] someone, 'I play is okay?' He say, 'Is okay.'" (Iranian asylum seeker)

For those with a desire to play football this is a fairly common type of exchange. Parks are one of the few civic spaces in Britain today used by people from all social backgrounds. Certain open spaces and recreation grounds can become dominated by certain groups at certain times but generally they remain democratic spaces. That is not to say that they do not reflect the neighbourhood demographics in which they are situated, which can be important in determining the kind of interactions that take place.

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***"We play with friends in the park... People just kinda turn up and we pick teams. [It is] mostly Somali and quite a few Arabs, all from [the local area]."*** (Teenage Somali refugee)

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Belonging is strongly linked with geographical space and the social dynamics contained therein. Communities and cultural forms have traditionally been geographically bounded. It must be noted that with people living evermore transient lives as well as communication being increasingly governed by technology such boundaries are not, of course, as fixed as they once seemed. Nonetheless, to feel comfortable with what is physically going on around you is part of belongingness.

Football in the park may take the form of an organised match (as part of a local FA sanctioned league), an informal match (amongst a group of friends), a training session for an amateur team playing in a local league or a small group of people casually kicking a ball to one another.

Where new arrivals have spoken about joining in with groups comprised predominantly of the white majority playing football in the park, they have on the surface been accepted as players in the immediacy of such a situation but when making enquiries about joining the team more formally, more regularly, they have subsequently been dismissed or ignored. On reflection, this is not seen as some sort of overwhelming prejudice against them. It is often interpreted more as a result of being a newcomer and a product of British cultural antipathy towards strangers. It can however reinforce self-perceptions of difference.

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It would seem that 'otherness' is not so important, or at least negotiated in a different manner, when encountered in a corporeally dominated situation such as playing football, but is then culturally inscribed when membership involves a more meaningful commitment (within the subcultures of amateur football competition). In other words, anyone who has the appropriate levels of ability can join in if a team is just training or having a kick-about because you just happen to share the same space at that time but becoming part of the club warrants a different kind of acceptance, an actively complicit agreement that 'you are one of us'.

Conversely, after joining in with groups comprised mostly of players from ethnic minority backgrounds, whether multi-cultural or mono-cultural, the outcome is more welcoming.

"I see the people playing [in the park]. It is other side [of the city], you know. They [are] like me [from Iran/Iraq]. And Mohammed, he see me and say me, 'You want to play?' So, I play [with them]... I meet Farrokh... and Hamid... and, [they] say if I want to play in tournament... I only in Sheffield, maybe one month." (Kurdish asylum seeker)

By playing football with such a group, the support network is widened. From meeting people and getting to know them this particular asylum seeker says he found out about English classes which then introduced him to the conversation club in central Sheffield and further formal support agencies that operate drop-in sessions at the same time. Informally, opportunities for socialising became more available as members of the team invited him to eat with them or visit their houses.

There are still differences to be negotiated:

***"Salim, he is a nice guy. He is Kurdish but he is very, very... he always... Always, he come say hello, he speak very well, very good guy." (Iraqi refugee)***

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The cultural antagonism implicit in the above quote is informed by historical prejudices emanating from personal experiences and interpretations of the position of Kurdish people during successive conflicts in his home country of Iraq. Part of living in the UK, particularly for asylum seekers who find themselves part of very diverse communities is reassessing their former prejudices.

In a competitive environment such as that provided by football there is always potential for division based upon any number of factors. For those who participate as part of multicultural groups and in competitions that promote diversity, however, most commonly division emanates from football based disagreements. That is not to deny that certain cultural stereotypes are not reinforced at times but they tend to be negotiated and overcome within the immediacy of the match. This points towards the importance of informal football in forcing people to overcome their differences for the good of the game.<sup>16</sup>

For some, playing regularly in the park leads to a more organised approach:

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***“In the beginning, we just go to the park...  
Yasin, he see us in the park and say,  
‘[Why not] start a team?’  
So, he like the manager, he coach us...”  
(Yemeni refugee)***

In this case, the ‘manager’, a refugee himself, had both an interest in sport from his previous work before arriving in the UK and connections with other informal (ethnic minority) football teams in the neighbourhood. The importance of such a figure for young refugees and asylum

seekers should not be underestimated. This particular group were reliant on such a role model in maintaining their discipline, both as a team during matches and as a collection of disorganised individuals who played regularly amongst one another but without structure. When he was forced to move away from Sheffield, the group/team played together less frequently and without purpose. Matches also became indisciplined and the players lost the respect they had gained from other teams because of their ability.

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16. Research carried out in Uganda makes use of a four level model for describing conflict that can arise through sport: disagreement, argument, physical, harmful. See Ravizza, D.M. (2012) ‘We Don’t Play War Anymore: Sport and the Reintegration of Former Child Soldiers in Northern Uganda’, in K.Gilbert & W.Bennett (eds.) Sport, Peace and Development. Champaign, Illinois: Common Ground Publishing

## Open 'training' sessions

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Various organisations receive funding to utilise the seemingly cohesive power of football to meet various social needs. FURD, for example, have held regular 'training' sessions targeting young men and teenage boys from ethnic minorities since 1996. Many young asylum seekers and refugees attend these sessions having found out about them from friends and acquaintances at school or college. The sessions provide some coaching from qualified FURD staff and an opportunity to play small sided matches on good quality pitches. Good players are also 'talent spotted' and fed into amateur football teams supported by FURD. Exceptional talent will be pointed out to Sheffield United scouts.

These sessions are often the first opportunity, outside of school, for young new arrivals to play structured football in a welcoming and professionally organised environment. Sessions are predominantly attended by BME young people. Many of the FURD coaches in charge of the sessions are from refugee backgrounds themselves which helps build empathic relationships with players who have had similar experiences. Such subtleties help young people's sense of belonging through the latent knowledge that there is someone else, whom they respect, who can relate to their situation through their own experience. Not that it is promoted in this way and it is no more obvious at these sessions than at any other time who is and who is not a refugee. It is more subtle. Coaches get to know the young people and have an understanding of them.

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*"If there are problems, I can help...  
I know what the problems are...  
And they know they can trust me..."*

*(FURD coach and former refugee)*

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*"When you're here... you feel more comfortable. Although we don't talk about what is affecting us... we still feel untied, untangled from [other things]." (Sudanese asylum seeker)*

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FURD have also started a weekly drop-in session (see page 24) particularly targeted at asylum seekers, from any age group, whose lives are especially vulnerable, often staying in hostels with nowhere to go during the day, having had their support cut and relying on as little as £15 a week provided by charitable organisations such as ASSIST.

An **example of good practice**, the benefits are enormous. At the very least football provides a distraction from the everyday concerns that dominate asylum seekers' lives.

It is not only during the sessions, however, that playing football can be diversionary. The weekly regularity provides some structure to lives that are empty of the work and leisure routines enjoyed by the majority. It is something to reflect on afterwards as well as look forward to.

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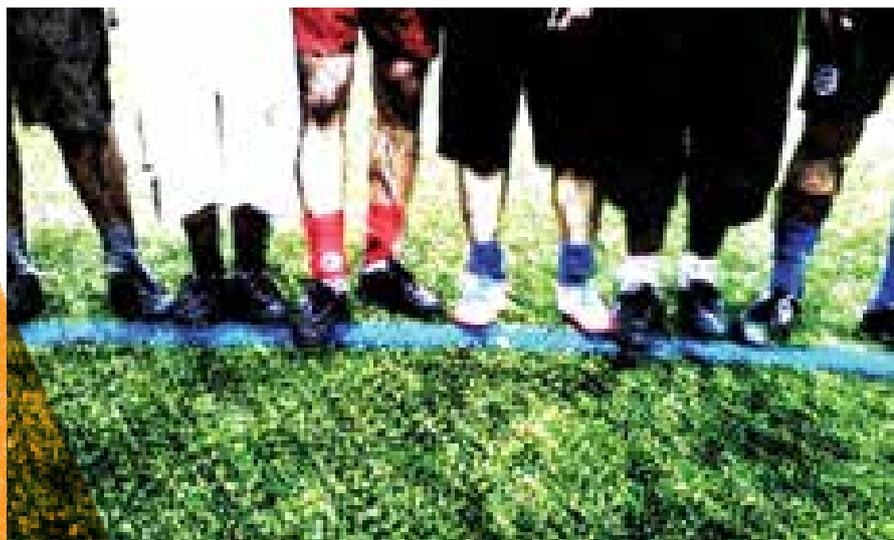
***“The night, maybe two or three nights, before I play football I get very excited. Like last night, I [go to] sleep at three o’clock in the morning... because I know [the following day] I go play football.” (Iranian asylum seeker)***

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Of course, attitudes such as this can apply to all levels of football participation. The key in terms of belonging is that the informality of the sessions does not penalise participants if, for whatever reason, they are unable to attend from one week to the next but the consistency of the provision means they always feel welcome. Thus, participants may not be able to attend for a number of weeks but will return and feel like they have never been away.

Although the sessions are strongly promoted to those in most need, the group includes refugees who have free time due to being unable to find full time work and other asylum seekers who are attracted by the informal nature of the sessions and the supportive environment.

“I come here to let off steam and enjoy it with people who understand me... everyone really understands the situation you’re in, which is a very difficult situation and people don’t constantly bombard you with the situation you’re in. You are free and you’ve got people who understand, people who are learning to understand, which means a lot to people like me.” (Zimbabwean asylum seeker)





## Case Study: Group Belonging

It has been a long winter, especially for many asylum seekers who are much more used to sunnier climates and whose daily lives offer little motivation to leave the relative warmth of the simple accommodation they have been given. Nonetheless, at 10 o'clock on a cold Wednesday morning, David braves the near freezing conditions and trudges down to the U-Mix Centre. He is quiet, self-absorbed, concerned with his own private thoughts. His future in this country is unsure. One of the many whose initial claim for asylum was refused, his mind is filled with the preoccupations of appealing this decision and his bag filled with the documentation needed to do so.

Approaching the football pitches, his mood lightens. He receives shouts of acknowledgement from the couple of young men already kicking a ball to one another, they themselves having been in a similar situation the previous year. He greets his friend, Raffi, with a smile. As they both warm themselves with a steaming cup of tea, kindly provided by a member of the FURD staff team, they discuss the form of Lionel Messi...

From the football pitch outside can be heard shouts of anguish as balls rattle the fencing behind the goal; another shot taken in anger sailing wide of its target as a week's worth of suppressed frustration is given physical form. Curses in Arabic combine with a surprisingly good knowledge of more familiar four-letter words. Instructions are given in broken English as the group of young men now numbering a baker's dozen try to organise themselves into teams. A school playground of multi-national adults do their best to be on the side with the better players, dragging their friends and fellow countrymen with them.

Having found some suitable footwear, David emerges from the changing room and jogs a little ungainly onto the pitch. He is not a naturally gifted footballer, but shows some deft touches nonetheless and enthusiastically takes players on when he receives the ball before running straight into a defender with better tactical appreciation of the game. A few groans from his team-mates are shrugged off as he turns to try to reclaim the ball and his lesser ability is soon forgotten as the ball rebounds into his path and he finds the perfect pass to the feet of a talented player they call 'Ronaldo'.

As the ball hits the back of the net, he turns, a broad smile on his face, fists clenched by his side. More overstated celebrations echo through the cold air from his team mates whilst some of their opponents vociferously argue about who is to blame, a ritual performed by all conceding teams at whatever level the game is played. Their frustrations soon give way to more concerted efforts at not suffering further embarrassment.

After the game, David is again quiet and contemplative as he sits in the changing rooms waiting for a shower to become free so he can have a good wash and warm himself up. That is his choice. The other players are full of energetic verbal exchanges as they discuss who was at fault for which goal and compliment one another's abilities. The discussions continue over lunch before many of them head off to the 'drop-in' at which advice will be sought about any number of issues concerning their welfare. For now, though, there is a good spirit and the jocular arguments prevail.

As part of a participatory action research approach to this investigation, FURD responded to the need for a regular informal football session that would benefit individual asylum seekers with little support and a desire to be more active. FURD are able to loan participants suitable footwear and kit as well as providing hot showers and toiletries. The session is followed with a free hot meal and financial support for travel costs. These are added extras that encourage participation, as is having someone available to offer support with issues that arise relating to their asylum case or situation.

***"It is very important that there are other people who understand our problems... Just having some boots to play in... if I want to play somewhere else, with another group, I would not have that and straight away you feel segregated."***

*(Zimbabwean asylum seeker)*

The emphasis is on having fun and combining football with other social activities including simple circuits in the gym before hand and sitting down to eat together afterwards.

"I'm never going to be some good player and play in a league or something like that... just [self] fulfilment. It keep your spirit level up, fitness level and you meet new people, which is good... You make new friends [and] it's a good workout as well." (Sudanese asylum seeker)

A very strong sense of belonging is nurtured within the group due to a combination of factors: welcoming environment, organisational support (in terms of travel costs, equipment, showers and simple good quality food), organic group development based upon informal and democratic decision making within the group (as opposed to imposing decisions from the top down – though there is support if needed from FURD staff with experience of working with minority groups generally, with good conflict resolution skills and who have knowledge about the asylum system and can give helpful advice to those facing problems), a focus on playing football for the sake of it, an implicit knowledge that others are, have been or possibly will be facing similar problems with regard to their situation. One of the important things though is that this is not explicitly discussed:

"Every one of us is carrying different experiences of life but most of all what connects us is football... It is very rare when we sit [after] we've played football [that] we talk about what's happening in our lives and our private things... At the moment, mainly we talk about what happened on the pitch." (Somali asylum seeker)

***"All I was thinking about was, 'How can we be losing...?'"***

*(Zimbabwean asylum seeker)*

And what happens on the pitch contains its own narrative on which to concentrate both physical and mental energy. It is a distraction from the more pressing concerns.

From certain perspectives this may be seen as an illusory way of distracting individuals facing serious threats to their human rights and who are being further persecuted at a point when they were expecting to be able to move on with their lives. Many asylum seekers do try to take up the fight, standing up against what they believe to be an unfair situation. The majority, however, find themselves downtrodden to an extent that their hopes rest with the expertise and persistence of others. For them football is one part of life that for a moment can provide some glory.

***"It's the only way I can win because outside [these sessions], that's a different story."***

*(Somali asylum seeker)*

Above and beyond these short lived instants, though, other positive activities can be provided that, as participants grow in confidence and build trusting relationships through playing football, can offer more meaningful opportunities in terms of challenging the status quo, raising awareness and educating others. In this sense, such football sessions are just a gateway to further engagement.

*"Before I got into this programme [at FURD] I had become sort of like a recluse. I was anti-social and...*

*I was so angry. But after [starting to come regularly to FURD], I got to speaking to a lot of people, different cultures and everything... It builds you in some sort of sense. And as a result... some people might not see it as very big but to me it makes a difference... as a result I've started a lot of programmes and I've started doing a lot of voluntary work... It just changed me as a person... Because now, who would've thought that I would be able to speak in front of people about the situation I'm in."*  
*(Zimbabwean asylum seeker)*

## **Informal 5-a-side**

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### ***Small-sided football has increased in popularity throughout all sectors of British society.***

Shorter games, less commitment and more variable timeslots for matches mean it fits more readily with contemporary work patterns and lifestyles than the traditional weekend league structure. For similar reasons, 5-a-side football is also popular with refugees and asylum seekers, especially within youth age groups who will have been socialised into this form of football through friends at school and college.

There is usually a cost involved, though some groups do manage to play regularly on pitches outside of the legitimately scheduled slots, but because it is relatively low when shared across all players, exceptions will often be made for one or two who may not be able to afford it.

