Sharing memories, reciting party pieces and discussing the quality of pies are among the activities at football memory sessions being held for people with dementia across Scotland. The changes in mood, behaviour and levels of engagement of many of the men who have participated in the Football Reminiscence Project have astonished and inspired care staff, family members and the man who came up with the idea for the project himself, football historian Michael White.

Michael, a member of the Scottish Football Heritage Network, has been giving talks to people in care homes and day centres about Falkirk Football Club, where he is club historian, for many years. It was while doing these talks that he noticed how men with dementia would suddenly take notice and engage when he touched on a time that was significant to them.

He contacted Alzheimer Scotland and, with the support of the Scottish Football Museum, a partnership was formed and a pilot project set up in 2009. Although Michael had a large collection of his own football memorabilia, accessing the extensive range of materials from the museum’s archives proved a huge help in stimulating memories of football fans now living with dementia.

Getting together with other men to talk about football appears to have filled a gap. During research into the project by Glasgow Caledonian University (Schofield & Tolson 2010), carers expressed concern that their husbands weren’t interested in generic reminiscence groups and missed the company of men. Care workers said that some men had expressed feeling ‘less of a man’ as a result of their condition or because of spending all their time being cared for by their wives.

In the reminiscence sessions, however, many men find themselves taking centre stage, reeling off expert knowledge and sharing collective memories that bring laughter and camaraderie to the group, and a boost to their self-esteem.

The findings of the Glasgow Caledonian research reveal how men who took part in the pilot sessions became more confident, calmer, more talkative within the group and sociable outside it, and more communicative with their spouses afterwards. The report also concluded that the model has potential for being replicated elsewhere.

The Alzheimer Scotland Football Reminiscence Project was founded by Michael White in 2009. The Sporting Memories Network (SMN) was co-founded as a Community Interest Company in 2011 by Michael White, Tony Jameson-Allen and Chris Wilkins to broaden the scope of the original Football Reminiscence Project.

Its aim is to use more sporting-based memories in reminiscence sessions to improve the well-being of people with dementia. SMN is a member of the Sports Heritage Network and is working with a number of key strategic partners to create a global sporting resource. These include the National Football Museum in Manchester and the MCC cricket museum at Lord’s.

The project has also attracted the support of high-profile sporting personalities such as Formula 1 racing driver David Coulthard MBE and Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson. To find out more about this work and about setting up your own reminiscence groups, see www.sportingmemoriesenetwork.com

United through football

A love of football is at the heart of an ambitious project which is having hugely positive effects on people with dementia, particularly men, reports Rachael Doeg

The project now

Today, Michael oversees more than 16 football reminiscence groups at venues across Scotland, including in care homes and day centres, and also doing one-to-one sessions in people’s own homes. Four of the reminiscence sessions take place in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Dundee and Aberdeen and the rest are run in smaller towns and rural areas, all on a monthly basis. Volunteers are also being trained to run sessions.

The first sessions in England have begun in 15 care homes in Leeds from October onwards, after the Sporting Memories Network was awarded funding from the Skills for Care Workforce Development Innovation Fund. NHS OXleas Trust is also piloting the project at a hospital ward in Sidcup.

Bringing back memories

Photographs of players and football memorabilia such as old programmes and match reports, adverts from the grounds, cigarette and bubblegum cards, old boots, knitted woollen jerseys and the smells of linament oil and pipe tobacco are all helping to tap into memories that may have been locked away for many years and bring people with dementia out of themselves.

Michael has been amazed not only by the power of recall of many of the men, but the extent of their knowledge of football.

He says, “I noticed very quickly in my talks that when speaking of a team beyond people’s experience there wasn’t much response, but as soon as I hit the 1930s and 40s, the guys would rack off every name of every player in the line-up. Their depth of recall is spectacular. It’s not just cursory, they remember the day players scored, what the weather was like, the type of goal it was, the transport to the games and even the quality of the pies in different places.”

