

Ep.4 Let's Go Further: Football and life goals: great match!

What role can sport and exercise play in helping learners to reach their potential?

In this episode of Let's Go Further, we hear from Damian Butters, Sports Course Coordinator at Shipley College, whose Ability Counts football team won their regional league earlier this year. Ability Counts football brings together individuals from a variety of backgrounds, giving those with disabilities or learning difficulties the chance to express their talents and be part of a team.

Listen as Damian shares how the team has boosted his learners' self-esteem, developed their life skills, and benefited their studies. Whether you're a sports fan or not, this episode is sure to put a smile on your face.

Transcript

Joe Mcloughlin 0:01

Welcome to Let's Go Further, a podcast that shines a light on the role of further education in transforming people's lives. In this first series we are talking with learners, teachers, business people and professors about why further education matters to them. I'm your host Joe Mcloughlin, Foundation Manager at the Skills and Education Group, an organisation that champions the further education and skills sector. In this episode, we're joined by Damian Butters, Sports Course Coordinator for Level One at Shipley College. Earlier this year, Damian coached the Shipley College Ability Counts football team to victory in the Yorkshire and Humber Ability Counts League. Off the back of this success, I sat down to talk to him about the power of sport as an educational tool, the benefits it offers students physically, mentally and socially, and what it can ultimately do to help improve learner life prospects. Hi, Damian, how are you?

Damian Butters 0:54

Yeah, I'm really good.

Joe Mcloughlin 0:56

I just wanted to start by asking if you could introduce yourself a little. Tell us about your role and kind of what a normal week looks like for you.

Damian Butters 1:03

I've been teaching at Shipley College for about 17 years now. I live in Barnsley, but I travel over to Shipley or travel over to Bradford every day, just because I believe so much in terms of what we do at Shipley College, our department is called the Foundation Learning Department, which is part of the Essential Skills. And we have a whole range of courses from Entry Two, Entry Three and Level One, I have one job where I look after the Entry Two learners who have got moderate learning difficulties. And I also look after the Level One learners who again have got some mild learning difficulties or just need support with their English and maths. And yeah every day is inspiring, really, it's an amazing place to work. It's a beautiful setting. And the key thing that makes the job so wonderful is just watching the progression of the learners.

Joe Mcloughlin 1:51

As part of your role kind of I know that you coach the Ability Counts football team, I just wonder if you could start by telling me a little bit more about that team, what makes it so different or so special?

Damian Butters 2:00

The reason it is so special is when I first came to Shipley College, we didn't have an Ability Counts football team, we had a Level Two and a Level Three sports team, but we didn't have one for students with learning difficulties. So when I came in to the college, I expressed an interest in setting something like this up, a football team up, and the college were really supportive. They allowed me to do that. And then I made contact with Leeds City College and Laura Danskin was the person who was in charge of AoC then for Ability Counts, and then she helped to set up a league. So at the beginning, it was just two teams, it was just us and Leeds City College who started it off. And then as the years developed, it's got stronger and stronger and now, teams now go to the National Championships, which happens every year at Nottingham University. And the winners from each region go there and play in a national tournament. And it is...for the students it's just life changing. It's just an amazing experience.

Joe Mcloughlin 2:55

And how have you gone at the National Championships in recent years?

Damian Butters 2:58

We've done really well over the recent years, we've finished runners up, and also what we've done, actually, one year, we actually won the National Championships as well, which is brilliant. But although it's amazing to win, of

course, it's fantastic to win. It's a learning experience and the life experience that learners get from going to National Championships because they have to spend they spend a weekend away. So we stay, we stay in the university halls. And it's just that whole kind of fostering team experience that they get from the event, some of my learners have never been outside Bradford so for them to go to a National Championship and be among elite athletes. It is amazing. Some of the students, ex-students who have actually gone to National Championships, I still see them now. And they say it was one of the best days of their life or the best weekend of their life. So it makes a massive difference to these learners that they can actually take part in such a prestigious event. It's amazing.