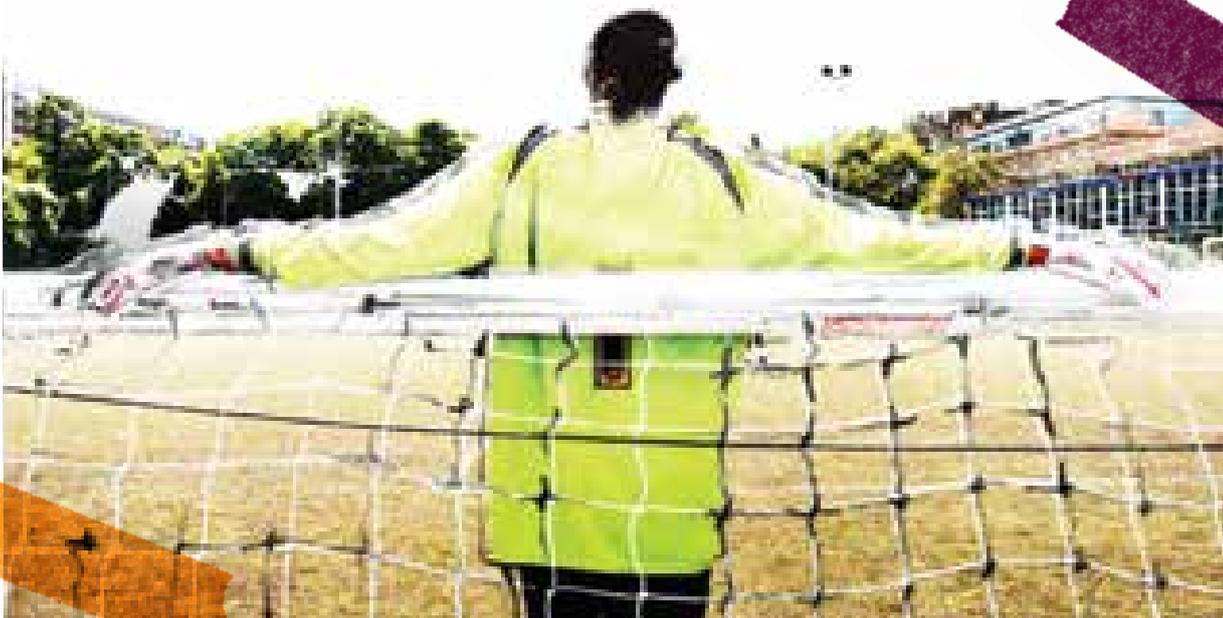
*“When I say I like play football, Des at the Red Cross, he take me to meet some people... they play every week near to where I live... you know, near to Hillsborough Park. It cost four pound. I say I no able to pay that. I no able to play. This guy, the umm... organiser he say, ‘no worry. I pay for you’.”*  
(Iranian asylum seeker)

Five-a-side football provides an important step for many refugees because it represents a transition from park football which is seen as apart from the structural establishment, both literally and metaphorically, in terms of football authorities and cultural consumerist norms.

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***“It better for playing... goals and... the ground [the surface] better... It more professional [more organised].”*** (Iraqi refugee)

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It is both casual, in a similar way to park football but involves a degree of organisation in terms of booking pitches and paying for them. It provides some sense of responsibility for refugees as they establish themselves within local communities and structures. Most refugee based teams do not play as part of 5-a-side leagues but play amongst themselves, with their friends. For new arrivals this can provide a further means for building connections with individuals who have either been in their position themselves or are sympathetic to their situation, have similar cultural background and will cover the costs for those who cannot afford it.

The locations at which small-sided football takes place usually have a number of pitches on which matches can take place simultaneously. As people play more regularly, often at the same time each week, they gradually get to know other groups playing on other pitches. Matches are arranged between different groups outside of the immediate connections and players are invited to join in with other teams. Again this happens between groups predominantly from within the ethnic minority communities rather than with teams comprising mostly players from the white majority.

***“There are times, like when you go to Power League and you haven’t got enough players... you go to another pitch and play with others... [But] you can’t just approach people. There has to be a link. And most people I know are Somali and Yemeni... or BME people.” (Somali refugee)***

## Case Study: **Football For Friendship**

The plan to meet in town seemed easier than trying to explain the whereabouts of the football pitches but as the minibus that has been arranged to pick up the players arrives still some are missing. The majority have only been in the country for a few months and are still getting used to finding their way around as well as the demands of more industrialised time keeping. As we wait for the missing members of the group to turn up, the more confident refugees enthusiastically discuss the upcoming tournament with the students who have organised it.

The Football for Friendship tournament is an annual event at the University of Sheffield. Its aim is to provide a space for students of the university and refugees living in the city to mix together in a friendly atmosphere. What the tournament represents is the notion that football can help build friendship, arguably an essential aspect of belonging in Western society, and help break down barriers between groups and individuals who may not normally come into contact with one another.

Unlike many football tournaments that are organised for teams to enter and compete for victory, the format for this event is that teams are formed at the start of the tournament through the random selection of players that turn up on the day. It is like playground football or park football but with more structure. Refugees and students are divided equally amongst the teams in order to encourage interaction. For some who have turned up as a team this is frustrating but for most it has the intended effect of breaking down barriers between individuals with very different backgrounds. Matches remain competitive despite the random composition of the teams but it tends to soften the occasionally excessive aggressiveness attached to being part of an established side.

Support is provided for refugees and asylum seekers in the form of free transport to and from the tournament venue. As we travel the short distance to the university sports ground conversations between students and refugees continue with views about Sheffield being exchanged and opinions of English Premier League teams being discussed.



The people who benefit most from this tournament are newly arrived groups or individuals. For them it is seen as a welcoming event and to be invited to it is a generous gesture. For refugees who are part of more established networks, its purpose is not seen as so valuable. They already have friends. They already play in football teams. For the students, it can raise awareness about the lives of refugees and asylum seekers and challenge misconceptions. Most noticeably, is the preconception that there is some fundamental difference between 'them' and 'us'. It is manifest at the start through some students being overly supportive of their newly arrived teammates to the point of condescension. As the football progresses, however, competitiveness takes over and through players' differing abilities their roles in the team take shape. Congratulations are offered based upon footballing expectations. Those with lesser ability receive approval when they exceed expectations. Better players more quickly find themselves as key components of the burgeoning collective.

The tournament in its current format offers a very temporary sense of belonging for newly arrived individuals who may not yet have had the opportunity to get to know many people. It makes them feel welcome that an important local institution is inviting them to participate in an event. Unfortunately, it stands alone and is unable to cultivate any mutuality between players from very different backgrounds that may develop during the day. Belongingness relies on routine and consistency. The Football for Friendship Tournament could develop this if it were a more regular feature on the calendar. The strongest aspect of the event is the potential for young men who may never normally meet asylum seekers to benefit from learning a little about who they are and the lives they have led in an informal environment.

## Informal 11-a-side

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Common identifiers of a nation and the symbolic conveyance of national identity throughout the world are a country's flag, the national anthem, its airline and its football team. In terms of the latter, one that plays 11-a-side matches in recognised international tournaments. In a micro reflection of such symbolic identifiers, for migrant communities living in Britain, having an 11-a-side football team is an important part of retaining and presenting a common cultural identity. Especially for refugees and asylum seekers who may see other symbols of national identity as more political than they perceive football to be and wish to distance themselves from them.

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***“One of the first things that [new arrivals] say to me is, ‘Can you help us make a football team?’”***

*(Gateway Protection Programme Worker)*

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The teams that have formed around national and ethnic identities tend to play matches of a more informal nature, though they may compete in one-day tournaments or small-sided leagues that require less financial commitment or organisational capacity. In Sheffield, the following ethnic groups have football teams that have been formed to play regularly, some of which aspire to participate in competitive leagues: Congolese, Iraqi, Kurdish, Slovakian

(Roma), Somali, Yemeni (as well as Bengali, Caribbean and Chinese from predominantly non-refugee populations). Team names may combine the country of origin or ethnic label in combination with symbolically strong epithets as a way of retaining and positively celebrating their previous collective cultural identity (examples of this can be seen from the list of teams on page 39 that have competed in the All Nations Tournament over the years).

Many of these teams do not have the resources to play in organised local leagues mainly due to the financial outlay needed. In this regard, any sense of ‘belonging’ is ambiguous. Players gain a sense of belonging to their football club, which is in turn promoting a continued membership to the imagined community attached to their cultural heritage. At the same time, these teams operate outside the official structures of organised competitive football.

They tend to play amongst themselves in fairly regular ‘friendly’ matches: arranged through team managers contacting one another, fixing a suitable date and venue then rounding up their players. The ‘managers’ know one another through the informal network of connections in which refugees and asylum seekers find themselves soon after they arrive. Some contacts exist through connections from before they came here – refugees from their home countries that live nearby or in other parts of Britain. More often contacts are made through the church or mosque as well as other meeting places in the neighbourhood such as cafes or barbershops or just walking down the street.

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***“It does matter because if you win you feel happy. You feel like you did training, practice, well. If we lose then we start, you know... shouting... getting upset.”***

*(Yemeni refugee)*

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The results of these matches do not equate to points in a league or progression to the next round of a cup but they are significant nonetheless.

What is important is proving themselves within the structures in which they commonly circulate; that of (new) migrant communities. There is a sense that belonging within the wider ‘British’ society is not, to begin with at least, a priority. Just being here is enough because it is safe and brings a certain amount of hope for a better future.

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Belonging within the cultural boundaries defined by being part of an ethnic minority community living in Britain becomes more relevant. This is in part about the deliberate expression of a specific cultural identity within British multiculturalism and also partly due to structural constraints that prevent participation more widely and which place minority groups in competition for scarce resources.

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***“[It’s good to play more teams] ‘cause you get bored playing with the same teams. The more teams you play, the better the competition going to be... [When we win] we want to move on, a different level, not stay the same, like the same level every time.”***

*(Yemeni refugee)*

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There is a desire for progression but not necessarily into existing formal league structures.

Furthermore, these teams’ continued existence is very fragile, reliant as they are on the enthusiasm, spare time and, often, financial commitment of just one or two individuals. In this sense, they are not dissimilar to plenty of other amateur football clubs. However, when teams made up of more permanently settled individuals fold those involved often disperse into other clubs. For new arrivals such possibilities are lessened for the very reasons they are not playing for a more established club in the first place.

***“When things mess up [with the team having to fold], I can tell you, none of them have [gone to another club]... I don’t see any of my players [from the ‘Dream Team’] that is playing any Sunday League. I push one guy to Darnall FC. I think he went twice and then... The flavour not there... Some people, they feel this is home. Dream Team make you feel comfortable... The difference is people feel comfortable, they talk to each other, express themselves, d’you get me, right. It’s a different mentality, different culture... yeah, a different flavour...”***

*(Manager of African Dream Team)*





## Case Study: Flexi Footie and Iraqi Forever

Organised by Sheffield & Hallamshire County Football Association the Sheffield Flexi Footie League is an innovative way of encouraging participation in 11-a-side football. It involves three shortened seasons that take place in Spring, Summer and Autumn on 3G pitches at two neutral locations in Sheffield. Matches last for 60 minutes with rolling substitutions. Affiliated referees are provided for each match and the aim of the competition is to keep more players interested in participating in the sport or entice others to get back in to football. Its attraction for many is the minimal amount of administration needed to participate as well as the competitively friendly spirit in which games are played.

The success of the league, like many others, owes much to the commitment of individuals at the organisational level. The Sheffield & Hallamshire County Football Association have shown their commitment to supporting marginalised groups through working in partnership with organisations like FURD for many years. In this case, the personnel involved in organising the league have shown good understanding of the issues that may surround cultural differences.

"With [certain teams] I make sure I give the managers a call before they play each other... I just say to them, 'Look, you know what they're like, you know they're going to be trying to get free kicks... or getting at the referee...' You know, I say, 'but you've got to let it go. Let the ref deal with it. If you get wound up, you're the ones that'll end up getting [a booking and] a fine...' The night before they play, I'm on the phone to them." (S&HCFA representative)

It is attitudes such as this that helps develop relationships amongst those taking part.

As part of the research process I have been invited as lead researcher to join Iraqi Forever playing in the Sheffield Flexi Footie League. I have met some of the team before but most are unfamiliar and I feel nervous as I approach the pitch for my first match. Balls whiz past me as those players who are already changed 'warm up' in a familiarly haphazard manner. I nod to some of them who I recognise from previous meetings at other events. They look very professional all dressed in replica kits of the Iraqi national side; white shirts with green sleeves, white shorts and green socks.

***"Hi, Chris. How are you?"  
The rolled 'r' as he pronounces  
my name in a soft Arabic  
accent gives his English a  
friendlier feel than the harsh,  
unfamiliar sounds of his  
native tongue.***

The team manager greets me with a warm hand shake. He looks very smart in his shirt, jeans and fashionable leather shoes. A serious man that belies his relatively young age, he always gives off an air of pride – in who he is, as a representative of his country and in his role as manager of his team.

The players are called together for a more formal warm up. I join the end of the line jogging across the pitch and I can tell that, as the only white player, and certainly not of Arabic background, some of the others are rather curious about my presence. We reach the other touchline and turn to come back. Instructions are shouted by the team captain leading the warm up. I have no idea of the meaning but the response of the players is familiar and I follow their lead as knees are raised towards the chest and heels to the buttocks.

*This familiarity makes me feel a little bit more comfortable about being here but I am also very aware of my difference and peripheral status amongst the rest of the team.*

A few more warm up exercises and some stretching before the manager brings us together for a team talk. I understand nothing that is said except for recognising a few names amongst the foreign words. Having experienced plenty of pre-match speeches, I gather that he is running through the

starting eleven and their positions on the pitch. Not hearing my name and receiving no directions I assume, correctly, that I will not be playing today. The manager apologises to me in English for speaking in Arabic and explains that other players who have been involved with the team longer than me have been guaranteed a game, which is no less than I expect.



The team was initially formed as a way of creating and maintaining stronger bonds amongst the Iraqi community who arrived in Britain as part of the Gateway Protection Programme. It was something that had worked to bring people together in their home country. They started by playing in tournaments and friendlies against teams from different migrant communities. Matches would take place in Sheffield or they would travel to other cities where other migrant communities had football teams.

However, where football was originally a way of bringing members of the Iraqi diaspora together and matches were organised for that purpose, the manager wanted to develop the team into a more competitive and disciplined side. His desire was to have a team that would be organised enough to compete in a local amateur league.

Some members from the Iraqi community, who are not good enough or competitive enough to play at that level but still want to participate, felt that this was not right, causing tension amongst the players.

***They still wanted Iraqi Forever to be about the community rather than about success. As a result, some players sought other groups to play with or stopped playing altogether.***

Following a couple of short seasons in the Flexi League the Iraqi Forever manager came to realise the considerable investment, in time and money, that organising a football team takes. He tried to redevelop his side as a community club, that would provide a competitive football

environment for all refugees and asylum seekers regardless of nationality, in the hope that it would be more likely to attract external funding from a programme such as the Big Lottery Awards for All programme. Unfamiliar with such procedures and increasingly short of time due to low paid work commitments meant that he was not able to keep developing the team in the direction he had hoped. Three years on from the origins of Iraqi Forever, the group now play amongst themselves each weekend in a similar way to how they started. The group is not exclusively Iraqi but it has attracted some of the less serious players back to playing football.

Belonging is not static. It develops unevenly for different members across a community. It can be achieved in different ways, to varying degrees and can change from one moment to the next. The role that football plays in this case changed from initially being a motivating force for (male members of) the community to get together. It was a bonding mechanism. As social capital was increased for certain members through their ability and desire to play more competitively along with the confidence that playing more competitively brought (as well as through non-football related aspects of life) it became an increasingly exclusionary activity for some. But then as life developed for the manager and work commitments occupied more of his time, football, and the development of the team as a representation of his competitive nature and desire to create a more meaningful life in Britain, became less important.

## Organised tournaments

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***There are different types of one-day tournaments in which refugees and asylum seekers participate. These can be classified as Developmental, Participatory and Self Directed.***

The developmental tournament is exemplified by the 'All Nations Tournament' (see page 38) organised by FURD in partnership with Sheffield & Hallamshire County Football Association which attracts a regular core of teams from refugee communities who strongly compete for the trophy. The 'Football for Friendship Tournament' (see page 29), organised by the University of Sheffield, is an example of a participatory tournament based upon a more integrated approach to playing football. These two tournaments are organised on an annual basis by established bodies within the city for different reasons. The final type of tournament, labelled as Self Directed, is organised by refugees or refugee community organisations (RCOs) themselves. These tend to take place during the summer months amongst teams who regularly play against one another on an informal basis but who want to create a more competitive atmosphere. In Sheffield, assistance is sometimes provided by FURD in helping to organise pitches and referees.