The more tailored the materials are to peoples’ interests and teams they support, the more successful the reminiscence can be.

Michael says, “I try to find out when each person’s interest in football would have been at its peak and who their heroes were. We ask family members and carers what teams the men like, where they went and who

Sporting Memories Network

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were their heroes, and then pick out images that will spark the memories.”

Michael’s aim is to gradually turn the groups into replica experiences of being in a football team. The sessions run for 90 minutes (the duration of a football match), and at half-time the group breaks for pies and Bovril. He is currently forming all the groups into a Scottish Football Memories League, with each club having its own name, colours and strip to wear when they meet to create a sense of identity and belonging.

**Getting people talking**

Carol Wicker is the co-ordinator at North Berwick day centre, where Michael ran a session. She said, “A lot of men attend our day centre and most of the staff and volunteers here are women. We try to find ways of engaging with men but it can be difficult to interact meaningfully and get to know people. “The afternoon when Michael was here was terrific and showed me just how great reminiscence can be. Football was a big part of life for some of our men and given they can’t remember much in their lives, they knew players’ names immediately, who they played for, what they were like. They had these pictures in their minds.

“One of our men has severe dementia and has since gone into long-term care. When he listened to the stories about football and players he became so animated. Michael had a photo of his brother, who had played for Queen’s Park Scotland, represented Great Britain at the 1952 Olympics and was also captain of the Scotland Amateur team. When he brought it out, Hamish said, ‘That’s my brother,’ and everyone around the table suddenly became interested in this man and what he had to say, and they don’t usually interact with each other.’

Since doing the sessions, Michael has seen numerous examples of positive changes in mood and a realisation among staff that people still have the ability to communicate. He says, “The strongest example of watching someone change was at a session in Stenhousemuir, Falkirk. A guy comes in on the minibus and usually sits in his chair and slumps forward. As soon as the lady says, ‘We’re going to have a football memories session,’ he becomes the star turn at the table, it’s like a switch goes on. His recall is out of this world and he really lights the whole session up.

“He says to me the teachers would tell him at school his head was full of football, and that he knew it would come in handy at some point.”

The fans have helped Michael fill in the gaps for his own archives by sharing stories about key moments in Scottish footballing history, and singing the songs to go with them. Many times, Michael has given people photos to share with their grandchildren as the images have brought back such joy and happiness.

He wants to keep building the archives and develop an extensive bank of images so it will be possible to create personal profiles for every football fan with dementia. He says, “I hope the project will grow and become worldwide, and that regardless of where you are in the world, through a love of football you’ll be able to benefit. To be able to sit down with people as friends and talk about the players you used to worship from the terraces is terrific. I get as much out of sessions as they do.”

**Reference**


**Resources**

Football Memories Websites: footballers, fans, celebrities and sports journalists have all shared their favourite football memories. To read them and add your own, if you are based in Scotland see www.footballmemories.org.uk. For everywhere else visit http://football.sportingmemories.org

Sporting Reminiscence Guide: a new SMN publication including images and replay cards designed for use in reminiscence sessions. Go to www.sportingmemoriesnetwork.com

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**BOOK LAUNCH ANNOUNCEMENT**

Jessica Kingsley Publishers are delighted to announce the launch of three new titles on dementia care at the UK Dementia Congress on 30 October, at the drinks reception from 7:30pm:

- Playfulness and Dementia by John Killick
- Leadership for Person-Centred Dementia Care by Buz Loveday
- Dementia – Support for Family and Friends by Dave Pulsford & Rachel Thompson

Special Guests:

- Professor Murna Downs, Chair in Dementia Studies, University of Bradford
- Rachel Thompson, Dementia Project Lead for the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) and Admiral Nurse for Dementia UK
- John Killick, Writer in Residence for Alzheimer Scotland, lecturer, trainer and author
- Buz Loveday, Lead Trainer at Dementia Trainers (www.dementiatrainers.co.uk)

10% off all book purchases for delegates at the UK Dementia Congress