



## Compassion and cultural change: Mental health, community and elite sports

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### Abstract

This discussion explores ways that compassion can contribute to transforming elite sport culture – where Individualism, performance pressures and emotional detachment all feature. The poignant friendship Jermain Defoe developed with young fan Bradley Lowery aligned with the community focused management of Wrexham AFC owners Ryan Reynolds and Rob McElhenney, offer selected examples of how vulnerability and connection can promote wellbeing in communities. Drawing on *Compassion Focused Therapy*, the discussion suggests a need for cultural change. Emotional sensitivity is not only possible but essential to protect vulnerability and maintain the mental health of athletes and their families. While writing this article, news came of Joey Jones' death - his legacy is an important thread in building a culture of dignity in elite sports and the revival of Wrexham football club and community.

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### Introduction

Looking out for ourselves isn't necessarily a bad thing. In fact, it can be a protection against emotional ill-health - particularly in elite sports where pressures to succeed can be relentless. Yet, stigma and shame can compromise mental health in high performance environments, impacting not only athletes but families, friends and colleagues.

A better understanding of athletes' mental ill-health in sporting cultures, could contribute to improving wellbeing and enhancing performance. Examples of good practice could also be passed on to supporters who make up communities.

### Stigma, shame and isolation in elite sports

Shame is considered a major contributor to athletes failing to report difficulties or access health services because of a desire to conceal emotional struggles. Similarly, stigma is often a salient factor when accurately identifying depression. In view of the fact that there are often undesirable associations with weakness and failing, symptoms of illness are often not reported to friends, family members, teammates or governing bodies. Shame encourages a person to hide - sometimes in subtle ways [2].

The emotional distancing, though intended to protect, frequently results in further isolation and is typically referred to as a *double bind - damned if you speak about distress but damned if you don't* - there is no good outcome.

*Courtesy stigma* also occurs, when people are labelled by their links to others who are stigmatized and can equally prove damaging to mental health. While struggling with emotional concerns, an athlete might experience distance from *others* and this is a documented concern for athletes who fall ill. A deepening sense of separation can erode support networks, vital to recovery

It is, unfortunately, a common coping mechanism in social and professional groups, and is much like saying '*I am not like you and this cannot happen to me*'. Yet, an athlete can feel greater isolation, as they are left to struggle with troubled thoughts and emotions without a trusted support network. This is a no-win and trapping situation as it is often followed by strong feelings of guilt and remorse by others, particularly when circumstances worsen.

### Compassion: A pathway to recovery

British psychologist, Paul Gilbert, has written extensively about the impact of stigma and shame. He developed *Compassion Focused Therapy* (CFT). This is a method of psychotherapy designed to combat internal attacks and self-blame - often associated with mental ill-health and particularly shame [1].

Gilbert suggests cultivating a more compassionate stance to oneself and others offers a way of healing from psychological wounds - basically, reducing emotional vulnerability through *self-soothing* - as opposed to achievement.

### Jermain defoe and the power of compassion

Gilbert's ideas are not only for formal psychotherapy - but are potentially influential in everyday life. Athletes, immersed in performance cultures, might consider themselves worthy of more sensitive consideration. *Kindness* is not *weakness* but a legitimate human need. The example set by footballer Jermain Defoe, reminds us all of the strength found in kindness in providing an important sense of unity.

His friendship with Bradley Lowery, a young boy undergoing treatment for cancer, moved everyone throughout the football world. It was a profound moment of kindness and connection. Jermain Defoe demonstrated that sport has the power to bring communities together, modelling the best of humanity.

Defoe demonstrated a counter-narrative to the image of elite sport as self-serving and emotionally detached. The value gained for everyone, in terms of psychological health, fosters a collective spirit, enhancing team performance but also community wellbeing.

### Wrexham AFC: Changing culture through care and creativity

Wrexham football club, under the ownership of Ryan Reynolds and Rob McElhenney, provide us with another example of how compassion and creativity can change the culture of communities - diminishing stigma and shame. Their approach to football has not been defined by corporate ambition and exclusivity, but by encouraging a strong community identity, altruism, and a genuine connection with local enterprise. Both have also actively supported players to develop an identity separate to their public persona - recognizing the potentially all-consuming nature of elite sports.

From the start of the venture, the owners showed respect for the history of the football club, its links with Welsh miners, its culture and past - modelling, often in amusing and self-deprecating ways, vulnerability as strength. Their business model is built on *feel good* - and it works. Ryan Reynolds and Rob McElhenney have not only given Wrexham a new sense of cultural pride but a *permission to play*. Humour, creativity, and vulnerability have overtaken an arguably, once restrictive culture re-kindling, a responsible yet adventurous sense of belonging to something worthwhile.

Wrexham's community have responded with an upswell of good feelings, a renewed identity and creative enterprise beyond the football club. Their investment in the development of Wrexham's community has revived and renewed both the club and community. Feeling valued and supported are antidotes to the corrosive and stagnating effects of stigma and shame.

### Caveats and risks

Of course there are possible downsides, in that the football

club and community are at risk of becoming commercial brands - both the story and identity, no longer belonging to *'the town'* but a commodity and a product of Hollywood storytelling (exceptional though it is). Crafted for a global audience, Wrexham's current prominence could ultimately alienate the community from its working-class cultural roots and established infrastructure. Similarly, the present owners' withdrawal could result in an entirely different approach to stewardship. For the moment however, the benefits of regeneration outweigh all considerations for the prospect of future difficulties.

### Cultural change: Aspirational not impossible - but with accountability

Finally, a further word of caution. Environments that value resilience and competition above all else, could view kindness as softness and incompatible with winning at all costs. It can be overlooked, misunderstood, exploited or replaces clarity and fairness in decision-making. There are also dangers concerned with mental health advocacy, and wellbeing initiatives that operate outside of professional standards, regulatory clarity, and accountability.

Nonetheless, moving beyond individualistic values that often prevail in elite sports, can contribute to environments where vulnerability is acknowledged and compassion and support are not only permitted but encouraged.

There are many examples of athletes contributing to community wellbeing outside of the scope of this discussion. Subsequently, sporting, performance cultures, and press reporting should, wherever possible, avoid negative media stereotypes, contributing to stigma or avoid shaming athletes when in difficulty, but foster a more compassionate and encouraging stance to recovery.

Jermain Defoe, Ryan Reynolds, and Rob McElhenney have shown clearly that leading with our hearts does not imply weakness - if applied thoughtfully and sensibly, it can be a powerful force for constructive and creative change.

### Post-script

**Joey jones:** At this time of cultural renewal for Wrexham, it seems especially poignant to acknowledge the recent death of Joey Jones. Joey was a Welsh football icon - beloved by the town. His strength as a footballer and loyalty and humility as a man - long embodied values, currently reawakened in Wrexham. His commitment extended beyond Wrexham football club, grounding and coaching younger players whenever and wherever he was asked to do so. Joey's commitment to Wrexham football club and the community forged a spirit of unity, and continues to influence the town and club's revival. He reminded each of us in Wrexham, that small gestures of kindness and fraternity are as important as European trophies or sporting celebrity status. Joey was able to blend both with apparent ease.

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