

Sport
Football

How Cambridge became first 'mental health friendly' club

By Jeremy Wilson

► League Two side are at the forefront of the 'Heads Up' campaign aimed at raising awareness and giving support

The groundsman

It was on Aug 6, 2013 when the life of Ian Darler, Cambridge United's groundsman since 1979, changed for ever. He was replacing divots on the pitch when he was asked to collect an advertising sign. He tripped on some cardboard boxes and, although he can recall falling towards the sign's sharp edge, "darkness then descended" and he was left with broken teeth, no feeling in his right arm and excruciating neck pain. He thought he had suffered a stroke.

"Everything fell apart," he says. "I had seen a lot of things, including people clinically die in the stadium, and I had foolishly thought I understood mental health. I thought depression was a bad day. Now I know that every single person can be affected."

It was at a time, says Darler, when there was no appropriate specialist help from within the club and he declined to the point that he seriously contemplated suicide. He telephoned his doctor, broke down during that call and, having started out by saying that he just had to "man up", came to realise that he needed professional help.

"That is when things changed," he says. "I had become isolated at home - I found it impossible to get out of the house."

Darler was initially set the task of going to the shop every morning - "I would wait until the car park was clear before buying a pint of milk" - and gradually found his path to recovery. He is back full-time at Cambridge and passionate about using his own experiences to help others.

"What I have learnt is that, if you ask someone if they are OK once, they will brush it off. If you ask a second time, you might get a different answer. It is now a good, honest environment we have at the club and I have so much admiration for the Duke of Cambridge. People will see the future King of England speaking about this issue and think there is no stigma now."

The fan

Match day at the Abbey Stadium and, mingling happily among the fans and identifiable by their lanyards, are members of the Cambridge United Supporters' Panel. David Birkett's lanyard, however,

is slightly different. It also says "mental health officer" and, while that part of his role is entirely understated, the potential reach into a weekly gathering of thousands of supporters is clear.

"We are all fans of football, we often sit down over a pint or a coffee, but don't always talk about the things that really affect us," he says.

"It's a case of knowing where to point people and being there if they want a chat. Blokes especially are often not very good at opening up. People do tell me things about their background and we have almost become good friends in the space of an hour."

"Sometimes we will just talk about football. I have had mental

'If you ask if someone is OK, they will brush it off. Ask again and you might get a different answer'

health issues and I think I have a degree of empathy."

Birkett had played semi-professionally, but difficulties arose when injury forced him to stop at the age of 42. "I had a stressful job - it was work, work, work - and playing football was my outlet," he says.

He became a postman and, as well as his role with Cambridge, is now coaching various teams.

"Football is a great way of making some stresses go away and, if you have fellow supporters to talk to, all the better," he says.

The player

Leon Davies has been at Cambridge since he was eight and is now a first-team regular, but what he calls the "ruthless" nature of football became starkly evident when he recently looked at an old photograph of his under-10s team.

"I am the only one left," Davies (left) says. "It made me appreciate that I'm still in the game. People will say, 'You've got it easy', and we do what we love, but it doesn't mean that players don't get the same stresses. Some are good at putting on a mask. That's the scary part. You can talk to someone for a year, think there is no problem, and then find out they are really struggling."

"When I was 18, I would struggle with disappointment and uncertainty. If I made a mistake, I found it difficult to forget. I didn't want to be portrayed as



Stronger together: (from left to right) groundsman Ian Darler, mental health officer Darryl Coakley, fan David Birkett, player Leon Davies, director Godric Smith and manager Mark Bonner

a weak player. I thought if I said how I felt it would have an impact on my selection.

"I wanted to keep it in my head and it was not long ago that I realised it was the wrong thing to do. There's been a big change in the last three or four years and I see a lot more people opening up to other players and staff members."

The Covid-19 pandemic has created significant additional challenges. "I know quite a lot of people in that boat of being out of contract this summer," says Davies. "You know your last pay cheque has come in and you have no job. I can't imagine how hard it is."

Davies now tries to be there for his team-mates, past and present, and also works with younger players in schools and the academy. "I want to stress how important it is to be positive and kind," he says.

The director

Godric Smith is not just a director and lifelong Cambridge fan, but also the chairman of Heads Up, the Duke of Cambridge's campaign that seeks to use football to normalise conversations about mental health.

"There are some devastating statistics," says Smith. "Suicide is the biggest killer of men under 40 and there can still be a tendency to keep quiet and carry on, to never admit weakness or show vulnerability."

Smith's first job after leaving university during the 1980s was in mental health campaigning and, for family reasons, it is an issue that has long been of personal importance. "The shift from then to now has been huge, but there is still a long way to go," he says. "The conversation is changing to a recognition that we all have mental health, just as we all have physical health. It has been prioritised here from the board down over the last two or three years and I am proud Cambridge United have taken a leadership position within football."

Prince William, he says, has thrown himself into the campaign. "To have every part of the game sign up to this declaration and give a commitment, in black and white, that says mental health is as important as physical health, is a very big moment. The Duke is an authentic football fan, but can also talk openly in a personal way. His leadership

Heads Up

Launched by the Football Association and Heads Together and spearheaded by the Duke of Cambridge, Heads Up aims to harness the influence and popularity of football to help show that we all have mental health and it is as important as physical health. Anyone wanting immediate support can text 'HeadsUp' to 85258 to connect with a trained crisis volunteer. This service is 24/7 and free to text from most mobile networks.