The tournament structure appeals to asylum seekers and refugees for different reasons. Primarily it is the 'sense of occasion' that such events develop. If it is difficult to raise a team as regularly as every week, it is easier to do so for one off occasions. They may also be a more familiar structure to many refugees who have come from places that do not organise regular amateur leagues and are consequently used to irregularly participating in one-day tournaments. Secondly, such tournaments tend to be organised with refugees and asylum seekers at the heart of the decision making process so issues such as food, transport and finances are uppermost in the organisation of the events.

This is particularly the case with Self Directed tournaments. These emerge through contacts that have been made between individuals who run teams – often through the organisation of one off friendly matches as explained previously. A Self Directed tournament achieves three things: a more competitive environment, a reason for travelling to/inviting teams from other cities and, as a consequence of this, it raises the profile of the organising team/manager within their community (whether defined as the multi-ethnic 'refugee' community within the city or the wider diaspora specific to their own culture).

Tournaments like Football for Friendship that focus on the integrative power of football need to be designed to incorporate much more than simply playing football. There is no doubt that getting to know each other through striving for a common goal, that of winning matches and ultimately the tournament as a whole, has a bonding effect. However, there is little opportunity to 'get to know one another'.

***“It was purely football. I’m intrigued now and want to spend more time with [the refugees in the team] and learn more about [their lives].” (Sheffield University student)***

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One recommendation would be to organise smaller more regular matches that allow 'friendships' or firmer bonds to form and to work closely with the Gateway Protection Programme, who welcome new groups to Sheffield on a regular basis, and other support agencies who are continuously working with newly arrived asylum seekers. Investment in suitable footwear should also be made because many new arrivals do not have appropriate equipment for such activities preventing them from participating.

One of the criticisms of The All Nations Tournament is that the developmental aspect is misdirected. Part of the rationale for the County FA supporting the event is to encourage more minority groups to become involved with the official structures of amateur football by competing in local leagues. There has been some success over recent years but the main problem is that there has been a lack of organisational and financial support for teams that would like to move to the next level of development. A positive move recently, and an **example of good practice**, has been the Flexi-League in which Iraqi Forever participated (see page 33). Unfortunately, the financial investment is still too much for such teams and their participation is only possible if either an organisation like FURD or the County FA are able to provide monetary assistance.

What has been suggested by some players, particularly those from stronger and more organised teams, is that competitions such as the All Nations Tournament should be part of a national network that would allow participating teams to compete with similar groups in other cities (similar to the Unity Cup that used to be organised by Kick It Out). This could be part of a structure that also supports refugee based teams who want to play one another on a regular basis, organised along similar lines to that of the Internet Football Association through which football fan groups compete with one another.<sup>17</sup> or the 'all-Asian' leagues and tournaments that exist in many cities with significant Asian populations.<sup>18</sup> Such leagues should not be seen as a replacement for existing structures but as a concurrent opportunity for certain minority based teams to develop the organisational skills required to progress into mainstream leagues if they should choose whilst playing football in a supportive environment the importance of which is recognised by the relevant governing bodies of the sport.<sup>19</sup>

One of the issues with the development of such a structure is that individual county football associations and regional development teams do not have the same focus within their areas of work. It is of course important to be responsive to local issues regarding equality and development. Such a network would need to be supported centrally, whether as an officially sanctioned FA competition or as a 'friendly' league administered through a partnership between DCMS and DCLG or an appropriate NGO such as FURD, Kick It Out or the Refugee Council.

17. <http://www.internetfootball.org.uk>

18. See Jahal, S. (2001) 'Playing their own game: a South Asian football experience', in B. Carrington & I. McDonald (eds) *Race, Sport and British Society*, London: Routledge; Burdsey, D. (2007) *British Asians and Football: Culture, Identity, Exclusion*. Abingdon: Routledge

19. As Burdsey (2007;p55) observes, "It is the prerogative of any group to play football with whom they want, yet it becomes an issue when doing so is enforced due to discrimination in 'mainstream' settings..."



## Case Study: **All Nations Football Festival**

It is the final everyone was expecting: Yemeni All Stars v Young Sharrow United. Two youthful teams that epitomise what the All Nations Tournament represents. The former, their all-green kit iridescent in the June sunshine, have sparked their way through the early rounds on this their debut appearance in the competition. Predominantly comprised of recently arrived Yemeni refugees, quick feet and youthful exuberance have dazzled the defenders of more experienced sides. Their opponents, a mixture of Somali, Eastern European, second generation Pakistani and black-British have been playing together in youth football for a number of years and exude casual confidence. Wearing the red and white stripes of Sheffield United, they have combined slick passing with lethal finishing and a strong work ethic to dismiss all comers. It is a match of contrasts, in team playing styles and participants' biographies.

The Sharrow team are rooted in a friendship group formed over many years through local connections, in the neighbourhood, at school and college, attending youth clubs and playing together in 5-a-side and 11-a-side teams. Many of the players have undertaken football coaching courses in the hope that such skills can work to their advantage in the depressed local job market. Some are extremely talented footballers, others play for the fun and camaraderie. Not that that dampens their enthusiasm or competitive spirit. Their opponents have emerged from the small but growing Yemeni Community across the city. A core of friends that have grown up in Britain mostly playing football in the local park have welcomed a number of additional players who arrived from their homeland less than a year earlier. There is a desire to show what Yemeni players can do, what Yemeni football is about, what they as individuals are about. Tactical disorder is masked by a surprising physicality and irresistible fleetness of foot, individual indiscipline kept in check by their Iraqi coach, constantly barking orders in Arabic from the sideline.

Following a scintillating match evidencing why both teams deserve to be competing for the trophy, it all comes down to a penalty shootout. Sharrow's overconfidence lets them down against the more agile and committed keeper protecting the nets of the Yemen and the fourth penalty taker in green steps up to win it for the Arab team.

As the winning penalty is dispatched into the back of the net, victorious players exultantly charge around the pitch, shrieking in celebration. Those not involved whoop players onto their shoulders. The coach is embraced by his team. The smiles with which many of the players have played their football throughout are broader than ever as they receive the trophy, raising it aloft in triumphant ecstasy.

***"They think they've won the Champions League...!"***

The losing finalists take consolation in sarcastically dismissive comments aimed at the exuberant celebrations. The extreme emotions displayed by the victors and the bitterness of their opponents in defeat are testament to the importance of this tournament to those taking part.



The All Nations Festival is an annual small-sided football competition organised by Football Unites, Racism Divides (FURD) in partnership with Sheffield & Hallamshire County Football Association. Participating teams are predominantly from refugee communities in Sheffield but are joined by multicultural teams representing the local neighbourhoods in which FURD does a lot of its social cohesion work. Its purpose is twofold. Taking place each year during National Refugee Week it is a regular event that helps to celebrate the presence of refugee based communities, alongside other multicultural teams, in the city of Sheffield. It is also an opportunity for the County Football Association to engage with players from various ethnic minorities and encourage them to get involved in more regularly organised, amateur 11-a-side football.

The first All Nations tournament took place in 2003 at the University of Sheffield as a joint initiative involving Sheffield First For Safety, the Refugee Housing Association, Sheffield and Hallamshire County FA, and FURD. The winners were the African Dream Team (see page 50) who went on to represent the city of Sheffield at the Unity Cup Festival in Manchester – a national tournament organised by Kick It Out. Unfortunately only a short lived event the Unity Cup Festival was a national 7-a-side football tournament played over two days with the aim of engaging and working with refugees, asylum seekers and other displaced communities across Britain by using the power of football to overcome exclusion, build confidence and address overt racism at refugee communities.<sup>20</sup>

20. <http://www.kickitout.org/221.php>

Numerous teams have competed over the years with players from refugee backgrounds representing Afghanistan, Albania, Angola, Chile, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Kosovo, Kurdistan, Liberia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Yemen, as well as teams representing other local communities such as those with a heritage rooted in Algeria, Bangladesh, China, Ghana and Slovakia. The event has become a regular fixture in the calendar and is looked forward to by competitors who have played year after year. Many teams, including the African Dream Team, Bengal Tigers, Albanian Fire, Galeed Giants, Yemeni All Stars, Iraqi Forever and Sheffield Prowlers (representing the Chinese community) return each year, sometimes with the same players, sometimes with completely different personnel.

At present the focus of the day is the football tournament. There have been suggestions that the festival feel has been lost. With FURD having moved to new premises with a purpose built all weather football pitch beside a large outdoor space, it is recommended that the event be a focus for engagement with refugee communities more widely by offering more activities for children and others not participating in the football itself.

## Competitive Football Participation

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Refugees and asylum seekers arrive in Britain with varying levels of football experience. Some have played to a level of what amounts to professional football in their home country. Others will have played in local amateur tournaments. The quality of those leagues and culture of the sport may well be very different to that found at a similar level in Britain.

*“We do not have grass like here. When we arrive and we see the grass, the pitches [in the park], they are so green... we play in the dirt, you know... the pitch is red, is brown and like this [motioning an uneven surface with hands].” (Congolesse refugee)*



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***“In my country, it is not so good, the football... We have only one professional league... maybe two but only one really. The top league is maybe like League 1. Perhaps the top team, the Championship.”***

*(Iraqi refugee)*

Competitive football in this report is defined as playing for a team in a competition that is part of the Football Association affiliated league structure. That includes the professional game from the Premier League down to amateur football at the lowest level of local and regional Sunday leagues. Such a developed structure is quite unique to British football participation.

Many of those who have experience of playing football in organised leagues abroad are keen to continue playing when they arrive in Britain. There is hope and belief that their sporting ability will possibly provide them with a career or at least some sort of greater recognition.

Attitudes such as this are of course not restricted to asylum seekers. Many men in their 20s (and possibly beyond) playing amateur football at various levels in this country cling to similar dreams of still being able to ‘make it’ as a professional player. The majority, though, once they realise the fallacy of such thinking will have other career paths to follow. For an asylum seeker, even if he knows he is lying to himself, it offers hope in a world where the future is so uncertain.

Whatever the reality of the situation, for those that have had the experience of playing competitively abroad, there is a similar desire to continue to play at as high a level as possible. Equally, there are asylum seekers and refugees with coaching qualifications or experience of working in physical education who want to continue to make use of their skills in this country.

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***“I think it’s never too late. If I start again, maybe I become professional. But maybe I’m 30, 31. It take time, like 5, 6 years...”***

*(Iranian asylum seeker, 24)*

For those at an age where there is still some realistic chance if they are of a high enough standard, there is a belief that they are in the right place for such possibilities to be realised. “[I] can see bright future playing football in this country... in Congo it was difficult to have opportunity which [I’ve] got now to play football.” (Congolese refugee, 17)

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***The UK is seen by many new arrivals as something of a 'promised land'. They have found their way out of whatever plight was afflicting their existence in their home country and believe that they are in a position to make a better life for themselves. In football terms, this is even more marked. England is the 'home of football'. There is the perception that this is where you will receive the best football education and the greatest opportunity to succeed.***

Belonging is connected with the realisation of one's ambition, expression of self-identity and development of agency. For individuals who see themselves as footballers, who define their self-identity by their footballing abilities, whether due to a lack of other opportunities or as a dominant part of their existing habitus and biographical narrative, it is incredibly important to be able to continue to play on arrival in this country. Agency becomes about the expression of a strong self-identity as a football player and the desire to prove a level of football ability can be attained that is perceived to be higher than that of their home country.

Playing football professionally may be a realistic possibility for a small minority but for most that harbour such hopes the reality is that they are not of a good enough standard. There are certainly some young players that with appropriate coaching and support could develop a career in football. Often though the clubs with the qualities, in structure and personnel, required to develop such talent do not have a culture in which new arrivals feel comfortable or do not encourage their membership. The exceptions are clubs like Sharrow United (see page 53) or the African Dream Team (see page 50) which are built upon a regime of inclusiveness.

For more settled refugee communities football is seen as providing younger members a possible career direction as well as belief that through the emergence of talent their ethnic identity will be less maligned. There are many talented players from ethnic minorities not traditionally associated in large numbers with the sport.

Similarly to other more established migrant communities before them, newer ethnic minority populations in Britain are beginning to use sport as a way of confirming their presence within British society, challenging hegemonic assumptions about their culture and searching for a future football star to act as role model and proof of greater possibilities in life.

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21. The organisation of amateur 11-a-side football in contemporary Britain would be the subject of a whole report in itself. It is important to draw attention to the fact it has been in decline for many years. Every season new clubs form and many disband in a relatively short period of time. Once established for a few seasons, clubs have more chance of continuing but there are still many pressures on their ongoing existence.

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There are three types of team that refugees and asylum seekers could end up playing for. The most unlikely (in the long term at least) are well-established, predominantly white, British teams. Most common is a team comprised of players with the same or similar ethnicity, often other refugees themselves but also perhaps including second generation and long term expatriates who are now more settled in Britain. Between these two extremes are some teams that have a combination of ethnicities, including white British, dual heritage, first, second and third generation ethnic minorities. Such teams are, in Sheffield at least, small in number.

The former and the latter of these three types of team compete in organised leagues and tend to have established themselves over a number of years.<sup>21</sup> A sense of belonging is created through competitive sporting struggle and mutual identity. It relies on the artificial nature of sport that replaces seemingly more organic though often no less socially constructed forms of communion. The former, predominantly white British teams are the 'norm' whose players' mutual identities are rooted in the performativity of white, 'working class', masculinity. The mutuality of the latter exists in their common experiences of 'otherness'. There is a similar performativity that has to be adopted in order to 'fit' into the culture of amateur league football.

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***“The [Sunday league] team in Rotherham I play in, they were all Rotherham United supporters. They tell me, ‘you should play for Rotherham’. It was okay [because] I am a good player.” (Iraqi refugee)***

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Notably, whilst this exists at all levels of the amateur (and professional) game there is a level of ability that allows better players to overcome such differences.

The teams that have formed around national and ethnic identities tend to play matches of a more informal nature as discussed in the previous chapter. There are, however, a limited number of notable exceptions.

## Refugee Teams



***Competitive 11-a-side teams predominantly composed of players who are refugees or have refugee backgrounds exist amongst those communities that have become well established in an area over a period of time.***

Tusaale FC (see page 46), for example, has three sides playing at U13, U16 and U18 level and is almost entirely composed of boys from Somali backgrounds who were born in Britain or that have spent the majority of their lives living in this country.

Playing football and having a football team in a local league is symbolic of their prolonged presence within British culture, of their minority status and their cultural distinctiveness compared to the majority. Football represents a 'natural' part of having grown up in (or spent a significant amount of time living in) Britain. It is a 'celebrated' part of British culture through which the presence of minority identities can receive greater exposure and a means through which important 'non-British' aspects of identities can be collectively maintained.

***Football is the very embodiment of cultural hybridity as British football traditions associated with youth culture and pub culture combine and compete with religious teachings, family values and sporting conventions rooted in the national heritage of their former lives or those of their parents.***

Belonging is predicated on recognition and renewal of different cultural values and ways of life – through a form very indicative of 'being' part of the dominant culture.

It may also be indicative of living in and being socialised into British life through a culture of 'community development' that has benefited from funding provision aimed at increasing social cohesion amongst different communities. In this regard, the organisers of these teams have strongly 'bought into' the positive role that sport can play which successive Governments have promoted. This is not meant as a criticism but perhaps evidence of the performative power of policy making. Consistently promoting the positives of participation may lead to belief in them to the extent that they achieve the outcomes they are believed to inherently hold, particularly within communities that have benefited from repeated interventions and support.

Their ability to exist also relies on members of these communities being more economically active as successive generations enter the labour market with slightly greater earning potential and thus disposable income to help fund teams. Having said that, funds are very limited and the traditional forms of raising money often used by other long-standing amateur football clubs do not seem to be available. This will be reliant on how well established the refugee community is and the extent to which football is recognised as an appropriate form of communal expression. Teams that rely on players from refugee backgrounds are very unlikely to be cash rich and perhaps more importantly do not have a large reserve of collective social capital on which to draw.

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22. See for example, Putney, C. (2001) *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880-1920*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

The issues they face are often not recognised by the established authorities that control amateur football. Likewise, the organisational requirements of running an amateur football club are not fully realised by many who attempt to take on the task. What is often not understood by advocates of ‘volunteering’ in sport is the class traditions through which this is expressed. Football at all levels has always relied on benefactors who recognise the benefits, in terms of social standing in the local (or most recently in the cases of numerous Premier League clubs, global) community, of ‘owning’ or ‘sponsoring’ a club. Most amateur club balance sheets rely on the combination of donations and player subscriptions (subs) to remain solvent. Furthermore, the time dedicated to the organisation of such teams is a commitment that needs the support of others, within the club and in wider social networks of family and friends. The implicitly positive values of the ‘muscular Christian’ tradition<sup>22</sup> that are embedded in sports such as football in this country are not so prevalent within some cultures, especially those that are trying to establish themselves in an advanced multi-cultural capitalist society, and will not be so easily and unquestionably supported by members of refugee based communities more widely.

