

# Clubs play the community card

**Paul McManus** of design firm bluegoose provides this in-depth look at how clubs and their partners in professional football and rugby union face the challenge of sustaining community relations whilst meeting marketing objectives.

It's a cold, grey Saturday afternoon in January 1982. It's damp. You're standing outside the football ground and there are certain images you are going to remember in 20 years' time: stone-washed drainpipes; long hair like that bloke in Human League; the milling crowds; the buzz of anticipation; a sense of high-flying elation closely followed by down-the-plughole doom; a burger stall burning the onions; steaming old blokes moaning about long hair and pop bands, recalling better days on the park – 'used to win things back then'; half-time – a geezer shouts over a crackling speaker, like Mecca at lunchtime, entreating you to buy a ticket for a kiddies' charity; you can't quite make out what the prize is but you're stuck in the hot dog queue anyway so why bother? So, that's the community bit over with – time to get back to the game.

Now you're back in 2002. Those twenty years have passed and while the outside world is a totally different place, the hot dog queue is still there. You can still go and see Human League belting them out but that bloke has had a haircut. The emotions before kick-off are about the same and so are the onions. But the community bit – now there's a story...

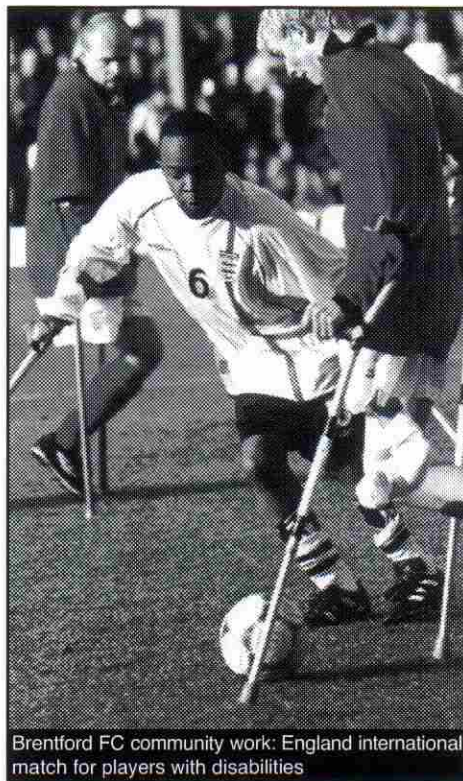
## Football in the Community

A bit of background here I think. Football in the Community schemes were first mooted in the mid-1970s as a counter-measure to the effects of soccer hooliganism. The urgency to improve club-community relations has resulted in phenomenal growth over the last 10 years. The marketing of a range of schemes and initiatives has increasingly been seen as a key part of the consumer marketing strategy of most clubs.

Overall, the aims of clubs are now generally similar: to involve young people in a variety of football-based activities; to create dialogue between the club and local people; to build PR, club profile and links with the community through coaching courses and educational projects with a strong social emphasis. Can clubs, the objective of which is profitability, keep supporters, players and the community happy at the same time?

Many big name clubs have a real community focus: Sunderland, Leeds, Newcastle, Liverpool. Stars in the firmament. Others that you may expect to be dominating the 'good ideas' league fall short on results.

Then there are the 'hard-grafters': clubs in the process of developing activities, gearing-up and really stretching their community limbs. Take Derby County for example, currently in the process of launching their new *Derby County Football in the Community* scheme. Richard Clifford, business development manager at the club, says: "As well as significantly increasing its activities within the schools, the scheme will also target its talents and resources towards areas of deprivation such as the Derwent NDC Scheme". Premier League sponsor Barclaycard is contributing to the new scheme, as is McDonald's and The Midlands Co-op.



Brentford FC community work: England international match for players with disabilities

Ipswich Town is also developing new concepts with sponsorship from McDonald's (there they are again – keep a note) to finance a Coaching Centre Network. It also runs highly successful *Playing for Success* and *Positive Futures* schemes. The club, linked with Suffolk County Council and local authorities, targets children with problems such as drug abuse and petty crime; the management team is looking to market the scheme to local and national businesses. It is interesting to note that the club's current main sponsor, TXU Energi, began its relationship with the club at the community scheme level. Their experiences were clearly positive

enough to progress to the highest profile brand placement of all.

Aston Villa has created many interesting community-based events, including the *Girl's Football Initiative* supported by McDonald's (you were expecting that, weren't you?) and attracting thousands of children to the coaching sessions. However, teams in the lower divisions have to work harder to maintain strong community links; success here relies on even greater innovation and support from business.

## Working it at the lower levels

Sleeping giant Wolverhampton Wanderers is currently developing a relatively small community department, headed-up by Andy Morgan. Previously at Stoke City, he worked on the *Street Sports Initiative*, utilising a partnership with the local police and their mobile floodlighting systems for after-school sports. Wolves has a similar Twilight & Midnight League supported by Birmingham Midshires: four sites in Wolverhampton focusing on deprived areas and targeting 35,000 children in 250 primary and secondary schools.

Brentford FC has two good examples of large companies backing grass roots sport running at present. Property developer St George plc has backed a schools coaching programme which will enable Brentford FC to provide free coaching for 10,000 children at 150 schools in the next year; it forms the cornerstone of football development for the catchment area of the football club. For St George, a big employer in the locality, the involvement reflects its strategy of working for the local community. In partnership with the ill-fated Railtrack, which has a national involvement in community schemes, the club will also operate a programme in Feltham this Easter to provide positive experiences through football. The aim is to reduce vandalism on the railway lines in Feltham, which has one of the worst incident rates in the UK.