Joe Mcloughlin 3:51

And this sort of has much longer lasting impact, right? It's not just about the trophy or the medal, it's a kind of it plays out for the rest of the rest of their lives almost.

Damian Butters 4:02

It does and it's about because obviously I'm at the start of the journey again for kind of 22/23 academic year. And it's a massive learning curve for the learners because sport is a fantastic way to help all learners, from those learners who haven't got much confidence or self esteem from non learners who need some structure, or in a sense need a carrot dangling. So a lot of my learners some of my learners have quite challenging behaviour, especially in the Level One group, and sport and football is a brilliant way to keep them focused and give them that drive which then helps them in their academic in the maths and the English. Because it gives them that sense that because they want to be part of the football team so much it allows them to stress the importance of academic as well. So the sport and the academic they realise that it's linked and if you do well in the studies, then that means they'll do well in sport. So we stress a real importance on that and that relationship really works for me as a course coordinator. If a learner's attendance for example is not good, we can talk about the importance if you want to come to football, you've got to improve your attendance and it's a massive incentive for our learners, especially the ones who like football and it works really well. It works really well we have a big success with that.

Joe Mcloughlin 5:13

And so what is it then do you think about the sport that's more accessible say than the academic side of things?

Damian Butters 5:20

Some of our learners, for example, who really struggle with maths and English, it is a real challenge for them. And among their peers, sometimes they lose their confidence. However, when they play sport, a lot of my learners struggle at English and maths, but are really good at sport are really, really good at sport, and it's their then chance to shine, it's their chance then to lead. And that's why it's fantastic. So in terms of my football team, last year, we took two students who were visually impaired, I took one learner who was blind, and we played football, we had two students who were deaf, who played as part of the football team so all the other learners, in order to communicate, we all learnt some simple signs. So when we're on the football pitch, we could sign with each other. So as the manager stood on the side-line, watching my learners sign, with the other learner in order to communicate what they wanted from the football match is just fantastic. And he was captain, Bilal, that was the student's name. And he was captain. And also, which is really wonderful, was that we went to the National Cup last year in Tamworth, and we met with Blackburn College and Blackburn College had three deaf learners. And they looked at Bilal like because Bilal was really good at football. So they looked at Bilal almost like a bit of a superstar and what they loved that Bilal obviously was deaf and they were signing with me. So now we've made connections with Blackburn College, and we're going to see them this year, and we're going to go and visit their college and they're going to come to our college, and we're going to have a little sports day. So it's those connections that you make. We've got really good links with Leeds City College really good links with Bishop Burton. And it's these little links that Ability Counts brings...football and the Ability Counts just gives learners confidence, it gives them teamwork, it fosters a family spirit that sometimes some of our learners haven't experienced before. And coming to college gives them that experience, it gives them that sense of belonging, and just makes them proud. It just makes them proud. And they don't sometimes it's not about the score. It's not about how many goals they score. It's not about the result. It's just about being part of a team and going through an experience together and helping each other. That's the key thing.

Joe Mcloughlin 7:30

And just recognising the value of, you know, you working for somebody, but somebody else working for you.

Damian Butters 7:35

Yeah, an example is, each week in training, I choose a leader of the day. So we have a couple of leaders a day and what they do, they have to wear blue bibs. And then during the drills and different exercises, they are the leaders so they

take the drills, and they support the other learners. And it's not just the same people who are chosen every week, everyone in the team gets an opportunity to be the leader. And what's amazing about that, for me is that sometimes some learners step forward who are then the leader, and they display leadership skills that just go "Wow, where did that come from?" because a lot of these learners in class are very quiet and find it really hard to communicate, but in the sports hall, because they're good at football and they feel safe and they have that family atmosphere, they feel safe to kind of express their true talents and their true skills really, and it is like amazing to see. It's just fantastic to see.

Joe Mcloughlin 8:27

I mean, so for me like what's interesting about your description of kind of the impact that football teams had on your learners is that they're developing these key skills, right, that will doubtless help in life.