These are compounded by generational differences. For older migrants who battled to gain economic solvency, football can be seen as a frivolous expenditure. For a second generation who have grown up in Britain, there is a desire to offer the younger members of their community the support that they did not receive from their parents.<sup>23</sup>

23. This is not, in acknowledgement of Burdsey’s (2007) observations, to underplay the significance of ‘race’ and racism or to essentialise the differences between first generation migrants and subsequent ‘hyphenated’ British-minorities in examining the reasons for changing patterns of participation and involvement. It reflects the findings of McGuire & Collins (1998) but is less a case of parental influence actively pushing young boys away from participation in favour of more suitable extra-curricula activity than in fact the importance of positive parental support for continuing participation at critical points in a young person’s ‘leisure career path’. See Burdsey, D. (2007) *British Asians and Football: Culture, Identity, Exclusion*. Abingdon: Routledge; McGuire, B. & Collins, D. (1998) ‘Sport, ethnicity and racism: The experience of Asian heritage boys’, *Sport, Education & Society* 3(1):79-88

**“You go to Sunday league games and there’s about 30 or 40 family members on the other side [supporting the opposition] and then there’s us that comes in our bus. So already for a 15 year old it is different. Most Somali parents will say focus on the more serious things. They don’t see football as a good career move. They see it as a bit of fun... Whereas the other parents, they’re at training sessions, matches...” (Somali refugee)**

Part of their commitment is related to the austerity with which they were brought up and the need to work harder to achieve their goals. Like young people in general, successive generations on whose behalf they say they are doing this, having grown up with in some ways more security but in a more insecure British society more widely, lead lives in which football competes with numerous other recreational distractions, both positive and negative.



## Case Study: **Tusaale FC**

The largest refugee based population in Sheffield is of Somali origin, estimated to be in the region of 5,000. Dating back to colonial relations that brought steel workers to the city in the 1950s numbers increased significantly in the 1990s following the civil war in Somalia. Particularly important was the demographic change from a small predominantly mature male population to being far more mixed and noticeably more demanding on public services such as housing and education; as a result of the conflict that forced them to flee their homeland a large proportion of Somali asylum seekers at this time were women and children.

As numbers increased so did the awareness of issues that newly arrived Somalis were facing at a time when immigration was not such a political priority. Seeing themselves only as temporary residents of the city before being able to return home, along with dispersal and housing policies that encouraged the development of neighbourhood communities, older residents maintained a strong sense of their own cultural identity.

The younger generation who came to this country as babies faced the difficult task of negotiating conflicting cultural identities as they grew up. But they were raised in communities that have been structurally well supported within the city. Many members have gained appropriate community development skills, gone off to study at university and returned with the desire to build better communities.

Tusaale FC was started by a group of friends who, having arrived from Somalia as very young children, grew up playing football in Britain. As part of the first wave of Somali refugees in the early 1990s their school experiences of being different drove them to seek support from one another but did not stop them making plenty of friends outside of the Somali community. Like many boys from lower economic backgrounds they spent all their spare time playing with their friends in the park.

It was when they reached adolescence that they noticed the biggest change.

With financial, organisational and emotional support from FURD, an U18 football team was started predominantly comprised of Somali players from the local neighbourhood. At that age, the hyper-masculine nature of amateur football led to many abandoned matches.

*“Right throughout school... [I had] quite a mix of friends. But as [you] get older, [you] tend to come back to like mainly having Somali friends... It’s mainly [due to having] common interests, ‘cause [non-Somalis] they’re into clubbing and drinking alcohol; different kinds of lifestyle. When you were younger you got something in common. Once you reach 16 or 17... like if I told you, ‘Let’s go and play football on a Friday night,’ you’d say, ‘No mate, I’m going out.’”*

*(Somali refugee, 27)*

*"We used to get into a lot of fights... any little thing used to trigger it off. We went through a lot. It wasn't easy... [Comments from other teams] used to bother us. At the beginning I just used to probably punch them or something. But now you're more used to it. You just laugh it off. You just give it 'em back. Just banter really. The more you play in a league... [you] understand more that it's banter. They'll give it to you, you'll give it 'em back." (Somali refugee, 26)*

In translation, tusaale means 'to set an example'. Having reached maturity and gained coaching qualifications the former players who now run Tusaale FC are keen to pass on the lessons they feel they learned from playing football when they were younger. They want to offer young British-Somali boys in their community the support that they feel they lacked from their own parents with regard to playing football.

In their opinion football can offer an alternative to the territorial rivalries that have emerged in Sheffield over recent years.

"The reason why we started the team is because of the whole gang mentality... We grew up looking out for each other... We lived in different areas [but] we never had that [gang mentality]... Whereas they [young Somali's born in Sheffield], they've grown up looking after their postcode. So now, with this football team... the idea is you got players from different areas in the city all playing [as part of a team]." (Somali refugee, 26)

There is also a firm belief that there is great potential going unnoticed amongst young Somali football talent.

*"The talent is there... if one person makes it then Somalis [think] 'so-and-so has made it... I might give some attention and support [to my son] see if he can also make it.' If nobody's made it then it's like a myth, innit..." (Somali refugee, 26)*



## Multicultural Teams<sup>24</sup>

24. It is important to distinguish that the term multicultural is being used descriptively to mean the presence of individuals from different cultures as opposed to the more political use associated with the concept of multiculturalism more applicable to teams indicated in the previous section.

There are a number of teams in local amateur leagues that may have one or two players from ethnic minorities, commonly African-Caribbean, playing alongside a predominantly white squad. There are a few that combine a complete mix of ethnicities. These have emerged through the determination of a small number of individuals wishing to challenge racist assumptions about football ability and offer opportunities to ethnic minorities who were feeling excluded from local amateur football.

***“I used to play in Doncaster and... it’s not that multicultural... you can feel a divide. For me it was hard to fit in...”***

***(Cameroonian refugee)***

When these teams were first formed the focus for some was on proving that football ability was not linked to ethnicity. For others it was more about offering an alternative culture through which to participate in competitive football.

The attitude of the former leads to a more competitive environment within the team as success on the pitch is the overriding aim.

Not at the expense of camaraderie but as the team become more successful it is able to attract and develop a higher calibre of player. This is particularly important for refugees who have played in competitive leagues in their own countries. Football is an important part of their lives and their hope is to be able to use their skills to succeed in their new social setting. As with so many other opportunities to participate in the cultural and economic life of this country, ability is only part of the story. Whilst for others it may be that foreign qualifications are not recognised, many of the problems for footballers are with the need to have international clearance from the governing body in any countries they may have played in previously before being able to play in the UK. This applies to all levels of football, from professional to amateur. For refugees who have fled for any number of reasons, contacting an official organisation in their home country is not an agreeable option.

For teams more focused on providing an alternative culture competitive football provides something in between the informality of recreational teams and the focused determination of highly competitive clubs. The latter require commitment that many asylum seekers in particular cannot give because of their transitory lives. But there is still a desire to participate in the official structures of British football competition. These structures are fairly unique compared with other nations in providing competitive 11-a-side football at levels that suit all ability of player. Unfortunately, the cultures of sides at different levels of competition do not necessarily suit refugees and asylum seekers.

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Similar organisational issues are faced by these sides as experienced by refugee based teams described above. There is a difference in attitudes between senior committee members and the players. The motivation for starting the teams may have been a combination of wanting to play football amongst a more welcoming culture for ethnic minorities and the assertion of previously unrecognised abilities within certain cultural groups but for many current players it is simply about the former. Many younger players have grown up in a more, descriptively and politically, multicultural environment, at school and around the city. Their abilities as football players do not have such 'political' meanings except at the personal level. In a culture of universal comparison, their skills can still be used at the individual level for gaining respect amongst their peers but youth culture and ethnic differences are played out against a backdrop of diversity rather than monolithic distinctions. Nonetheless, the culture of these sides is encouraging to refugees and asylum seekers who share common minority status and who are further disadvantaged for reasons already mentioned.

***The nature of being an asylum seeker means that commitment can be difficult yet also an extremely important part of being able to find some kind of structure to their lives.***

As a result clubs such as the African Dream Team, who have relied on and encouraged the recruitment of refugees and asylum seekers, can find themselves with continuously changing personnel. This creates further problems at an organisational level.

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The nature of being an asylum seeker means that commitment can be difficult yet also an extremely important part of being able to find some kind of structure to their lives. As a result clubs such as the African Dream Team, who have relied on and encouraged the recruitment of refugees and asylum seekers, can find themselves with continuously changing personnel. This creates problems at an organisational level.



## Case Study: African Dream Team

Training starts at 9pm every Friday evening. Players arrive in dribs and drabs, some greeting each other with conviviality, others offering no more than a nod of the head as they hurry off to get changed, keen on making the most of the time available to them. Two Somali youths, already changed, sit waiting for the pitch to become free. One wears a replica Barcelona shirt, the other dressed in the blue of Chelsea. They discuss the merits of a new pair of Nike footwear that the younger of the two lads has recently purchased. He passes one of the shiny orange football trainers to his friend, gesturing to him to feel its weight. The other is firmly tied to his right foot, as it rests across his left knee for him to admiringly examine the moulded studs.

The pitches are located on one of Sheffield's many hilltops high above the city. A royal blue ribbon of twilight on the horizon tries to resist the deep inky infinitude of the starlit canopy creeping towards it. The green rectangle of artificial grass, brightly lit from above, glows ethereally in the darkness. As any final evidence of sunlight disappears in the west many of the players, already changed into their football kits, face eastwards, hands to the sides of their heads:

الله أكبر الله أكبر

### **"Allahu Akbar. Allahu Akbar."**

Led by a tall and imposing Algerian player wearing tracksuit trousers cut off just below the knee and a t-shirt that seems ever so slightly too short for his long torso, the familiar Islamic refrain marks the beginning of evening prayer. For the Muslim players it is a necessary ritual that must precede training at this time of year. Those of more secular attitudes or with alternative religious beliefs begin their warm up routines around them with the usual indiscipline.

A new Kurdish player, who has a less strict relationship with the teachings of Islam, is keen to ingratiate himself with his team mates through his football skills rather than his following of religious convention. He passes the ball about in the centre of the pitch with three other players, originally from various parts of central Africa. They laugh at each other's attempts at trying to keep the ball in the air amongst them. Two of the players joke to one another in French. They are at ease with their present surroundings, a vast difference to their conflict ridden upbringing.

Having observed his Muslim practices more privately, the manager arrives to lead a more organised warm-up routine. Latecomers are lightly admonished as they hastily untangle themselves from their gymsacks and join the other players. Training itself consists of two groups, participants who play for the African Dream Team in the local amateur Sunday league and those who come along for the chance to play competitively casual football as part of the extended network of ethnic minority players who are not competitive enough or fit enough for the full team.

Small sided matches are organised on each half of the pitch. The pace is quick. One touch, two touches, any more and the player is penalised. The younger players wanting to dribble round the whole team have to learn to pass. The older players, not as quick as they once were, use their bodies and rely on a greater understanding of space to build attacks with less haste. Inter-generational frustrations are circumvented by the rules of the game – this is how we (learn to) play football. It is an ideal that rarely translates to the physicality involved with lower league football on a Sunday but Friday evening provides, for the African Dream Team, an alternative cultural space through which to explore and express minority identities with ease.

The African Dream Team are not exclusively from Africa. The club certainly includes many players from the continent: Somali, Sudanese, Congolese, Nigerian, Algerian, Egyptian, Liberian, Libyan. There are also English, Scottish, Kurdish and Jamaican. The team manager is Ghanaian with Sierra Leone heritage. When he arrived in Sheffield in 2003 he knew nobody in the UK. Having played to what he claims to be a relatively high standard as a young man in Ghana he found the best way to meet people was to take his ball to the local football pitches and kick it about until someone asked him to join in.

“Where can I find a football pitch?’ That’s my first [thought]. Because I know if I get into football I will meet friends.”

He began to play regularly and upon hearing about a football tournament organised by FURD aimed at teams and players from migrant communities he persuaded some friends with whom he played to enter. This was the birth of the African Dream Team.

The team name is of course connected to his ancestry but also represents a more inclusive and aspirational quality.

“So we chatting about the team, the name, what’s it going to be? We were thinking ‘Dream Team’. It has to be something that is generation to generation; when we gone...I told these guys, I say my aim for this team is it has to be something like a transitory route. Any new guy come in he have to heard of this. If we just make it ‘Dream Team’ some people think it something else but if we make it ‘African Dream Team’ everybody feel that, ‘Let me go see these Africans; what they do there?’”

At the time, there were 5-a-side teams that he used to play with that were ‘for Somali people or Pakistani...’ His team was for bringing together a wider diaspora. It is African in name only. Symbolically, it is a team without borders. It is this that many new arrivals find reassuring.



*"My idea was not all about winning. It was about how people are going to get together. It might make your life easier... When [someone] start coming, he can have a laugh and end up meeting someone, and then from there he got friends. [Some] think it's only for Africans but when they come, they see everyone in there."*

In practical terms, the African Dream Team provides, through word of mouth, a transitional space that encourages new arrivals to join in and play for as long or short a period as they need until they have the confidence, connections and compulsion to move on.

The core of the club is that of more settled migrants from both refugee and non-refugee backgrounds. With assistance from FURD the team developed from playing in 5-a-side tournaments to a fully affiliated 11-a-side team which has played in local Sunday leagues for almost 10 years. Many of the players find out about the team from friends. The transient nature of the team means that they rarely develop a settled side and as a result find it hard to make progress through the league. It is a self-perpetuating situation. As friendships are formed, confidence increased and social capital built, alternatives to playing for the African Dream Team are prioritised. The better players move on to better teams. Poorer players find different ways of socialising. Some prefer just to participate in training or form five-a-side teams to play amongst themselves. In some cases, security is sought by joining a more mono-cultural team. Many just move away.

The problem is that a team built upon charity, in the ethical sense, is not sustainable without charity in the financial sense. The team manager is emphatic in his praise for the support he has received from FURD who have helped to secure affordable training facilities for the African Dream Team at Sheffield United Academy through their strong partnership with the club.

*"FURD have helped Dream Team a lot. Without FURD I don't think Dream Team would be alive... Any time I ring [the Project Co-ordinator], 'H, I got this problem, blah, blah,' he always there for us... I always know I got some place to go, I got some back up from someone [with same kind of commitment]. He just keep me alive."*

The importance of such support has allowed the African Dream Team to continue when other teams in their situation would not have been able to do so. Unfortunately, towards the end of the research period the team finally folded due to a combination of factors including cuts to FURD funding that prevented them from being able to offer financial support, changes in FURD staffing that meant key personnel were not so readily available to provide structural support and the team manager finally finding the commitment too much due to a lack of support from within the team.

## Case Study: **Sharrow United (U21s)**

It is the end of the inaugural season of the Meadowhall U21 football league. Sharrow United have had a good first season. Their final fixture is a cup final against Dronfield Town, the team that finished one place above them at the top of the division. Keen to avenge their defeats earlier in the season, the Sharrow team are out on the pitch early going through their warm-up drills with coach Luis da Silva, a former Chilean international who was forced to flee his home country during the Pinochet regime to seek refuge in Sheffield.

Watching Sharrow United there is a maddening sense of déjà vu as chance after chance is squandered by a strikeforce that were scoring for fun throughout the season. Their opponents on the other hand take each opportunity with composure. Capitalising on their size advantage from corners, making the most of defensive lapses, exploiting the physical disparity in the midfield. To their credit, the Sharrow team are trying to counter through quick, skilful wingers who leave their full backs standing. Repeated misses and a punishing scoreline in favour of their opponents, however, leave the players frustrated and demoralised.

A hasty clearance and the chainlink fence surrounding the pitch is rattled once more as is the partnership of the French speaking central defenders. A team that is used to winning find it difficult to use the deficit as positive motivation. Disagreements manifest themselves as arguments amongst the team. Whether in French, Arabic or a strong South Yorkshire accent, the disagreements give further strength to their opponents.