Railtrack recognises the power football has to make the young listen. Many children and youths are seriously hurt or killed each year as a result of playing on the railways and by linking up with clubs it has a vehicle to highlight the dangers, offer solutions in out-of-school play, combined with free match tickets. For Railtrack, using football to get the message across means making a difference to society and improves business practice.



Brentford community development officer Lee Doyle states: "We offer excellent year round exposure to sponsors, combining events and festivals with schools football and coaching work. The Brentford *Football in the Community* programme has strong brand values associated with quality, reliability and the family". Oh, and the club also has a family enclosure sponsored and supported by... you guessed it.

### The ubiquitous McExperience

Since its first involvement in Premier League football in 1995, McDonald's has invested £10.36m in the sport. This money has helped establish family stands, junior supporters and coaching schemes, staff support and resources to involve a total of over 500,000 children. So what does it get back in return?

With football increasingly viewed as a sport involving the whole family, it makes perfect sense for McDonald's to become part of it. The company offers benefits to the local community but equally important, says McDonald's community affairs and education manager Stephen Hall, are the benefits to its staff.

"As the national sport it has an obvious relevance to staff – they can relate to it and are encouraged to get involved in activities themselves," says Hall. "They are usually local people, living and working in the community that has ties with a particular club.

"Whether they actually support the team or not, it offers employees a chance to do something relevant to them and their families."

McDonald's employees spend over 3,000 hours organising special events for children at football venues every season. The eventual aim is for all 1,150 UK restaurants to support a local youth or school football team. Even on this scale of corporate participation, the overall level of branding is relatively low-key; individual local managers and franchises have a great deal of flexibility to make decisions as there are no hard and fast guidelines on if and how the Golden Arches should be used.

McDonald's seems very much aware of the sensitivities surrounding sponsorship issues and children and moreover brand profile is not a driving force. It may be a well-worn concept, but 'to be seen to be putting something back without taking much away in return' is a sentiment expressed at McDonald's and at other big name community partners alike. To be involved at the grass roots level is the common theme, where new ideas and partnerships flourish and the focus is on being active and working for a common interest.

### The rugby approach

So what about rugby? Since the advent of professionalism in the sport, the RFU at Twickenham has shown itself to be a creative thinker when it comes to getting out there and banging the drum. It has just launched SEE U @ RUGB as a joint venture with long time sponsor and partner Royal & SunAlliance. It's a three-year programme described by Andrew Schoular of the RFU as a "ground-breaking sponsorship initiative aimed at attracting young players to the game from inner-city areas of social deprivation".

Activities include the introduction of a floodlit league in Manchester's Moss Side district where RFU development officers will provide coaching and establish links with local clubs to generate and encourage a pool of talent. It's about getting rugby back into the cities, developing a lifelong participation with opportunities to play and experience the game.

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What of Royal & SunAlliance? "We were keen to support an initiative that fitted our community investment programme of providing opportunities for all young people to participate in sport" says Duncan Boyle, MD UK Commercial. It already runs, alongside Sport for England, the R&SA Panathlon Challenge – a multi-sport challenge event aimed at inner-city schools. It also hosts an annual awards scheme in conjunction with the Youth Sports Trust. For R&SA, says UK marketing services manager John Hymers, it's "a focus on grass roots in sport; it's about profile, exposing the name and opportunities for developing the brand". That is the fundamental reason why it views £250,000 a year over the next three years, linked to an involvement with England Youth Rugby, as money well invested.

At club level, Saracens has one of the most advanced community structures in any sport – the Saracens Foundation – a registered charity with clear objectives to enhance the lives of young people through sport. This status offers the club a certain gravitas when dealing with potential business partners.

Saracens MD Tim Lawler describes its activities as having "energy, expertise and enthusiasm all rolled into one to create a platform from which Saracens' community activities can further benefit the young people of the region". Partners include Save & Prosper, ntl and Duck Tape. More recently, the club has launched the *Sport for Life* initiative, which gives adults 16 years+ a chance to develop exercise programmes and fitness skills through the use of the latest techniques and best practices. The initiative is a joint venture with Oaklands College, St Albans. It came about, says community team member Simon Ward, as a reaction to people contacting the club saying 'we want to do what the players do' in terms of training techniques.

### Creating communities

So what conclusions can we draw from this kind of marketing activity? Why does the 'community bit' now seem so important? Sports clubs are basically providing people with the chance to belong to a non-traditional community. We all like to feel we 'belong' and this puts a new emphasis on how businesses need to target their audiences.

For businesses, marketing should no longer rely on targeting an audience with no other common interest than their purchasing habits. They need to use their brand as a focus, a sense of belonging to an audience with a shared set of common values and interests. As society develops, people's lives and consumers' buying patterns change. A business that is closely involved with its community has more stability – it can anticipate change and react quickly to customer needs.

In addition, a shared sense of values and common support quickly develops into a powerful influence to keep individuals as part of that group – breaking these bonds means leaving friends, colleagues and memories. If the brand is tied up with this emotional experience it makes its disposal more difficult. Football and rugby clubs are emotional brands and an association allows for closer bonding and customer loyalty.

For the clubs, a constant investment in the future health of the sport at youth and school level is essential. A healthy grass roots base supports the pinnacle of any sport. For now, we can look back over the past 20 years and say that paradoxically soccer hooliganism has had a beneficial effect on sport and how it markets itself. Clubs and businesses have awoken to smell the onions. ■

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