Damian Butters 8:38

Absolutely. So if I can give you I can give you a couple of examples. We've got some learners last year who were part of my football team. And they were doing a course called aims. And it's next steps. And this course is a work based learning course. So I had probably about three or four students who were on that course, who were a part of my football team. And what my football team did was it gave them the confidence when they were in the workplace to ask questions. And when they're in the workplace, and they were talking about leadership skills and about using their initiative, and about communicating. When we were in the sport session, I was talking I was giving examples, for example, in the training going now if you were in your workplace, how would you solve this problem? So I gave them a little football scenario and go right what we're going to do, and those skills, those transferable skills, they've now taken on, so the learners who were with me this year have now actually left the college but what they've actually done now is they've gone to a thing called Project Search. And they're actually now working in different placements, but I know that football has had a big impact on that to give them that confidence to actually go out there in the workplace. Obviously, the course was amazing as well, which really, really helped, but I think football also was a key part of that.

Joe Mcloughlin 9:50

Yeah, it's great and I think it works across it works across qualifications, right. So it doesn't matter what you're studying.

Damian Butters 9:57

Absolutely. So to give you an example in terms of how it works across the board. In my team, I had last year I had some students at Entry Two, some

students at Level Three, some students that...sorry, Entry Three, some students at Level One and some students at Level Three. And all of these students all came together and mixed and communicated and worked really well. So yeah, just for my Entry Two students just for them to play football with the higher level learners it meant so much to them. And not just in the gym as well. During dinner times and break times they would stay together as well and they would say hello to each other in the corridor and in the street. And I can't tell you as a tutor, you're constantly trying to build the learners' self-esteem and give them confidence and...but in the end, peer recognition is the most powerful tool we have really. And for a Level Three student to walk past one of my Entry Two students and go "Oh how's it going on Hamid, how you doing? How are you doing? Did you watch the match last night?" Just that interaction means everything to my Entry Two student because he's getting recognition he's being accepted. That's one of the key things of the Ability Counts football team, it brings people together from different areas and different groups and different courses.

Joe Mcloughlin 11:12

And then so I was just thinking about thinking about that kind of learner self-esteem and learner kind of issues. Like you've said, you've mentioned that a lot of the learners you work with have various learning disability or difficulties that they face. Thinking more about exercise rather than sport, what is it about the kind of the value of exercise that helps these learners do you think?

Damian Butters 11:33

Exercise is so important, it's so important for our students, because we had a lot of students who were struggling with their self-esteem, suffering with their mental health as well, but fitness, doing drills, running, going on the fitness machines, on the running machines, it just gave them something to focus on to just for that time to take away their worries and their stress. Because they were doing something physical, they were doing something which made them think about something else, just for that short time. And it made a massive difference, it made a massive difference, because by exercising as well, when they finished they were tired, you know, it gave them that it gave them that purpose. And sometimes some of our learners as well, they have so much boundless energy, that doing sport, it uses that energy up, which really helps them when they go back into the classroom, because they've done something physical. So at lunchtimes, we have fitness clubs that a lot of our learners go to, and when they come back in the afternoon, it's made such a difference to them in terms of the learning, they've got rid of that kind of excess energy, and then they come back and then they're ready to learn, which is amazing. Sport is just a brilliant way of supporting mental health. Some of our students who have got low fitness, what

we do, we get our students out and we'll just walk we've got a local park just down the road from us. So Roberts Park, and what we do is we'll get our students to do a couple of laps around the park. And then we'll go back to class, because it's just great to get out of the classroom and just get them to exercise because it makes such a difference. Because they talk as well when we get our learners outside of the classroom, and we're doing exercise, sometimes they open up about other things as well. And sometimes they feel more confident to talk about things, we did the Duke of Edinburgh with our learners last year, as part of that we found out so much about our learners because they felt confident, because they're outside and the fresh air and exercise is a brilliant way of getting the learners to open up a little bit as well.