It could be said that the team are moulded in the manner of their coach as he hurls out curses in Spanish, at the opposition, at the referee, at himself. His players are not listening to his instructions and his frustration is evident. It is not so much that they are losing but that they are being dragged into playing the opposition at their own game; a style for which they are ill equipped and which he has tried to coach out of them. He wants them to play with speed not physicality, short passes not long clearances, to their strengths not those of their opponents.

Sharrow United was started in 2000 with the specific aim of offering better opportunities for ethnic minorities to play in the local amateur league and prove that players from certain cultural backgrounds had the football ability that was often rejected by established amateur clubs. With limited support from FURD they have progressed up the divisions and become increasingly better organised.

The senior team has progressed from being predominantly comprised of a group of mates and their extended local contacts to an extremely diverse collective. Over the years refugees and asylum seekers from Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi and Iraq have played alongside first, second and third generation British-Pakistani, African-Caribbean, White British and Eastern European amateur players from across the city. Some have gone on to or come from semi-professional sides and a select few have trialled for local professional clubs.

The U21 team has its origins in FURD's Sunday coaching sessions in Mount Pleasant Park. As a result of attending these sessions, some of the players formed a 5-a-side team to test themselves competitively in a local league. Following this, they then decided to take the next step and enter an 11-a-side team in the new Meadowhall Under-21 league.

The majority of players have grown up in inner city Sheffield and like the senior team comprise extremely diverse ethnicities and cultural backgrounds. There are sons of refugees and economic migrants who were born in this country playing alongside young men who were uprooted from their homes in conflict ridden nations and arrived as asylum seekers, their families in pursuit of a safer and brighter future for their offspring. They do not necessarily understand, are completely aware of or particularly care about one another's personal situations. Some team-mates have closer relationships than others. There are cliques within the team. What they have in common is a belief that they would not have the same opportunities if they were playing for a different team and all harbour hopes that football could still provide them with a future career. In truth the odds are against them but what they are getting is an excellent football education from coaches that have a greater understanding of the issues young migrants face both on and off the field of play.

The U21 team is coached by two former professional players originally from Chile and Iraq who were forced to leave their home nations as a result of the Pinochet and Saddam Hussein regimes respectively.

### **Finding refuge as a football coach**

A red card in Iraq meant a longer walk than simply down the tunnel for an early bath. Playing football during the reign of Saddam Hussein, whose son was Minister for Sport in the country, was as oppressive as most other aspects of life for Iraqi people at the turn of the 21st century. Players from the national side returning from defeat, or even a poorly won victory, could be imprisoned for five days as punishment. Questioning a refereeing decision in a league match might lead to a similar incarceration.

During a mid-table clash in the top division of the Iraqi League, one player was so fearful of the consequences of being sent off after abusing the referee that he fled the country. With the help of contacts he had made within the game he made it to Jordan and then to Lebanon. As part of a contract to sign for a Lebanese club it was agreed that they would organise his international papers. In the meantime, he would be loaned to a club in Syria. His papers never materialised. He decided that his only chance of a real future as a football player was in Western Europe. He could not go back to Iraq. His journey began with a life threatening escape across the border into Turkey.

The following year was spent moving from country to country, one month in hiding here a few weeks there. Through the assistance of a network of 'friends' who helped provide passage to Kurds, Iranians, Iraqis and Afghans, through Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Austria, Italy, and France eventually, hidden in the boot of a car on a ferry to England, he arrived in Hull.

His attempts to resurrect his playing career in this country floundered on the finer subtleties of a foreign language of which he knew nothing before arriving in the UK. His ability was in no doubt, his linguistic capabilities unnecessary on the pitch. His nationality unproblematic to teammates who thought he should be playing for the local league side they would go and support when they were not trying to emulate their heroes in the amateur ranks of the lower leagues. There are, however, other complications, such as gaining international clearance from football governing bodies in countries where he previously played as well as the procedures associated with seeking asylum. This promising young player, a professional in his home country, was left playing low level amateur football because of the fear of reprisals following an on-field transgression.

Realising the impossibility of achieving his ambition as a player, he was supported by FURD in gaining coaching qualifications. He now works for the benefit of the young people of Sheffield taking training sessions at community facilities as well as helping to coach Sharrow United U21s team. With larger numbers of young asylum seekers from the Arab speaking world needing support in this country over recent years, his experiences qualify him as more than just a football coach. In the subtlest of ways he acts as a big brother, a mentor, a translator and a support worker.

## **'White' Teams**

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***One of the aims of this research was, as the title suggests, to explore the possibility that football provides a site for some form of mutual belonging between long term residents and new arrivals. Whilst there is evidence of this amongst ethnic minorities, it does not seem so prevalent where the 'white' majority are concerned.***

Attitudes towards asylum seekers and refugees, whether positive or negative, remain couched within a general ethnic 'other'. There is no way of knowing outwardly whether a team-mate or opponent is a refugee or asylum seeker (though assumptions might, possibly correctly, be made based on existing knowledge about certain minority groups or more likely incorrectly reliant on misinformation and ignorance). This information will only become apparent if the individuals know one another well enough to exchange background information about themselves.

As discussed already, predominantly white teams do not provide an appropriately welcoming atmosphere for most refugees and asylum seekers so there is no opportunity for the majority to get to know such individuals that well. It is as opponents that most white British players may encounter refugees and asylum seekers, without being aware of it. They will simply be seen as part of an ethnic 'other'. Of course, from the perspective of refugees themselves, that identity may still be more preferable than any label relating to their migrant status due to the stigma that has become attached to asylum seekers.

This can be reinforced within football by the discursive features attached to foreign players who are perceived to be bringing 'gamesmanship' into the British game by faking injury, playing for freekicks and generally lacking the moral fibre that sport should supposedly instil in participants. Such behaviour is prevalent in top flight football regardless of nationality but is not seen as acceptable at lower levels of the game by those who have been socialised into the more traditional physicality associated with football. For some refugees and asylum seekers who have grown up playing quite uncompetitive football and watching top level matches on television, such gamesmanship is not seen in the same way. A foul should be awarded with a free kick and you need to make sure the referee sees it the same way. If you are injured you need treatment or at least a rest. You do not get up and carry on as if nothing has happened. Equally, though, many refugees are used to playing an extremely physical form of (street) football in which certain ways of regaining possession acceptable to them are deemed not to be in Britain.

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The cultural differences are supplemented by economic issues. For young refugees still economically reliant on their parents, football may not be seen as a worthwhile investment and simple offers of support in other ways may not be present or available to families without their own cars or other forms of independence most of us take for granted.

Whilst these are all structural barriers that can discourage refugees and asylum seekers from feeling comfortable in certain teams, to some extent it may be as simple as wanting to play in a football team with your friends. And friendships are most likely to be formed through the combination of common cultural activities. Football becomes one that reinforces those bonds.

*“It is different [playing for Yemeni team] because [they] are my friends and [I] enjoy more playing with [them]... [I] enjoy playing for [other team] because it is [in the] league... [but only] some are friends, other just play... I go out with friends from [Yemeni team] but only football with [other team]... [It is] easier with [Yemeni team] because [we all] speak Arabic...”*

*(Newly arrived Yemeni asylum seeker)*



## **Professional Football Consumption**

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*A further source of such communion with others is through the consumption of professional football. Due to the global reach of the English Premier League, many refugees and asylum seekers have already developed a relationship with and gained knowledge of English football clubs. This impacts on belonging in three significant ways. On occasions that they find themselves in conversation with long-term British residents, or talking amongst themselves within the refugee 'community', it can provide a topic for mutual consideration that avoids the complexities and stigma attached to their status. It is also a source of mutual connectivity during communications with friends and family 'back home'. The physical act of being part of a 'local' crowd in a football stadium and the embodied communal experience of attending a match can create a very positive sense of location. The same can be said for watching televised football in a community setting. Finally, supporting a football team and the expression of that support provides an alternative hook on which to hang their identity that is not reducible to ethnicity or political status.*

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Most significantly is that, although most urban districts in which refugees and asylum seekers are housed are likely to have professional clubs, unless it is Manchester, Liverpool or London they are unlikely to have formed a connection with their local side. As football clubs have an increasingly commercial relationship with supporters their responsibility to uphold some historically bound civic status is contested. Consequently, the opportunity for football clubs to contribute to a local sense of belonging amongst new arrivals is open to question.

This is unfortunate as although refugees tend to come with an allegiance to one of the currently more successful 'bigger' clubs in this country, 'smaller' local sides could offer far more in the way of opportunities to connect with local people in an organic way. Interestingly, however, this is not commonly seen as a motivation for supporting a football club as such local identifications are not usual amongst football fans hailing from nations from which they are seeking asylum. Nonetheless, the historical associations that football clubs have with their localities means that refugees and asylum seekers living in Sheffield who have an interest in football do develop an affinity for Sheffield United and Sheffield Wednesday, especially because many get housed in neighbourhoods fairly close to one of the two stadia and get to witness the regular spectacle that comes with home matches.



## Talking football

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### **Asylum seekers and refugees come from all sorts of backgrounds, with varying interests and levels of education.**

Much of what occupies their conversations will depend on how long they have been in Britain, their age, country of origin and personal interests. What provides common points of connection are often their asylum application, possibilities of work (for refugees) or volunteering (for asylum seekers), the situation in their home country and the usual small talk and gossip that carries on from one meeting to another about family and mutual acquaintances

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***“It’s like the English way. The common way that English people introduce themselves is through the weather: ‘How is the weather?’ No need to dip into other details. Same thing to us: ‘Did you watch the football last night...?’”*** (Zimbabwean asylum seeker)

Like for so many other people, football for some refugees and asylum seekers provides the backdrop for other parts of their lives and for other ‘more serious’ concerns. It is a topic of conversation to fall back on when other interests fail to provide common ground, whether for the comfort of new arrivals themselves or for those trying to engage with them.

***“You should speak to Ahmad. He’s very quiet, he doesn’t interact much but I know he loves football... I mean I don’t know much about football myself, but I know a little about Chelsea and when I started talking to him about it he started telling me all about how much he enjoys [football]. He was like a different person...”***

*(English volunteer at Conversation Club)*

Football provides something ordinary, familiar, unconnected to the tribulations attached to seeking refuge. For asylum seekers, life can be both empty and busy. It becomes devoid of the meanings that the rest of us take for granted, in terms of being part of civic society, as producers and consumers. Life becomes dominated by the ‘business’ of seeking asylum. In other words, the combination of reporting to the UK Border Agency, attending English classes, seeking out volunteering opportunities, contacting the Home Office, case workers and solicitors, arranging meetings with support agencies and ‘networking’ with other refugees at events where they may receive a free meal or cup of tea. It is the business of keeping busy. Without these commitments emptiness takes over and with it mental instability.

As discussed already, playing football clearly provides a physical space away from such ‘business’. Football can be equally important, however, in providing a social space in which the ‘business’ of seeking refuge is, for a time, of secondary importance. Having something to do gives you things to talk about. It encourages connections that can remain on the surface of life. It provides an immanence to one’s existence.

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Football takes place in the here and now and is separate from an individual's status as asylum seeker, it does not involve dwelling on the past but provides an on-going narrative that will continue into the future. Subsequent meetings between those playing or watching, whether at the next game or at some other event, will involve reflections on previous matches and possible ways in which they can progress or just the exchange of seemingly meaningless 'banter' that actually performs an important bonding role. This applies equally to the consumption of professional football and the discussions that emanate from participation in recreational football.

***"Like when you... I didn't know you support Arsenal... so when you give it [jocular abuse] to me about Chelsea... At first I didn't get it, you know, why's this guy so...? It's the same on the pitch. It's normal."***

*(Zimbabwean asylum seeker)*

Asylum seekers can feel undervalued in many ways and much of their life in Britain can be dominated by falling into a needy role. Even when feeling positive about their new lives, there can be an unwanted reliance on others. Football represents an independence from that kind of support. It does not disappear but moves backwards to be replaced by a different set of rules that encourage a more equal relationship.

It is not only due to the negative discourses encouraged by British cultural and political institutions that refugees and asylum seekers can feel worthless. Such stigma is reinforced by self-imposed embarrassment about having to ask for charity and a perceived loss of social worth due to their current status. When initial claims are refused forcing individuals into the appeals process, self-sufficiency is tested to the extreme. Homeless, powerless, hopelessly dependent on the goodwill of others, people feel uncomfortable talking to others about their lives.

As asylum seekers and refugees find themselves at different stages of the process their status can become a greater or lesser topic of conversation with others in a similar position. Sometimes there is a need to discuss things. At other times there is a desire to keep things to yourself. Football provides a point of departure, a subject that has no bearing on or connection to an individual's political status.

There are many different reasons that individuals seek refuge in a foreign land. Some abandon their former lives completely; others maintain connections with family and friends left behind as best they can. The decision (however it is made) to seek protection abroad is accompanied by hope, by those making the journey and those who remain. On arriving in Britain, optimism is often tempered by the reality of the asylum system and the inequities that persist in the 'developed' world. As circumstances become less than expected it is important to maintain the illusion of a better life when communicating with loved-ones who were unable to or chose not to leave.



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*“The first time I speak with my family [after arriving in this country], they get so excited because... there was the Chelsea match, they... because in the [refugee] camp we watch the football, the Premier League... but also Spain and Germany... there is a lot of it. They were excited because they see the Chelsea match and they know that I am here, where it is, where the match... they don't know Chelsea is far away [from Sheffield]...” (Recently arrived Somali refugee)*

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In this case football creates a liminal communicative space in which distance between family members and the various concerns that may emanate from this can be overlooked or moved to the background. The conversation can concentrate on 'normal' topics around which they would have interacted before they were parted. Other discussions are based upon differences between the new and old lives, the weather, the people, day-to-day activities. What happened earlier in a football match will have been the same whether viewed in the North of England or the Horn of Africa.

This is most important for new arrivals as geographical and emotional attachments become confused and contorted around the familiarity of the past and the insecurity of the future. It is for these individuals that football can form the most valuable connecting bridges with others.

## Case Study: Conversation Clubbing

The acoustics of the hall amplify the low murmur of numerous conversations. There is all number of anxieties amongst those present but the overall atmosphere is one of contented calm. Except at one table in the middle, where there is tension. Two Afghanis privately discuss the situation before them. An Iranian stands authoritatively, his decision made. An English girl waits with patience for the outcome. The Sudanese man next to her studies the scene in silence. Suddenly, concentration gives way to chaos. Faces turn towards the commotion as wooden bricks smash against the table-top. For those involved in the game, initial alarm at the toppling tower gives way to laughter as it comes crashing down.

Jenga. Chess. Playing cards. These are just some of the activities that occupy the many refugees and asylum seekers who spend Friday afternoons at Victoria Hall socialising over a cup of tea and a biscuit. David is not interested in playing games. He is more interested in discussing the manager of the England football team.

*"What do you think? Do you think he is the best man? England, they are dreadful. Why are they dreadful? They have brilliant players. Rooney. Gerrard. Hart, he is a fantastic goalkeeper. Why do they not win?"*

Of Sudanese heritage and having grown up in Kenya, English is his first language. His considered delivery, punctuated with enthusiasm, gives all his adjectives an onomatopoeic quality. "I don't like Rooney." We are interrupted by the thoughts of a Zimbabwean commentator.

*"But he is the best English player... that is why England are not good." Another pundit, from Iraq, joins the debate. "You don't like him because he play for Manchester United..." is his assessment of his friend's opinion, "...but Rooney, he is a good player. He work very hard for his team. But in England you do not like to pass, it is always about running, it very physical."*

The conversation moves on to a debate about a particularly controversial incident in a match the previous weekend. Two of those involved in the discussion had seen the incident on Match of the Day, another had watched it online after hearing about it from friends and one of the group was unaware what had happened so was given three passionately described perspectives on the situation.

At the table behind the tower of bricks is being rebuilt.

The Victoria Hall Conversation Club started when the Sheffield Refugee Friendship Group came together with STAR (Student Action for Refugees) and the newly established Drop in Centre (Sheffield Asylum Team) at Victoria Hall in late spring 2002. About 5 or 6 volunteers sat down with about 5 or 6 refugees to talk and play games, drink a cup of tea and get to know each other. There was no particular brief and no training. A variety of approaches were explored to help language practice and confidence building at the same time as giving new arrivals a chance to find out about the city and what it could offer them.

