

Sporting

Can our sporting past affect our present lives? Mick Cooper reflects on his childhood.

As the ball came flying towards me I lifted up my foot to make contact... Goal! Goal! Goal! Goal! Goal!

Eddie pelted down the right wing of the football field. I ran down the middle. 'Pass! Paaasss!' I yelled at him, 'paaasss the bloody ball.' He didn't hear me and carried on charging down the right flank. A defender ran towards him. Eddie dribbled past and kept going.

I waved my arms about in desperation. 'Centre! Centre!' I shouted. Eddie looked across and saw me. Another defender ran towards him. The goalkeeper came off his line and sprinted towards Eddie. By now I was about ten yards in front of an empty goal mouth. 'Paaaaasssss!!!' I screamed. As the defender reached Eddie, he looked up and kicked the ball to me.

I watched it sailing over. I was terrified. I had to score. This was no ordinary match. It was the semi-finals of the Haringey Junior School Cup. And these were no ordinary opposition. They were St. Alban's Junior School, the best team in the league, the team who had beaten us eight-nil just a few weeks earlier.

As the ball came flying towards me I lifted up my foot to make contact...

GOAL!

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I jumped up. I hugged Eddie. I ran up and down the field. It was one of the most special moments of my life.

So why is it that fifteen years later, sat around in men's group after men's group, I've yet to mention it. I've talked about my relationship with my parents. I've talked about playing cowboys and indians. I've talked about my first grope in the dark. But it seems that I've forgotten about my goal against St Alban's. I've forgotten about my glorious days on the football pitch. I've forgotten about sport. And in doing so I'm beginning to realise that I've forgotten about a vast chunk of my youth. Because when I think back to the real issues of my childhood—as opposed to the ones that the psychotherapeutic models tell us are important—I can see that sports were a major concern of mine. Much of the day I spent either playing sports, reading about them, or watching them on TV. And I suspect that even if my mother was telling me she wanted to marry me and my dad was standing over my genitals with a carving knife, I would have still told them to get out of the way so that I could watch *The Big Match* (Freudian joke!).

But why is it important to think back to our childhood? One reason is that by looking to our past, we can begin to detect 'patterns' of behaviour or feelings that have been consistent throughout our lives. By bringing these patterns into awareness, we can ask ourselves if we want to change them.

The experience of scoring against St. Alban's and the experience of writing this article reveal one pattern to me immediately—I'm one of life's 'goal hangers'. Boy! The struggle I had writing this article. I didn't want to do the hard graft, I didn't want to interview people or research thoroughly, I just wanted to say 'Hey Presto!' to my computer and score a winning piece of work—something everyone would

congratulate me for. It's just like the 'me' standing in front of that goal, waiting for the ball to come over. I always hated spending a whole match chasing around for a ball. All I cared about was scoring.

As well as attitude, there's also a striking parallel between the position I played in the school team and the position that I often find myself in when I'm in groups. I was a left winger, which meant that I played right on the edge of the pitch, often out of the action for many minutes at a time, but always ready to get involved when the time was right. That's the position I frequently find myself gravitating to in groups. I like to be on the edge of things. Too near the centre and I feel claustrophobic and overwhelmed. Too far away and I feel isolated. I like to have the freedom to move in and out as I choose.

And, as a left winger, I was also very keen on moving forward. Picking up the ball in my own half, I'd run screaming down the left wing, taking the rest of my team with me and creating all sorts of havoc for the opposition's defenders. Forward motion is also a characteristic of my behaviour in groups. I get passionately frustrated if I feel that things aren't moving quickly enough. I always want to get on with things, to move into new territory. And when I feel that things are getting boring I tend to stir the group up in the hope that a bit of conflict and chaos will move us on. Not surprisingly, I often get accused of 'steam-rolling', of trampling over other people's needs. I suppose that in groups you get people who take on the role of defenders and mid-fielders—who want to go at slower or more modified paces. As an attacker, I've never given defenders much credit, except as the opposition to be broken through. Maybe it's time I started learning to value the defenders who are on the same side as me.

A number of men that I've spoken to can also see clear parallels between their sporting past and their present experiences. A friend Paul, for instance, was the sort of boy who wasn't a great footballer, but who was easy going and could co-ordinate a team. Paul always ended up being captain, however reluctantly. These days, Paul takes on exactly the same roles in groups or organisations—as coordinator, secretary and general person-who-holds-everything-together. He comes in, not with brilliant skills or anything, but before long he's right in the centre, running the show.

But what creates these parallels? The simplest answer is that both our past sporting experiences and our present reality are created by underlying personality characteristics. If I'm the sort of person who likes to be on the edge of things then I'm going to move towards that position whether it's in my junior school football team or in a group therapy session.

But if, as men, our sporting experiences play such a major part in our childhood, it may be that they don't just reflect underlying personality characteristics, they actually serve to *create* them. Maybe the fact that I gravitate towards outside positions in

Identities

groups is a consequence rather than a corollary of playing left winger in my school teams.

