

## Street life: but not as we know it

**StreetGames is a brand that has been bubbling under the consciousness of *The Leisure Review* and, we suspect, the mainstream sport and leisure industry for a number of years. With the news that the charity recently held its third birthday party at the House of Commons with Ben Bradshaw and Jonathan Edwards on the guest list, we felt it was high time we found out just what the people who brought the world ‘doorstep sport’ were all about.**

We met StreetGames’ north west regional manager John Dwan in a warehouse in the back streets of Eccles and began the process of deconstructing the organisation that has recorded more than a million attendances over three years. How did the man who describes himself as no more than the “north west link” for the charity come to be there with about two dozen other people amid racks of industrial storage for equipment and resources?

“I was a self-employed coach,” Dwan said. “I used to coach outdoor pursuits as well as gymnastics and trampolining. I ended up getting a full-time job at the Royal School for the Deaf supporting the PE teachers with the kids, who all had multiple disabilities in addition to being deaf. That led to a job in a sixth form college in Stockport running sport and PE for their students with special needs and then I got pointed at a job in Manchester as their first community worker funded by regeneration money in Moss Side; it was probably one of the first such jobs funded solely by regeneration money.”

Dwan has never fitted the conventional template of a sports development officer and his time in Hulme and Moss Side made him realise the fault lines in that template: “I realised that to quickly grow community sport in Moss Side we needed more local coaches. We found it really hard to work with NGBs [national governing bodies] who were dead inflexible but I remember doing a workshop with Hamish [Telfer] in the crèche at Moss Side Leisure Centre where people were sat in little crèche chairs.” Any mainstream educator will tell you that this sounds like a not particularly good learning environment but Dwan counters this assumption: “It was the right place to do it, the right location. You have to make things accessible because people won’t travel.” And so a philosophy was born.

After doing regeneration bids for his own area Dwan ended up doing them for the other community workers in Wythenshawe and north Manchester, eventually ending up managing all of them. When Manchester was awarded the Commonwealth Games he moved to East Manchester to manage the Sport Action Zone (SAZ) within the regeneration scheme there and left the sports development team. Dwan was in his element: “The Sport Action Zone within the New Deal for Communities scheme replicated in a smaller geographical area what we had done across the city but we had more resources to do it. We did really well and had loads of input into the Games before, during and afterwards.” His involvement with the Games legacy is still not over and he has regular input into the community use of the Games facilities at Sport City.

His role in the SAZ sounds like standard sports development: “I started a load of new sports clubs, trained people as sports coaches, gave them lots of opportunities and skills in all sorts of sports. I think over the years I supported the set up of over 30 different sports clubs.” But setting up these sports clubs, the bread and butter of sports development officers, was anything but standard. “I was talking to someone who has just started in Stockport’s inner-city area and he has a target to set up three new clubs in a year. I said, ‘It’s a tough one that.’” His reasoning is surprising for anyone not immersed in the culture: “In inner-city areas you have to stay very involved in the club yourself for up to three or even five years because the skills don’t necessarily exist at a local level. I helped set up an angling club in East Manchester because all the youngsters were fishing in the canals and with it being £6 for a rod licence we wanted to get a club set up and get some support. It took me nearly five months to find three parents who could pass a credit check at the bank and be signatories on an account. There are always issues setting up clubs in inner-city areas that you won’t get elsewhere. Nobody is an accountant who can just do it and many don’t know their way round paperwork. You’ll often find people don’t have bank accounts and can’t take their passport to the bank to prove who they are because they don’t have a passport. Like I said difficulties like these crop up that you wouldn’t necessarily consider straight away.”

Dwan was successful in his role and, although the SAZ initiative ended nationally, in Manchester it continued: “The SAZ was funded for five years and then continued by the regeneration scheme because it was doing quite well but it was always going to end at some point. I didn’t want to go back to the leisure department so I set up a [www.theleisurereview.co.uk](http://www.theleisurereview.co.uk)



A new angle: taking sport to the people who want it where they want it

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social enterprise called Sport4Life, rented a disused shop unit in Moss Side and worked evenings and weekends on that for a year." Gradually Dwan grew Sport4Life into an eclectic provider of community-based coaching and events in and around Manchester, moving his base wherever he could find support in the shape of peppercorn rents for his growing business. Which is why he is now in Eccles, cheek by jowl with the iconic Lowry Centre, Manchester United's hypermarket of dreams and the Imperial War Museum North, all high-end real estate providing mainline sport, leisure or culture and an obvious contrast to the economic challenges that face both Dwan's customer base and similar communities throughout the country.