*The club proved so popular, that it was first extended to a second weekly afternoon session and later to a regular women only session.*

New groups have since grown up in some Sheffield districts and in other towns. When funding allows the club organises weekend activities including countryside walks, museum excursions, football

and cinema visits. If regular funding for such 'extra-curricular' activities can be secured, club members will be more active in making decisions about what they want to do.

There has always been interest from Conversation Club members in attending football matches and they have relied upon a partnership with FURD for the occasional provision of tickets. It has been suggested that a visit from professional football players to the afternoon sessions would have the benefit of raising the profile of the work they are doing with refugees and asylum seekers as well as being an incredible boost to members' self-morale that they would be worthy of attention from such (potentially) high profile celebrities. This could be done as part of players' charitable work written into their contracts.



## Watching football

*There is a communal togetherness in the act of watching football that connects people across space and time. Through the on-going narrative provided by football, connections are made to the past through memories of other matches, former players and classic goals – even if those memories were created in a different country, a different lifetime. In the stadium, football creates a temporary sense of belonging with the surrounding crowd. If viewing on television it does likewise amongst those sharing the immediate space in which they are watching and to thousands of others gathered around screens across the globe.*

*“There is some café, they have television at back. They always show Champions League. Is only small but full of people... Somalia... Arab... all types of people... and they get crazy. You know, some supporting Chelsea and some support Barcelona. Everyone shouting, arguing, but not really [serious]. It is always like this with football. I don't care so much, but I enjoy...” (Iraqi refugee)*

For the majority of asylum seekers and refugees the only way of watching professional football is on television. Furthermore, this is generally limited to that which is available on terrestrial channels. Home subscriptions to satellite television are too expensive and, notwithstanding the above comment, the communal spaces where matches are shown, most commonly pubs, are often exclusionary for cultural and/or economic reasons. More creative means of watching football must be found.

*“I watch on Internet, in library... I have to book one hour... and then I go to other side, you know, where there are some computer in other room, other side... on Saturday is busy, very busy... can only have one hour, so I go other computer at half time...” (Kurdish asylum seeker)*



Libraries are for many refugees and asylum seekers welcoming and regularly frequented spaces. They are warm, economically undemanding places. They also provide opportunities to learn more about the language or culture of Britain to those so interested as well as offering access to the Internet. For many individuals with little else to do with their time and few other public places they can while away their days, the library represents a communal hub.

Watching football in this way is both an isolating experience and a communal one. Viewing a match live online forms a connection with hundreds of thousands whilst creating a detachment from the immediate surroundings. For refugees and asylum seekers, belonging is less bounded by geography (physical or political). That does not necessarily mean that a greater sense of permanence is not sought.

Football clubs are very apparent symbols of a local identity. Whilst support is certainly no longer as geographically bound as it may have been in the past there are historical roots that reach out to fans and provide a firm grounding that may be absent from other aspects of modern life. For refugees and asylum seekers whose previous experience of watching professional football is most likely to be televised matches, going to see a game in the stadium can provide an extremely visceral form for feelings of belonging and the expression thereof.

The only opportunities for asylum seekers and most refugees to attend live football matches are when clubs offer free tickets to local groups as part of their community engagement policies. These occasions tend to be infrequent and tickets are distributed en masse. As a result, those who attend do not develop as great a sense of attachment to the local club as they might despite the potential that such a relationship could create a similar sense of belonging that other fans have through the expression of their support.

When such opportunities arise, it is for many simply a chance to do something different. It could just as well be tickets to go to the cinema, the theatre or any other event. These are activities that could be offered by other organisations and it is to the testament of football clubs that as businesses they do offer such opportunities as part of their community based inclusion work. However, there are those for whom football attendance is a far more meaningful experience. It is such individuals as these that tickets should be made available more frequently. This could be in return for volunteering in some capacity either for the club or an associated organisation. In this sense, community policies on distribution of tickets should identify individuals for whom such affiliation would be of most benefit.

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***“I live in Sheffield, I support Sheffield United. Sheffield has supported me so of course I support Sheffield United. They are my team in England. If I get tickets I will go but it is very expensive...” (Congolese refugee)***

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There are many debates about deserving and undeserving recipients of such donations. With the expense of going to football matches increasing and greater numbers of people being priced out of regular attendance, club ticketing policies need to balance income generation with continuing growth of the fan base and corporate social responsibility to different communities within their locality. The majority of match goers are aware of these responsibilities and the significance of encouraging minority groups into the stadium. Whilst for some regular football supporters it can provide an opportunity to regurgitate clichéd quips based upon negative cultural stereotypes others are more responsive to the enthusiasm displayed for their team.

***“He was a bit crazy, a bit over the top. Half the crowd around us were watching him not the match. Seemed like he was enjoying himself... and he were making us laugh... and like, yeah, it don’t matter where you come from, if you’re supporting the Blades... you’re with the right team, like.”***

***(White British Sheffield United supporter)***

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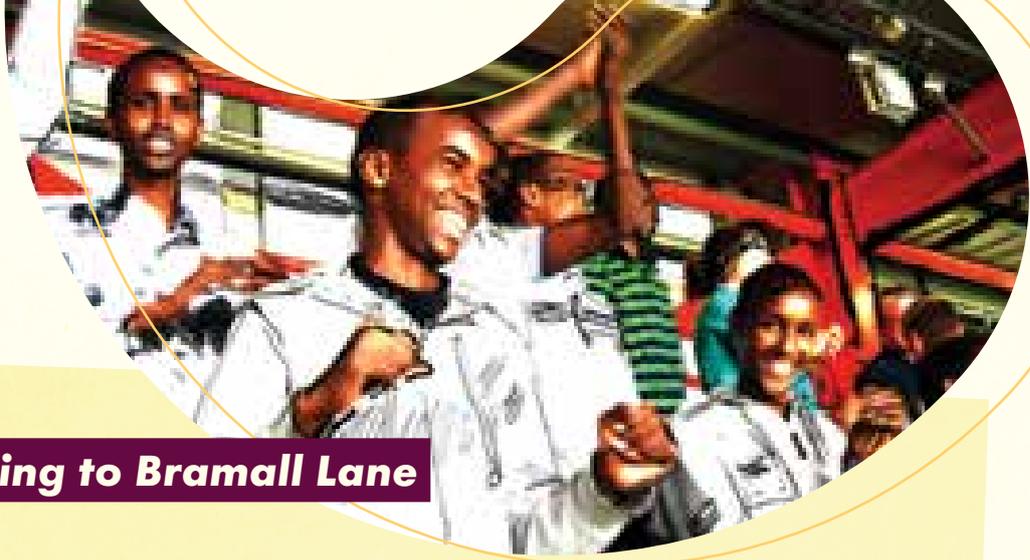
25. There are debates around authenticity of support that can undermine such unity. See Giulianotti, R. (2000) ‘Supporters, Followers, Fans and Flaneurs’, *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 26(1); King, A. (1998) *The End of the Terraces*. London: Leicester University Press

26. See Back, L., Crabbe, T. & Solomos, J. (2001) *The Changing Face of Football*. Oxford: Berg

The thing that unites football supporters is their connection to the club.<sup>25</sup> Demonstrations of such support from ethnic minorities have always challenged simple constructions of ‘otherness’ within the white majority.<sup>26</sup> It does not mean that individual attitudes and misunderstandings about refugees and asylum seekers will change but it does open the possibility of dialogue taking place.

“When they saw our reaction like them... there’s no difference, yes we have different face, different language, different culture but for football we are the same.”  
(Iraqi asylum seeker)

Attendance at live football matches is experienced as an embodied event that provides respite from one’s worries. It is a chance to perform and present an alternative identity. For some this may seem more ‘natural’ than others depending on their existing relationship with football as a spectator, supporter or fan. Regardless of this, though, going to a match seems to provide overwhelming sensate experience which serves to connect new arrivals with their surroundings (see page 68).



## Case Study: Going to Bramall Lane

The streets around the Sheffield United stadium are filled with expectant supporters as the team make a final push for automatic promotion in their last home game of the season. Swelling the highest attendance of the season is a group of refugees and asylum seekers. Such a number of dark skins altogether amongst the rest of the throng is noticeably unusual as they string themselves out in order to find a way through the mass of people being squeezed together by the tightly terraced streets. The purpose may be different and those surrounding them dissimilar to what they are used to but the feeling of jostling through the tightly packed horde is not so unfamiliar to the group. Parents maintain a watchful eye on their children and keep within easy reach of one another as if off to market. They are respectful of the footballing throng but not overwhelmed.

***“Where were you when we were sh\*t?  
Where were you when we were sh\*t?”***

their usual seats on the ‘kop’. It is not directed at the group of ‘outsiders’ who they might, rightly, assume are visiting ‘their’ stadium for the first time. It is more an accusatory query to the thousands of other ‘supporters’ who seem to be only turning up because of the significance of the match.

A few refugees who happened to be right next to the group seem a little startled by the sudden vocal eruption in what is otherwise a fairly sedate crowd. They are reassured by other fans who are waiting patiently to enter the ground; fans who, used to seeing black and Asian supporters in small clusters, are curious about who they are and why there are so many.

There is a moment of disorientation as the sinister turnstiles separate family members struggling with the automated ticket readers and daylight gives way to the bunker-like interior of the football stadium’s concourse. The patiently understanding stewards helpfully direct the newcomers to their seats. The dark underbelly of the stadium gives way to the bright green of the pitch and vivid colours of the crowd, now part of the spectacle to be experienced at a distance as much as being an involved member like in the streets outside.

The familiarly sarcastic refrain, to those who regularly attend football matches, is delivered by a small group of lads as they make their way towards

***“You fill up my senses***

***Like a gallon of Magnet***

***Like a packet of Woodbines***

***Like a good piece of snuff...”***

The less than tuneful rendition of Annie's Song that accompanies the start of a United match at Bramall Lane is idiomatically indecipherable to all but the most proficient English speakers in the party.

As the match begins there is an awestruck silence over the majority of the group; an inexperienced reticence about how to act. The first half is mostly spent in quiet contemplation of the scene ahead of them, intense concentration of the game itself interrupted by the occasional distraction by supporters nearby rising together in anticipation or shouting abuse in the direction of opposing players.

Some, overawed by the visceral scene before them, watch transfixed; others seem less involved but curiously attentive. Some are excited by the action on the pitch, others fascinated by the atmosphere in the stands. Very few of the group are particularly animated as they struggle to comprehend the behaviour of the crowd around them and unsure of the decorum with which they should conduct themselves. One or two begin to have fervent discussions with each other as shots fly wide of the target, passes go astray and strikers crumple under pressure from their opponents.

As the game progresses and the occasion becomes less overwhelming, many of the refugees' reactions are more in line with the supporters around them. As attacks build in momentum and the noise around them builds in intensity a more physical involvement with the action is discernible. A strike on goal. Members of the group lean forward in anticipation. One or two rise to their feet with celebratory expectancy but as the shot is parried away disappointment is transmitted through slumped resignation.



## Doing football

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The final way in which consumption of professional football can impact a sense of belonging is if it is an important part of one's constructed self-identity. Many refugees will declare themselves supporters of an English professional football club. Like most other football supporters this will be exhibited in conversation through referring to the team as 'we' and effusively, often irrationally, defending the club, its manager and the players against disparaging comments from others. The degree to which some express their fandom is so encompassing it seems to overwhelm their life (see page 72). As the following quote illustrates, for one Muslim asylum seeker the sacrifices that his faith demands were nothing to the sacrifice of his football club, Arsenal, conceding eight goals to rivals Manchester United during the fasting period of Ramadan in 2011.

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*"You know, I could not eat, I was sick, so sick... I go watch match, and you know, I fast... I not eating at... now, it is Ramadan, you know... I not eat from 5 o'clock in the morning. When I get to my house, I wait... is normal [during Ramadan], we eat at around 10 o'clock [in the evening]. I tell you, I get my glass of water. I was so hungry but I could not eat nothing. I eat nothing. It was terrible..." (Kurdish asylum seeker)*

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This is a particularly extreme expression of a football based identity. For the majority, their team represents a symbol through which they can experience success. Their support is rooted in a more limited availability of teams to consume from afar but is also directed by association with global brands that represent their aspirations for a life without reprisals, without relegation to some lower category of person.

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*"Most of the people here [seeking asylum], they've gone through much; they've lost a lot. So they want to be winners. And they want to be associated with the winning teams."*  
*(Zimbabwean asylum seeker)*

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As a result, most refugees support successful teams at the top of the Premier league: Arsenal, Chelsea, Liverpool, Manchester United and increasingly Manchester City.

"Nobody will say 'I support Fulham or Wigan. No way! It's Arsenal, Man. United and Liverpool... those are winning teams so people can say, 'I belong to a winning team, so I'm not that bad right?' Even if I lose in society, at least I've got some people representing me on the telly, right. And when they win you feel better..."  
(Somali asylum seeker)

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They would deny that they were any less authentic in their support for their team. Discussions can become quite 'heated' and viewpoints passionately expressed. For many new arrivals, English football is the one area of knowledge they are confident about. If they are challenged about a particular aspect of 'their' team they will willingly defend themselves. Refugees and asylum seekers who are football fans will be conversant with the latest issues, not just regarding the 'big' clubs but also the local teams. They will not necessarily be as passionate about the likes of Sheffield United or Sheffield Wednesday because they will not have had as much exposure prior to arriving but they will pay attention to the latest news and happily pass comment with local supporters if given the chance.

The difficulty for refugees and asylum seekers is that their milieu of existence does not often bring them into realms in which such interactions and performativities can flourish. They cannot afford to attend live sporting occasions and, even if expense were not an issue, are often not comfortable in conventional sport spectating spaces such as pubs and bars where such events are televised.

If to belong is to be accepted for who you are then through the expression of football fandom a temporary sense of belonging can be achieved. Mentally and emotionally, for a time at least, those not politically classed as part of the nation in which they are residing, can forget or ignore such a dominating classification. They are simply Manchester United supporters or Liverpool fans. Some even follow Sheffield United or Sheffield Wednesday.

This is what football can do. It can provide a form of togetherness that seems to take place at a sub-conscious level. It may seem to be fairly ephemeral but can become more meaningful with repeated experiences. The crucial thing is that such belonging is not seen as some replication of the 'Tebbit test'<sup>27</sup> that disrespects the hyphenation of social identities or ignores the importance of cultural and political citizenship in perceptions of the self.

27. During an interview with the Los Angeles Times in April 1990, Norman Tebbit, at the time a Conservative back bencher, proposed the 'Cricket test' which he suggested would be a measure of how integrated British ethnic minorities living in Britain were by whether they supported the English Cricket team rather than the team from their country of ancestry by saying: 'A large proportion of Britain's Asian population fail to pass the cricket test. Which side do they cheer for? It's an interesting test. Are you still harking back to where you came from or where you are?'





## Case Study: An Arsenal fan from Kurdistan

Growing up in Iran during the 1990s Dekor did not have a lot of opportunity to watch football. His childhood was spent trying to avoid the chores that went along with rural family life in a farming community. When he achieved his aim many hours were spent playing football with friends around the area.

The only place to watch television was the local store/café. With only three terrestrial channels, illegal satellite broadcasts brought a regular crowd to watch top English Premier League matches. Having no money to spend in the establishment Dekor would have to sneak in and try not to be noticed otherwise he would be chased away. This was a business after all.

In adulthood, Dekor is anything but discreet, especially whilst watching football. The fervour with which he attached himself to Arsenal Football Club in those formative years has become an overwhelming identity since arriving in Britain.

As a Kurd making what was seen to be a less than legitimate living from the relative benefit of living close to the Iraq/Iran border his misdemeanours left him with little option but to flee from the authoritarian regime. Imagining a more liberal and liberating life in Western Europe he arrived in Britain with no knowledge of the asylum system other than the extremely limited information given to him by the smuggler he had paid to get him here.

During the 10 years he has lived in this country he has accumulated much in the way of Arsenal memorabilia. He always turns up to football training in a full replica kit. Other adornments may include Arsenal sweatbands, bandana or baseball cap. One wall of his room, in the house he shares with six other asylum seekers from other parts of the Middle East and Africa, is covered in images of Arsenal players, team photos, posters of the club crest and a red and white Gunners scarf. In amongst it all, helping to create a tragicomic montage of devotion are fading photographs of his parents, his brother on his wedding day and him as a child playing with his siblings.