Within some form of sport's team lies most males' first experience of an interdependent group. The relationship with parents and teachers is usually a hierarchical one. The relationship with school friends is normally one of 'I want,' but the sports team is a 'group', each person has their own responsibility to both themselves and to the others in the team, there is no longer anyone telling them what to do. And as such, the team is the prototypical setting for every man's later group experiences, whether it's working in a collective, living in a house, or being in a men's group. A man whose first group experience is as leader may well stick to that role, simply because it's what he knows best. On the other hand, a man whose first experience of a group is to be shunted to the peripheries, may approach each group later in his life with a certain fear and wariness.

Of course, many of us were never in school teams, but even them, our sporting abilities could still have played a crucial role in our developing sense of who we were. I was popular at school long before playing for the school team: liked by the teachers, admired by the other boys and 'chased

after' by the girls. Part of the reason for that must have been that I was the best football player in our playground. It gave me status. I always got to be a 'captain'. Everyone wanted to be my friend so that I'd be on their side during the playground football matches. And I don't doubt that being treated in such a special way at such an early age left me with a permanent sense of myself as someone talented, someone who can achieve, and as someone who is special. Arrogant though it may be, in many ways I still hold onto that sense of superiority and specialness.

In my experience of school, boys who were good at sports were nearly always treated with a high degree of respect. I remember a rather goofy-looking boy in our German class called Henry. Whilst the teacher was teaching us the differences between *der*, *die*, and *das*, most of my time was spent sticking my compass into Henry's backside. Then it transpired that Henry was a genius on the cricket pitch. As soon as I discovered that my compass went back in its stationary set. I began to talk to Henry more carefully. I admired him, I wanted to be his friend. From being the class fool, Henry was transformed into one of the 'lads'.

Unfortunately for me, my experience of being

Christina Moore



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By looking to our past, we can begin to detect 'patterns' of behaviour



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respected for my sporting prowess didn't last forever. As I got older, I got fatter. And as I got fatter, I got slower. My position on the left wing required a degree of speed and agility, and the larger I became, the more difficult it was for me to involve myself in the game. I spent longer and longer times on the wing just waiting for someone to pass the ball to me. Eventually, one day, the coach called me aside and told me that I was dropped from the school team. I was devastated.

Worse than that, the moment I was kicked off the football team, the respect I had once earned turned into contempt. For instance, every Tuesday and Thursday I would meet my teammates outside the school refectory to walk down to the playing fields. One day, soon after being dropped, I went to meet them and found them strangely cold and unwelcoming. One of them, Nick, asked me if I could run down to the other end of the school building and find someone. I did, and when I got back I just caught sight of them running round the corner and off to the fields without me. They'd tricked me, and it was a dirty trick at that. I felt hurt, isolated, alone and unloved.

Here, through sport, I was learning that I wasn't infallible, that the specialness I felt because of my sporting prowess was a precarious state of existence. But in many ways I was very lucky, because for some men, a sense of failure and rejection was all they ever gleaned from their sporting childhood.

In my school, these were the 'cripples', the 'specky-four eyes', the 'fatties'. These were the boys who were teased relentlessly by teachers and fellow pupils alike for their lack of sporting abilities. They were humiliated by being picked last in the team line-ups. They were shouted at when they mis-kicked the ball. They were punished for trying to avoid the sports lessons but punished even more when they did turn up to play. And I wonder how much impact all those years of abuse must of had on these boys. Are the unassertive, 'nerdy' men of today the sporting 'spazzies' of yesterday? Surely that much criticism must have had some permanent effect on a boy's self-confidence?

Fortunately for me, I didn't have to taste sporting failure for too long. Two seasons after being dropped I was back in the football team. Sooner or later, the message sunk in that I had to involve myself more with the match, and when I changed position from left wing to left half during the sports period sessions I was forced to participate in the game. Everyone noticed I was getting better, and the same people who had turned their back on me when I was dropped from the team were suddenly applauding my new-found skills. It felt good to be welcomed again, and I was brought back into the team with many a hearty pat on the back and lots of support.

But the night before my big come-back I got out of my head. I could hardly walk that evening, and the next day I was still floating on another planet. I figured that I'd be taken off the pitch the minute the coach realised that I was in cloud cuckoo land, but as it turned out I played the best game of my life. The drugs must have made me totally fearless, because I plummeted in to every tackle, dived for every ball, and ran like a headless chicken throughout the match—so much for drugs and sport! The highlight came when, inanely wandering around the opponent's goal mouth, I managed to head in a goal. I was the hero of the day.

But by then I didn't care too much about football. I'd long since given up sitting through the Saturday afternoon results. Other things mattered—like girls, parties, and music. But I wonder if by then the damage had been done. That the party-er I became was simply an extension of the footballer I was. And I also wonder whether the man I am now—for all my right-on credentials—is just another extension of that little boy running around the football field.

If it is, I've got a lot to thank my left foot for. But it also leaves me with an uneasy feeling about all the men who left the school sports field with feelings of guilt, failure and shame. Maybe we need to be more vigilant about the way sports are taught in schools. It would be nice to make sure that the only baggage children leave the sports field with is their football kit. ♦

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