As Dwan was building his offer in the north very similar developments were happening in London, the Midlands and the north east. "As I was working in the New Deal community in East Manchester a number of other New Deal communities and other smaller management pathfinder projects in the North West, all government-funded, all spending money on sport, all willy-nilly, not very strategic. Some were not even working with the local leisure department or NGBs. So the Government Office for the North West and Sport England took on board the idea that they should have a network meeting. They did, it went quite well and they paid someone in Salford Council to look after that network. The name StreetGames just evolved from those regeneration areas networking together in the north west. The network got noticed by Sport England nationally and the Department of Culture, Media and Sport [DCMS] put some money into to develop the idea. Jane Ashworth [now the chief executive of StreetGames nationally] was seconded from Sport England into the DCMS and she came across the growing network and helped get the funding to move it on."

StreetGames records start at the back end of 2006 and was officially launched in January 2007. "It started bubbling in 2003 or 04 with people like me, Jane and Kerry McDonald [in the West Midlands] with a lot of support from Janet Matthewman at the Government Office and people who thought: 'We can set something up here that fits lots of gaps in provision and fits between the CSPs [county sports partnerships], the NGBs and the Youth Sport Trust.' Jane actually left Sport England and she, myself and Kerry spent a good six months working for nothing trying to get StreetGames set up."

The sacrifice, commitment and sheer hard work have paid off and StreetGames has grown in scope and in influence when it comes to developing sport in disadvantaged areas. However, to the outsider its raison d'être remains opaque. One thing is clear: it is not about money. "We don't make a big profit; it's not about that," says Dwan. Does he perceive StreetGames as part of Jennie Price's sports system? "Well, we have a national partnership with Sport England now. It was announced last year and every year the relationship gets better and better. As a youth sport voice, a youth sport deliverer, a youth sport networker, I think a lot of the mainstream partners are accepting StreetGames a lot more and starting to work with us more so we're working with a lot of NGBs, CSPs and local authorities."

Again, the building of partnerships is a major driver of the nation's sports development managers and one measure of StreetGames success is the way partners have changed their tune and are prepared to fit their offer to the network's way of working, notably the NGB sector. "We've made a lot of progress with some NGBs but we don't have the resources and time to go and meet with all of them so we measure success by influencing where they go, what they do and how they do it. Our partnership with Sport England is largely based on us doing this, providing the link needed to help mainstream sport connect with community-based activities in disadvantaged areas." So it seems that a key part of StreetGames role as an organisation is sharing expertise of what works well on the ground. "Yes, we even have a knowledge transfer manager now. The new contract with Sport England has certain targets and a lot of them are about knowledge transfer."

Now on a roll, Dwan looks at the benefit that involvement in StreetGames brings to his patch: "We have a national identity and there are only three boroughs in the north west now that StreetGames don't work with in some shape or form. This means that all of a sudden the community worker in Burnley has got an organisation that sees what he wants to do, where he's doing it and who he's doing it with, and we can help him as part of the national scheme. He can then get on the back of national scheme and pick and choose which opportunities to access, relationships with NGBs, funding support, promotional help or even impact evaluation."

Like any good development initiative, the somewhat vexed issue of monitoring and evaluation has been built in. It is clearly a key part of StreetGames but still, for many, one of the downsides of getting involved with Sport England who take "M and E" very seriously. Dwan smiles: "Well, we have to collect it but we try to collect it online in a very simple and easy way without being a real pain for people on the ground." For him the M and E system is a good example of where StreetGames adds value: "Take Wasim in Burnley. He inputs how many kids he's had on cheerleading, how many kids he's had on football, how many sessions he's run and so on and it generates reports, pie charts and graphs, which he can show his managers. So it becomes a funding tool for him, especially since you can also print off facts from our site, such as data on national trends and trends in Burnley on women and girls participation, and use those to help make your case. We provide lots of simple resources and advice as we can. For example, you can get on Grantnet free through us; we pay for that service for people."

So how widespread is the charity? "Nationally StreetGames is a network organisation of 111 projects – anything from a whole local authority leisure department down to one

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John Dwan (back row centre) shows why he lost out to Edwin van der Sar (back row left) for the Manchester United goalkeeping gig

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person wanting to set up one activity a week for local kids.” Dwan goes into detail: “The umbrella covers tenants associations, the local YMCA and all sorts of organisations, although we don’t go out recruiting as we simply don’t have time to go knocking on doors and saying, ‘Do you want to join in?’” More and more projects are beating a path to the StreetGames door and the unique selling point that attracts them is the concept of doorstep sport.