He displays his (new) identity with pride.

It is an identity that embraces Western appearance and challenges his nationally enforced Muslim upbringing. Whilst respecting the requirements of Ramadan and the festivity of Eid, he is not strict in his following of Islam. He is more than happy to dismiss the religious strictures about alcohol to go to the pub to watch his beloved Arsenal, if he can scrape together enough money for a drink.

With an innocence that seems at odds with his streetwise appearance and love of Western popular-culture he has, with the help of his Kurdish-English dictionary, even written letters to the club asking to visit the stadium and making suggestions about the management of the team.

### **Welcoming the 'other'**

Sitting in a Turkish restaurant in Finsbury Park prior to Arsenal's match against Montpellier, the concerns of many supporters are that of their star player's contract talks more than the impending Champions League clash. It is a concern shared by Dekor who has penned a message to Theo Walcott urging him to stay. Sitting amongst other Arsenal supporters, dressed in similar replica shirts, he does not look out of place. He chats casually with them, his broken English unproblematic for fellow fans with similar opinions about their team. It seems like he belongs.

Pulling out a large sheet of paper, he begins to draw a pitch; the menu acting as ruler for the touch-lines, the base of the squat silver salt shaker an ideal template for the centre circle. He runs through the starting line-up as he sees it, struggling with the pronunciation of the foreign sounding players and needing assistance as he spells out the names on his makeshift team sheet.

They are the same names being announced to the cheering crowd that accompanies his bewildered arrival at the stadium. Dekor sinks into the spectacle, drawn towards the incandescent glow of the pitch as other spectators swarm around him searching for their seats. This section of the Emirates Stadium is largely comprised of season ticket holders and for this game, Champions League match day four, there is a complacency amongst the surrounding supporters that verges on indifference. Small groups will occasionally take up the lead of an isolated voice amongst them:

**"We're by far the greatest team the world has ever seen..."**

**"Who's that team we call the Arsenal, who's that team we all adore..."**

**"We won the League... At White Hart Lane... We won the League at White Hart Lane..."**

Dekor had only just arrived in the UK when Arsenal did last win the league and on this, his first visit to see his beloved team live, he is not well versed in the rituals of football fandom. He does not know the songs. He is unaware of the apathy which the regulars around him seem to have for their team. His connection with Arsenal is televisual. It is media fuelled. It is a one-to-one (or one-to-eleven/twenty five) relationship with the players as personalities, as celebrities and as skilled performers of an activity he knows well.

The make-up of an Arsenal crowd has for many years reflected the cosmopolitanism of the capital city, the reserved sensibilities of increasingly bourgeois Islington inhabitants mixing with the multicultural neighbourhoods of north London more widely. How many Kurdish people attend the Emirates Stadium is unknown but tonight the number is at least one higher than usual.

The awestruck silence with which Dekor first entered the stadium has been replaced with vociferous instructions loudly directed towards his heroes on the pitch.

**"Sagna, SAGNA! Pass. PASS, Sagna."**

The Arsenal full back seems to be the target for most of his concerns. Bemusement spreads through the more passive members of the surrounding audience. He is a lone voice, convinced of his impact on the scene ahead of him, unaware of the distraction he has become.

His credentials identify him as a tourist. His enthusiasm begrudgingly excused. He is also initially identified as different. He is not doing things in the right way. In some

**"What's he got in that backpack?!"**

this is manifest as prejudiced 'humour' stereotyping him as a possible terrorist.

As he pulls out his team sheet, knowledgeably constructed in the café earlier, his credibility is tested further amongst those sitting behind.

**"He thinks he's Jose Mourinho!"**

As the crowd grow more frustrated at the lack of penetration on the pitch and restlessness itches its way into the sedated stadium, however, his impassioned involvement emboldens others. Still he berates Bacary Sagna, the Arsenal defender. With typical terrace wit, another lone voice in the crowd, mockingly mimics him.

**"For f\*ck's sake Sagna, PASS!"**

There is amused laughter in the surrounding seats. A further single shout: "Yeah, c'mon SAGNA!" Dekor recognises the sarcasm in the air and revels in the unconventional impact he is having on those around him. He has now become the cheerleader for this corner of the stadium as resignation of his presence sets in.

**"At least he gives a sh\*t... not like this lot."**

He may not be fitting in to the conventions of support but he is being accepted for what he is, in the eyes of those around him: a 'tourist' whose passion for Arsenal is unorthodoxly infectious. Consequently, at the final whistle other supporters are shaking his hand, wanting their picture taken with him; he has become a celebrity himself and is overwhelmed by the welcome he received which he had previously only dreamt of and was unlike any other feeling he had experienced since arriving in the UK.

## **Conclusions, Limitations and Recommendations**

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The notion of belonging can be seen as the interconnection between cultural, communal and personal aspects of life that make people feel able to express themselves freely without fear of retribution, that they see themselves as an equal amongst their compatriots and their everyday lives are rooted in familiarity.

### **Safe Spaces and Belonging**

Belonging is connected with how we feel about the places and spaces in which we spend time on a regular basis. To feel you belong somewhere is to feel comfortable, to feel welcome, to feel safe and to feel able to express yourself in a way that helps such feelings to persist. In consumerist based societies such as Britain much of the city is inaccessible to asylum seekers in terms of meaningful interaction with the wider population, both literally and symbolically. They rely on the civic spaces of libraries and public gardens or churches, mosques and community centres.

Football is able to provide an immediately apparent alternative space that whilst exhilaratingly distracting is also fairly predictable to those used to playing the game. For new arrivals, the only minor difficulty is recognising the type of football being played, recreational enough for them to join in or a competitive match that needs a more formal connection with those involved. People tend to play football in the same places at the same time each week and some rapport can be established quite soon for those who have enough confidence in their abilities. Regarding the consumption of professional football, public spaces for doing so are much more restricted. Nonetheless they can provide a place to go regularly and meet similar people each time, whether other supporters of your team or followers of football generally. Such places develop their own communities defined by football fandom.

Through the regularity of going somewhere to play or watch football it becomes a more familiar space. It is familiar through the activity taking place there as being recognisable to similar activity when life was more secure and it becomes familiar through the repetitiveness of participating. It is also fairly predictable. During a match, there are rules and immediate arbitration. Whilst there are always debates about their interpretation and the ability of one referee to make accurate judgements, all players know who is in charge. The very act of challenging authority in the shape of the referee that is deemed acceptable in football to an extent can be liberating for oppressed individuals. In informal matches there is no referee and decisions are made democratically for the good of continuing the match. In recreational football the choice to participate defines the very existence of the activity. The presence of a football match in the park defines a particular space as belonging to the group participating in the activity for its duration. It is a noticeably physical and acceptable form of occupying a public space.



Belonging is about the ownership of and right of access to certain spaces. Asylum seekers and refugees are able to claim the same right to a footballing space more easily than other places which may be symbolic of belonging: the neighbourhood, your own home, place of work, meeting places such as pubs, cafés and other leisure facilities.

There should be spaces beyond the boundaries of the pitch that are similar sources of sanctuary, to socialise after playing or for watching football in a comfortably communal atmosphere.

### **Embodied Belongingness**

The way we move, our bodily comportment, is socially and culturally constructed. The subtleties of such distinctions are subconsciously learned over many years of interacting with the physical and social environment around us. Belonging is connected with feelings of comfort in our own bodies. The more comfortable we feel, the more natural we act and the more easily we are accepted by those around us.<sup>28</sup>

As a physical activity, often rooted in embodied memories that have developed, or for some stagnated, since childhood, football provides an opportunity to express comfort in one's capabilities and mastery over the immediate environment. It is a fragile situation, however. Sporting activity consists of both subtle physical movements as well as grand gestures. Football involves more than just the act of controlling and kicking a ball or running into space and jostling with opponents during the course of playing. There is a much greater performance that begins with imaginings of the game ahead. The routine of packing your kit bag, the journey to the match or training session, greeting the other players, getting changed and pre-match warm-up. The small movements of various muscles and limbs become instinctive but take total concentration for the duration of the match. Goal celebrations, elaborate tricks, over exaggerated injuries and testosterone fuelled gestures embody more individualised expressive forms. Post-match gesticulatory analysis, the competing physical sensations of vitality and fatigue, the self grooming rituals in the changing room and the psychological absorption of physicality as one reflects on the activity in more meditative moments afterwards.

These embodied sensations and experiences reflect and inform the interactions with others so that as part of the reflexive process a mutuality of actions is achieved. That is not to say that there are not culturally different football styles and expectations related, for example, to the performativity of masculinity that, depending on the level of participation, can lead to conflict both internally and externally. Such actions exist in a dialectic relationship. As a result belonging is not an absolute state but is an amalgamation of moments that coagulate to become more or less constant at different times. Belongingness is related to the consistency of such embodied moments over time.

Similar routines and rituals emerge for supporters in their consumption of professional football. The behavioural distinctions between new arrivals watching

28. For Bourdieu, this would be seen as a result of the *habitus* through which the field of sport acts and is acted upon as a distinctive cultural practice. From a Foucauldian perspective bio-political regimes such as sport can be critically seen as sites for the embodied negotiation of discipline and emancipation.

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matches in the stadium or on television and their more experienced counterparts are more distinct than through playing football. The physicality involved with watching football as opposed to playing is contingent on the social context of the spectating space and one's experience of it. Most refugees and asylum seekers do not have much experience of attending live matches and are therefore untutored in the performativity attached to fandom at its most visceral. Nonetheless, there is an overwhelming engagement, both mentally and physically, with the spectacle that comes from watching matches on television.

### **Mental Health and Self Concept**

Mental wellbeing and belonging are mutually interdependent. To belong is dependent on psychological ease in managing everyday life, through connecting with others, feeling safe and being valued. The greater the sense of belonging one feels then the easier it is to achieve these conditions. Depression is a condition to which asylum seekers are particularly prone and it is clear that football can provide a strong counteractive measure for such feelings, both in the short and long term.

Self-worth comes from feelings of mastery within the context of a match. I have scored more goals than my opponent, I am more skilful than him, more committed, fitter, stronger, better at giving or taking the associated jocular abuse (within permitted norms)<sup>29</sup> that has become an inherent part of football culture; I have contributed to the team in some way. The competitive elements of football, even at a recreational level, are vital in raising self-esteem for individuals providing they are playing at a level that is appropriate to their abilities and ambition. If not, it can reinforce a sense of failure.

The routines and discipline attached to football help with the management of life from one day to the next. Football represents something like 'normality' amongst the unfamiliarity and inactivity that dominates life for new arrivals. Simple things like the exchange of 'banter' amongst teammates has the effect of just feeling like 'one of the guys'. Being mocked for missing a shot has nothing to do with the systemic oppression felt by many asylum seekers. It is both meaningful and meaningless within the mundanity of day to day life providing it remains within acceptable boundaries.

For many young men football is a way of reinforcing and consolidating friendships. It overcomes intimacy issues that plague masculinities in various ways across different cultures. It avoids the need to share information that asylum seekers and refugees do not necessarily want to disclose. Bonds can be formed through a mutual interest in the sport. Friendships can form at a deeper level over time but that can be on individuals' own terms. Through football, connectivity can remain on the surface. This is both a strength and a weakness as the nature of competitive sport creates ambiguities amongst potential friendship groups. Pulling together to overcome the opposition can work to strengthen bonds that may not exist away from the pitch. Differences in levels of competitiveness and commitment can however undermine casual connections to the extent that enjoyment gained from participating is undermined and individuals feel further isolated, in relative terms, from what they felt was an inclusive environment.

29 . Different cultures and different individuals have different levels of what is considered acceptable. All agreed that racist abuse should not be tolerated. There is however confusion amongst all cultures about the terminology to the extent that racism as a concept within ordinary interactions has lost much of its meaning.

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Friendships develop over time and football provides the motivation for people to meet regularly. Whether training, playing, going to matches or watching on television, there is a timetable that for many refugees and asylum seekers may be absent in the rest of their lives. The development of friendships, or friendly relationships with interconnecting networks of acquaintances, is part of the communality attached to belonging.

Going to football on a regular basis provides the means for such relationships to develop as well as simply something to look forward to, in the very literal sense of the phrase as well as the anticipatory sense. Moreover, hopes and dreams should not be underestimated in helping to manage the pressures of everyday life. Football for many young refugees and asylum seekers, as with many young British citizens, provides a dream, a plausible future. In a more mundane way it provides a psychological boost by providing something to reflect upon, improve and look forward to from one week to the next.

What this all contributes to is a sense of consistency and continuity in one's self-identity in the face of other disjunctures. There have been arguments for many years about leisure forms replacing work as the primary source of self-concept. For asylum seekers who are not allowed to work and refugees who may not be able to find work in the field in which they have skills and experience, 'leisure' is an important source of self-identity. Being able to present a consistent and persistent version of the self is an essential part of belonging. Football provides an expressive form, understood by others, through which to develop a sense of self. I am a footballer; that is what I do. I support Arsenal Football Club; that is who I am. Those conditions do not change in moving to a new country. In fact, in a western society that itself is subject to less secure forms of identity making, football culture provides something to which many people anchor themselves in an attempt at consolidating a sense of who they are.

There is a linearity to football culture that connects the past to the present. Through the consumption of the professional game, memories of golden goals, classic matches and favourite players can be shared alongside opinions about recent incidents and results, whether seen on television, read about in the news or a combination of both online. At a participatory level, the same is true, through the 'critical conversations' between team-mates and significant others about what happened on the pitch and how it could have been different and will be next time.

### **Empowerment and Inclusion**

Through the formation of a football team groups and individuals can feel empowered. Their subsequent progress, or lack thereof, into the socio-cultural structures of football then has a bearing on feelings of continued marginalisation.

Sport is commonly seen as a critical site for resistance by marginalised groups. For refugee based communities forming a football team is initially about recognition. Recognition of a particular cultural, ethnic or national identity. Recognition of certain individuals within minority groups, by the groups themselves and by the wider society. It is also partly through the recognition by members of newly forming communities that a precedent has already been set.

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Other ethnic minority groups have their teams and so should we. Expectations change as communities become more established, as individuals become more economically active and as the experience of life in this country changes.

The initial process of putting a team together and becoming involved in the informal structures of football raises expectations at being able to progress into the more formal structures of 11-a-side football competition. Critical points are reached where decisions have to be made about the reasons for a team's existence and their capacity to sustain themselves. There is a significant difference between a group organising to play amongst themselves each week whilst occasionally making contact with other teams to play one off matches and the commitment needed for affiliated amateur league football.

There is a desire for progression at all levels. Whether it is those playing in informal groups or teams that have been formed to play in more formally organised leagues. In lives that in so many other ways may feel like they have stagnated due to forced migration, being able to see some kind of progression by becoming better at football or more organised as a group or team can be incredibly important. The paradox is that for those running teams, as they become more confident with the bureaucratic cultures of life in Britain and widen their network of connections, the less time they have to organise their teams because other social and economic opportunities arise.

Established refugee communities suffer similar problems to other ethnic minorities in terms of mutual misunderstandings and cultural disjuncture. Advances have been made in terms of cultural awareness within football but its organisation is still in the hands of a generation that are unrepresentative of considerable numbers of young ethnic minorities who play the game. There are instances of miscommunication and misunderstanding between players and officials, whether in the form of referees or league secretaries, that can reinforce feelings of victimisation amongst ethnic minority groups. It is of course too easy to reduce such incidences to racist attitudes but is often how some individuals from ethnic minority backgrounds interpret the situation. Hopefully the recent establishment of an Inclusion Advisory Group by the Sheffield & Hallamshire County FA will go some way to addressing these issues at a local level.<sup>30</sup>

30. This is the result of attending the County Inclusion Advisory Group Workshop organized by the national Football Association with the aim of addressing under-representation in decision making at County Football Associations and in grassroots football as outlined in the Inclusion and Anti-Discrimination action plan.

See [www.thefa.com/News/governance/equality/2013/apr/inclusion-advisory-group-020413.aspx#H6isAGwsDZQKhISZ.99](http://www.thefa.com/News/governance/equality/2013/apr/inclusion-advisory-group-020413.aspx#H6isAGwsDZQKhISZ.99)

### **Hybridity, Multiculturalism and Group Belonging**

Key to understanding football and mutual belonging is the relationship between asylum seekers and refugees, established ethnic minority communities and more recent refugee based communities, the white majority and the dominant discourses of multiculturalism.