Joe Mcloughlin 13:26

I was thinking that myself whilst you were talking, because...so I'm a keen runner in my in my own life. And part of the reason I do that is because it gives me the brain space to actually, you know, unplug for an hour, get away from a screen or just get out in the world. There's a lovely short film on YouTube called the runners, which is about 11 minutes long. And it's just these filmmakers filmed people running in their local park in East London, and just asked them questions about their lives. And for whatever reason, they gave really, really open kind of personal answers. So this...there is something about...I don't know what it is, but there is something about exercise and kind of how that, you know, opens you up to people and helps you kind of, you know, relax a bit and share a bit more.

Damian Butters 14:07

in the world that we exist in now in terms of computers and iPads, the busyness of our lives that sometimes we feel like, we don't have time for exercise. But just me as a teacher, sometimes when I'm working at home, and I'm planning and my wife would go come on, come on, let's go for a run. And I'm just like, ah, and then when I get out there and run it's the same thing. It's just suddenly the things that seem really big. Suddenly you go for a run and you exercise and you get back...the endorphins of what you produce when you're exercising a bit like eating chocolate gives you that buzz and gives you that positive buzz then you come back and then suddenly the problem that seemed really big is gone and it seems actually much more manageable. The Ability Counts football team is all about that. It just gives our learners the chance just to get rid of their energy and sometimes aggression as well. Sometimes our learners are feeling amped up and they're feeling cross and they're feeling angry and they'll come to us and do sport and suddenly they leave with a smile on their face and that...that's the power of exercise that's the power of sport. And Shipley College is probably one of the leading in terms of the Level One Sport in terms of doing

that recognising that all levels of our students need to do exercise be it from the lower level learners. So with our students who are in a wheelchair, we do exercise in our hall in the Jonathan Silver building, and sometimes they might only be passing a ball and back but it gives them such fun and such excitement to be part of a team. So yeah, exercise we feel, in the Jonathan Silver building is key to learning really, it's really important that all the groups take part.

Joe Mcloughlin 15:41

And so with that in mind, and thinking about getting more people involved and kind of...or getting as many people involved as you can, what's next for yourself and the team this year, kind of what does defending the title look like?

Damian Butters 15:51

We've already been sent the fixtures. It's a couple of teams we play. We play Leeds City College and East Riding, Bishop Burton and Calderdale. And what happens is we play kind of regional friendlies and league matches and then within that, so we've got in November, we'll have our qualifier for the National Championships. So it's...I'm feeling the pressure, I feel under pressure a bit like Pep Guardiola feel under pressure, because we have qualified for the past 14 years. So I do feel a little bit under pressure that, again, we'd love to qualify, but we'll see what happens. But I'm confident we've got some good players this year. Although we're competitive, and hopefully each team wants to win, what's fantastic is all the managers from each team recognise that Ability Counts is about the...it's about the students, and it's about them just enjoying the sport. And of course, winning is important, but what's more important that the learners really experience and what I mean by that is sometimes, especially when we're doing our little league sometimes Leeds or another college might not have enough players. So we just mix our players in. It's that kind of atmosphere. It's a really nice atmosphere. I suppose it's a little bit like, during the Euros, and they were talking about the difference between women's football and men's football. And talking about the women's football having this amazing kind of family atmosphere, and it's just about the love of the sport. I kind of think Ability Counts is very similar to that. It's just a love of the sport. So yeah, so we've got the qualifier in November for the National Championships. And then in February, we've got the qualifier for the National Cup. So I'm really excited already. We've had a couple of training sessions, and I've seen the students and we've got some really good players. And what's really nice is kind of the Ability Counts football team now is quite famous, in kind of this area. So when the students come to enrol they go "I want to be part of the football team, I want to be part of the football team". So it is, it's lovely. It's lovely to keep building on and seeing the kind of students from the beginning to the end. Because sometimes we have some students who stay with us for a couple of years, and



watching them in the training session. And you can see how much they developed and how much they're helping the other learners. It's fantastic.

Joe Mcloughlin 17:56

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