Dwan explains what this means: “It’s delivering what people want, where they want it, in a style that suits them as affordably as possible. For instance, why should someone have to travel four miles down the road to do something that they could do locally? And in the style they want to?” When Dwan was working in Moss Side he used a lot of the simplified versions of games developed by NGBs and looked to tackle the barriers around affiliation fees, coaching qualifications and the complex rules and regulations that frustrate both his customers and Dwan himself. “We facilitate our own tournaments and festivals, working with the NGBs. We do a Futsal event because Futsal is a youth culture thing – because of all the video games – and it has taken hold because it’s easier to play, because the ball doesn’t bounce. Even I can control it. But it gets quite complicated and there are two referees and lots of rules. We simplify it and say, ‘If you want to play 10-a-side or 20-a-side carry on.’ Like you would in the park. We don’t come in all officious and insist on these rules and a ten-minute warm-up and check your studs. We let them get on with it, with a bit of guidance.”

Despite this anarchic attitude to the niceties of mainstream sport, StreetGames does follow the manual in some areas, but only if the customer demands it. “We have a festival because people wanted a festival,” says Dwan when a comparison is made with the Youth Games movement. “In the north west it used to be just the ten New Deal areas who had said they wanted a celebration event. It doesn’t need to lead on to anything. We have one at Sport City now but it’s not as you would expect. For example, we play kwik cricket because it’s simple and we do it on a car park which we barrier off because that’s what they are used to. Sometimes it’s hard to get NGB cricket coaches to understand that’s how it works best for the kids who are playing.”

The North West festival gets about 1,200 young people so you only have to look at the numbers to see it that is a successful format. Dwan lists the reasons the festival succeeds: “It’s dead relaxed. You can’t bring club teams. It’s all about fun. There are winners and that’s because the young people and the workers wanted competition. The first year it was a participation-only event but they worked out themselves who won. Now it’s a proper competition and the mayors all come down and we do a presentation. It’s a proper job.”

The event takes place at Sport City, built for the 2002 Commonwealth Games and, with regional and national quality facilities on all sides, surely as mainstream and intimidating a venue as you could find. Not surprisingly Dwan has a different take: “I always remind myself about places like Sport City. I get blasé about them because I go all the time but to these young people it’s inspirational, it’s special. They’d never go normally. It’s a great atmosphere.” Again it is clear that the Dwan approach subverts the expectations of mainstream sport deliverers and consumers: “The NGBs help with delivery. England Athletics do the sports hall athletics, for example, but it’s not regimented. There is structure and all the health and safety stuff is boxed off, as is child protection, but the events themselves are run with a different ethos. The purpose is to go there for fun. We encourage parents to come and give them a wristband saying VIP – very important parent – on it, make them guests. We do the one-day festival at the end of the summer and the kids are recruited through all sorts of play projects and outreach work in parks and things like that, but not in sports clubs.” This again runs contrary to the perceived wisdom in sports development that you can’t do anything outside the school term.

John Dwan is an unlikely anarchist. He would probably deny the charge that he undermines the system but he cannot deny that he challenges accepted practice and, if it does not fit with what he or his customers require, changes it. His motivation for this assertive attitude is perhaps best shown in the case studies from the volunteering project on the StreetGames website. One story, of a girl called Dani, tells of a young person “on a bad path” and pregnant at 16 who, through a StreetGames project in Gloucester, found purpose and support, became a qualified coach and now runs her own club with 75 youngsters attending weekly. Dani is quoted as saying: “When you tell people you left school at 14, they assume you’re not bright. That’s not true at all. I am responsible for all the club paperwork, grant applications and budgeting. I like doing it – it gives you a sense of ‘yeah, I did that.’ Lots of people have had a go at me in the past, said I wouldn’t do much. Well, they were wrong.” As Dwan proudly states, the volunteering project, backed by the Co-operative and V, helps the 16- to 25-year-olds who need help: “Not university students, not the white middle class.”

The temptation is to view John Dwan as a one-off, a maverick with a disdain for the mainstream and a determination to go it alone but in StreetGames he is part of a nationwide network of people just like him. From Sunderland to the Scilly Isles, often under the radar of mainstream providers, 110 other projects are using, possibly even abusing, sport to improve the life outcomes of young people. Jennie Price has had the sense to include them in her sports system and the governing bodies of sport are finding a way to work with them. How long will it be before the StreetGames way is the mainstream of sport and the uniformly clad, regulation-bound, old boys’ network-driven anachronisms that currently represent sport in the nation’s consciousness are forced under the radar?

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