New arrivals will spend much of their time with other asylum seekers and refugees from many different cultural backgrounds, through sharing houses and being socialised into the refugee community at support sessions and conversation clubs. Football can be added to the list for those so inclined. Many will have come from a less ethnically mixed environment. Their early socialisation into life in this country (and depending on their journey to get here prior to arriving) will be as one of an extremely diverse set of individuals. Simultaneously, most will also be part of an ethnic minority, an experience of which they may have extremely negative memories from their own background or have no experience before arriving in Britain.

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Being part of such a multicultural, multi-ethnic and tolerant society is seen by most as one of the positive aspects of living in Britain. Nonetheless, individuals tend to form stronger connections with others from similar ethnic groups. This is in part through the realisation and reinforcement of their peripheral status. The social meanings attached to ethnicity are constructed externally and internally. In Britain, multiculturalism is framed in relation to the cultural norms of the majority. As a result, if you are not part of the majority you are first and foremost part of a generalised 'other'. There are crude distinctions made within that definition by the majority and there are much more complex differences that are acknowledged across and within ethnically defined minority groups. The extent to which these are recognised by a whole range of mainstream and minority organisations, agencies, individuals and communities is dependent upon the internal definitions by ethnic minorities themselves and their relative position within local matrices of power.

There is a durability to ethnic identity that is the result of collective consciousness being transmitted across generations to the extent that more established ethnic minority cultures are part of the hybridity that actually defines contemporary British culture. Where minority ethnic individuals can recognise themselves and their cultural background as part of the mutual cultural exchange that defines hybrid Britain there is a greater sense of shared belonging. Less established ethnic minorities seek stronger attachments within their own cultures as well as connections to other less recognised ethnic minority communities that may share common experiences. Many asylum seekers and refugees are from such ethnic minority backgrounds and feel most comfortable surrounded by those more similar to themselves. Having said that, many also feel attached to one another by a sense of togetherness that is fostered around activities specifically aimed at supporting new arrivals that brings together asylum seekers and refugees from all variety of ethnicities. This is, as already mentioned, experienced in relation to a general connection within a complex set of ethnic minority identities framed by British multiculturalism.

The globally dominant model for sporting connectivity is its representation and promotion of the nation state. This is reflected by the popularity of mono-ethnic teams within recently displaced populations that have developed communities in Sheffield in recent years. What is important to them has been their relative positions to one another as much as their relationship with the ethnic majority. As a result an informal football competitiveness has manifested that avoids the complications attached to affiliated football. A shared structure of belonging is thus developed and reinforced within and across a particular set of recently formed refugee based communities within Sheffield and connecting with similar groups in other nearby cities. For refugees and asylum seekers wanting to play more competitive football, there are a small number of teams that are comprised of players from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds which represent the 'other' within the structures of amateur football.

For too long football has been dominated by a view that ethnic minority teams should fit in to and assimilate with the prescribed structures of competitive football. In a more fragmented social world where multiculturalism is about the fusion of different cultural backgrounds and the recognition of multiple identities and modes of existence, there is a need to offer alternative structures for football participation and consumption that recognise and proactively engage with difference. This should not be at the expense of conventional modes of engagement but in addition to them. The flexi footie league is an example of an innovative approach to 11-a-side football that may have started to address this need.

### **Cultural, Social and Physical Capital**

The interconnecting qualities of football described above in relation to belonging conceptualised as the relationship between cultural, communal and personal aspects of life can be summarised as follows:

<b>Qualities of Football</b>	<b>Aspects of Belongingness</b>		
	<b>Cultural...</b>	<b>Communal...</b>	<b>Personal...</b>
<b>Spatial</b>	Familiarity	Occupation	Safety
<b>Embodied</b>	Expression	Acceptance	Comfort
<b>Psychological</b>	Routine	Support	Consistency
<b>Empowering</b>	Resistance	Expression	Development
<b>Multicultural</b>	Recognition	Connectivity	Identity

The column on the left lists the qualities of football in relation to how they add to a sense of belonging for refugees and asylum seekers. Each quality is then related to belonging as defined by the interrelating aspects of cultural background, communal relationships and personal efficacy. These can be equated to cultural, social and physical capital; a theoretical perspective that currently dominates the political scene in a number of fields.

Initial meetings and connections made through participation rely on the physio-cultural capital in the field of football (to utilise Bourdieu's terminology<sup>31</sup>); translated as football ability and enjoyment of the sport. Such interactions overcome language difficulties and other cultural differences that may exist. Belonging in this sense is, to some extent, temporally bound by the duration of the game but is nonetheless expressed through a physical familiarity with the world.

31. Bourdieu, P. (1977) *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

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This temporality is key to understanding belonging and the capacity of sporting activity to contribute to perceptions of belongingness. A sense of belonging (within a sports team or group and to some extent more widely) is connected to acceptance (of the individual by the group and vice versa or the group by wider society) through processes of negotiation. It is not absolute but there is a point at which feelings of belonging are more apparent than feelings of not belonging; a point when one perhaps 'belongs enough'. Rather than a point, which seems too specific, 'belonging enough' indicates a period with more durability; a period of self-realisation or physical comfort with the surrounding environment. Belonging is to some extent unachievable and even 'belonging enough' might remain out of reach. It is through a combination of self-worth, connectivity and cultural familiarity over a period of time that feelings of belonging emerge. Membership of a football team or informal group that play regularly can help by providing a routine through which (football) skills, personal networks and new and old cultural practices can develop within a context that provides social security amongst likeminded people.

More specifically, belonging to a football club can provide access to a wider network of friends and acquaintances with whom to socialise in a potentially mutually supportive environment. Networks that for many of us are formed through longevity of living in a particular area, work based connections, family associations and long term friendships; all of which new arrivals may struggle to find as accommodation is seen as temporary, work difficult to obtain or in the case of asylum seekers not permitted, and the whereabouts of family or friends often unknown. Football provides the excuse to get together regularly, reinforcing bonds between disparate individuals. They can remain loose bonds because football provides a space away from other aspects of life that is centred on the immediacy of the game and the narrative of the sport experience.

Football is not separate from the social, cultural and political worlds but can exist in parallel to them. In this sense it is a combination of distraction from, reflection of and challenge to the status quo. It is the distance between the sporting and societal parallels that is important. In the case of asylum seekers, the distance between the two areas of work has been too great for good communication and mutual benefits to exist. This has resulted in assumptions being made about refugees' relationships with sport. From the sporting side there is a tendency to conflate the issues with more general ethnic minority experiences. From the refugee support side there has been a lack of knowledge about how to access sporting opportunities and the important role that sport can play for new arrivals.

This research project has been an attempt to correct the situation but is inevitably limited in its scope. The hope is that it can provide the foundation for further studies in the field of sport and the lives of refugees.

## **Limitations**

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### ***The Absence of Women***

One of the main limitations of this study has been identified as its inability to recruit women as research participants. Attempts were made to identify key gatekeepers that would be able to assist in reaching out to female refugees and asylum seekers but focus groups failed to materialise. This is due to a number of interconnecting factors: more men actively engage in football within a fairly small sample population, the assumption of gatekeepers that a football based investigation was more interested in men's opinions, the gender of the lead researcher and the ethnographically based approach to undertaking much of the fieldwork.

### ***Scope of Study***

The research has tried to encapsulate a number of different aspects of football culture, from participating to consuming, in terms of what it means to individuals whose status in this country encompasses a wide range of identities, politically and culturally. In designing the project, the vast differences between newly arrived asylum seekers, refused asylum seekers on support, those appealing decisions and living in destitution, refugees who have recently been given their leave to remain and those with refugee backgrounds who have lived in this country for many years (some the majority of their whole lives), were not taken into account. This is in part because the focus of the research was football and its role in bringing disparate groups together.

### ***Mutual Belonging?***

Research is a dynamic process that develops in different directions as decisions are made about which themes to concentrate on at certain times. Inevitably, there are always gaps in such a qualitative approach. Due to the decision to include potentially vulnerable asylum seekers as research participants, much time was spent developing relationships at the expense of also exploring in depth the attitudes of long term, white, British residents who play football. Assessment can be made through the participant observation aspects of the research process but it would have been useful to have supplemented this with more formal interviews. This does not invalidate the findings in terms of mutual belonging but focuses them on the interconnectedness from the perspective of refugees and asylum seekers only.

## Recommendations

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**Better communication between refugee support agencies and local football clubs/leagues/associations.** One individual with a passion for sport and an understanding of asylum issues is needed in each region/city who can act as an intermediary between sports clubs/organisations (including professional clubs, amateur organisation, university sport associations and volunteer groups) and refugee support agencies (including refugee council, red cross, national health service/specific medical practices, housing associations, UKBA, G4S, local council, RCOs and various charities). This would be a role for FURD in the case of Sheffield but for other areas without such an organisation it may fall within the remit of City of Sanctuary, the Refugee Council, the county FA or educational institutions.

Organisations supporting refugees to play football need to be able to **provide equipment**, especially to asylum seekers who wish to play but are unlikely to have appropriate footwear. Partnerships should be made between such support agencies and local football clubs or sporting goods suppliers to obtain old kits and unneeded stock. The charity 'Boots for Africa' could redirect a small percentage of their support to help new arrivals in this country.

More financial support – especially for established teams – to help **encourage recruitment of asylum seekers**. It would not need to be a large funding package but would need to incentivise the inclusion of asylum seekers. It could be in the form of travel passes matched with membership expenses that are claimed through evidence of appearances for a team. It would be the responsibility of the individuals to make the claim but clubs would need to be made aware of the fund as a way of boosting their finances.



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Refugee **teams themselves need to realise the importance of good organisation**, take responsibility for promoting themselves and develop a committed structure that includes the wider community and socialises young people into the wider structures of football. This needs to take place from the top down as well as the bottom up with football governing bodies taking more responsibility in nurturing individuals from minority groups who are able to act as intermediaries between different cultures as they are represented by the organisational elite and the communities engaging with grassroots football. The Sheffield & Hallamshire County FA have taken steps in this direction by recently establishing an Inclusion Advisory Group which will be made up of individuals and representatives of organisations that can best provide advice in relation to the participation of various diverse communities in local football.

Additionally, whilst the Football Association do offer **useful guidance** on the administration of amateur football clubs annual workshops should be provided which would be particularly useful for individuals who do not engage with written materials. Furthermore, the benefits to businesses of sponsoring local teams could be more widely publicised. Development officers need to be supported and rewarded for engagement with clubs that need extra support due to a lack of infrastructure elsewhere within their communities and networks.

**Suitable developmental approach** that allows individuals to play at an appropriate level to their ability and desire, from informal recreational level to competitive amateur level, that takes into account the inconsistency of their lives.

**Training to be given as part of football coaching badges** in managing individuals from socially excluded groups – with a section focusing on the specific issues faced by asylum seekers. Part of the philosophy behind FURD’s work is that football reaches audiences that may not ordinarily engage with issues around diversity. By including this within coaching courses it would fulfil a number of aims. This must be done as an embedded part of the courses rather than as an extra tokenistic section bolted on at the end.

**Best practice guide for running local ‘friendly’ leagues** that place as much emphasis on the social aspects attached to football. Whilst it can certainly be argued that simply playing football provides an opportunity for integration amongst people from different backgrounds, there is a lot more to be gained from using football as a motivating activity for wider social engagement. Developing the Football for Friendship model, there should be more opportunities to ‘turn-up-and-play’ on a regular basis that avoids the need to be part of a team and which promotes greater interaction between individuals from different backgrounds.

An extension to this would be **support for a ‘unity league’**. The success of the All Nations Tournament in attracting regular teams points to the potential for extending the annual one-day event to a more on-going league competition. The format for such a league would be to extend the invitation to participate beyond the refugee based sides that currently contest the All Nations Tournament each year to include teams from communities who would benefit from wider engagement with such minorities. This could include teams from local universities with students who would benefit from such interaction. Teams comprised of senior members from well established amateur clubs whose positive experiences would filter back to their own clubs and leagues. Local companies could be invited to participate as part of their diversity and engagement policies.

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Furthermore, **regional competitions** based on the model of the All Nations Tournament should be supported that provide opportunities for teams to travel to other cities and compete with similar refugee communities in other areas. During refugee week football tournaments aimed at refugee communities are regularly held in towns and cities throughout the UK including Bradford, Bristol, Exeter, Leeds, London, Manchester, Middlesbrough, Newport, Plymouth, Wakefield and Sheffield. A national competition for the winners of these tournaments would provide a showpiece event. It is also a model that could be followed by Refugee Community Organisations who want to use football as a way of encouraging connections between refugees from the same countries who live in different parts of the UK.

The development of materials that utilise **football as an educational tool** that publicise to young people the issues that face refugees and asylum seekers, locally and globally. There are many examples of how football has been used as a resource for a range of educational purposes from teaching English as a foreign language to challenging racism to raising awareness around sexual health. These should be consolidated into a nationally recognised package that is available for use in schools and less formal teaching environments. Football should be embedded within such an educational tool to simultaneously enhance physical fitness, increase skill levels and raise awareness. The FA have given support to the e-learning platform footee.com designed by MotivatEd Limited to help young people learn valuable, life-enhancing, school curriculum skills in a fun and interactive way. This should be extended to learning materials that utilise the attraction of playing football to address social issues. Africa United, for example, have developed coaching materials that mean players are learning about sexually transmitted diseases whilst doing the training drills.

**Implementation of a 'Stadia of Sanctuary' programme** amongst professional football clubs. This would be in partnership with organisations that support asylum seekers and refugees. Dedicated club supporters could be rewarded with tickets each month for 'befriending' refugees and asylum seekers and taking them to matches as part of a volunteering package. New arrivals should be offered most as they become accustomed to their new life. In this way they can be encouraged to support local teams through tickets to matches and a refugee community supporters club. The longer they remain the more they will have to do to keep attending but the stronger the desire will be and the greater the benefits. The long-term pay off will be more support for the club and a higher profile in communities beyond these shores. The aim would be to encourage an organic development of mutual affinity between new arrivals, their local football clubs and other supporters. At the very least, football clubs should be signed up to the 'City of Sanctuary' movement and should include visits to refugee support groups as part of players' charitable work.



**Provision of non-profit making locations for watching live televised football matches.** This is where local professional clubs could again work positively towards helping new arrivals socialise through providing a space that is welcoming for them to watch the matches they are used to consuming in their own countries. Seeing their local football club as a welcoming organisation will help their sense of belonging. Other community spaces should be considered as somewhere to go to watch football with other people. A small charge for those who can afford it could be administered to cover the travel costs of others. It could also cover the transmission costs providing the broadcasting companies set an appropriate community rate. This should be easier than ever with the introduction of 24 hour subscription packages. For belongingness to develop though it must happen on a regular basis rather than on one off occasions for important matches.

**Further research is needed into other activities** that may contain similar positive experiences for those who do not enjoy football. Walking in the countryside, recreational cycling, swimming, gymnastics, snooker, table tennis, racquet sports and martial arts have all been mentioned by research participants as possible alternatives. A 'sanctuary through sport' guide should be produced that suggests ways in which amateur sports clubs and leisure centres could involve asylum seekers and refugees as volunteers. Most sports involve some sort of cost which prevents participation. If that cost can be replaced by payment in kind through volunteering, asylum seekers will be able to engage much more widely. What needs to be recognised is that the infrastructure to support volunteering of this kind needs investment. The work of organisations such as Volunteer Action Sheffield (VAS), Football Unites, Racism Divides (FURD) and others that work with volunteers needs investment in order to have the capacity to act as the intermediary in supporting the needs of volunteers and the (sporting) groups with whom they may be placed.

There is also particularly a need to **explore the lives of female refugees and asylum seekers** in terms of what activities create a sense of belonging and what barriers exist to participation. Participation in women's football is one of the fastest growing sporting activities in Britain but there are still huge cultural barriers. Female refugees face the same issues as their male counterparts in terms of their economic position, political status and ethnic identity but may feel further distanced from sports participation due to culturally inscribed understandings of gender.

Key to the role of football in helping new arrivals gain a greater sense of belonging is its transferability across cultures. If that predominantly applies just to the male population, what are the equivalent activities and cultural formations that apply to women.

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