Good to talk: The Duke of Cambridge (bottom right), leads a video call with Tyrone Mings, Steph Houghton, David Beckham, Andros Townsend and Carlo Ancelotti as part of 'Heads Up'

has been pretty extraordinary." And the key message? "It begins with talking," says Smith. "Like everyone there are some situations I can still find stressful and which make me anxious. I have learnt over the years how much talking can help. It's the single biggest thing people can do to stop what might seem relatively small issues turning into something more acute."

The manager

For Mark Bonner, Cambridge United's new 34-year-old head coach, what might once have been

perceived as a trade-off between players being open about their mental health and football's often macho culture no longer exists.

"It is certainly not binary," he says. "We are working with people first, and players second. My job is getting the best out of people - allowing them to be themselves. Understanding and being with them along the way is an important part of that. Then you get more out of them; a better team, cohesion and unity."

"You can still be demanding of people, have high standards and

expectations, but treat people with respect, understand everyone is on a different journey, and try to help people and support them through those inevitable challenges both during a football season and life."

Bonner has seen first hand how football has changed, but says that it is sometimes "still trying to overcome that stigma" and only talking about situations after the event. "We are making progress and we are really ambitious with where we take this," he says.

The particular pressures on a manager are unique and, as Bonner starts what can be a notoriously lonely job, he knows that retaining perspective will be crucial.

"Winning, losing and drawing will all happen," he says. "In order to be successful, you know you have to be completely committed. On the other hand, you know this is a game. Millions of people love it, but millions of people are disinterested. It is not the most important thing in the world. It's just the most important thing to a lot of people."

The mental health officer

Darryl Coakley can still clearly remember the moment, aged 20, when he was released by Cambridge after two years as a professional footballer.

"I was training with the first team, had a meeting with the manager and then, the following week working in the local Greene King in Bury St Edmunds. I went from being a professional football player to working in a factory within a week. It was really tough, but I have learnt from my journey."

Coakley is now Cambridge's mental health officer - a relatively unusual role still in football - and one that involves working at all levels of the club and community. A particular focus is on managing that transition for those academy players who are inevitably released.

Cambridge have what they call a "no surprises" mantra and provide education and life skills programmes throughout a player's time in the academy. There is also aftercare, with opportunities still to train, as well as weekly or monthly phone calls and access to video clips and data that can be shared with other clubs.

"You have an incredible sense of belonging to a football club - it must not just be a transactional relationship," says Coakley.

Cambridge also deliver community football sessions for locals, drop-in services for young people and families to access professional mental health help and a "Mind Your Head" programme in local secondary schools.

"There are three key messages," says Coakley. "That everyone has mental health; that we can train our mental health like our physical health and that mental health is different to mental illness."

"It's a strength not a weakness to talk about your feelings. We want to be at the heart of the city. We are trying to impact the whole community and the football club is in a privileged position to do that."

Klopp: Knowing my dad never got to share in my feats as a coach is tough

By Chris Bascombe

Jürgen Klopp says he finds it tough coming to terms with the fact his father never had the chance to see him become a coach and share in his successes.

Norbert Klopp died shortly before his son began his managerial career at Mainz in 2001.

The Liverpool manager has often spoken about his father being a "harsh critic", pushing him on when he was a youngster.

Speaking candidly with one of his players, Andy Robertson, in support of the Duke of Cambridge's Heads Up campaign, Klopp said he now sensed his father's presence in a more spiritual way.

"My dad never saw me as a manager. He died four months before I became a manager," said Klopp.

"But the actual thing is my father was a natural coach as well. He pushed me through my career, but my real [managerial] career, he never saw. That's hard, to be honest, from time to time."

"What makes it really strange is, now I'm 53, if I sit in a specific angle and look in the mirror, I am scared to death because I look exactly like my father."

"I never looked like my father my whole life. I looked like my mother. All of a sudden, 'It's my dad!'. Really crazy. But the support never stops."

Klopp joined several footballing personalities to back the partnership between the Royal Foundation and the Football Association, which aims to use the power and influence of football in order help bring the subject of mental health to a broader audience.

The German referenced the psychological strain put on players and their families during the lockdown, especially when there were genuine fears that years of work towards securing Liverpool's first title in three decades were at risk.

"There were moments in the lockdown when we thought it is a proper setback from all of our dreams," Klopp said. "But it was a setback for all of us together, and we could calm each other down."



Opening up: Manchester City's Ilkay Gundogan and Phil Foden chat for #SoundOfSupport

Discussing his experiences of talking about mental health, Robertson said: "When I started making it as a professional, I think that's when I struggled the most."

"I used to be one that blocked everything up. I have opened up a lot better and [that's] something I wish I had done earlier."

The #SoundOfSupport series includes conversations between Manchester City's Ilkay Gundogan and Phil Foden, and Manchester United's Jesse Lingard and TV presenter Maya Jama.

Lingard says the past 12 months have been especially difficult.

"Last season, I was going through some things off the field with my family, so it was difficult for me to perform on the field. I'm very family orientated and my mum was



Inspiration: Jürgen Klopp says his father was a 'harsh critic' but pushed him to succeed

going through some things last year with depression," Lingard said.

"In the meantime, I had to look after my little brother and sister, who are 12 and 15. You just get to that point where you're like, 'I've got to actually say something'. I spoke to my family and stuff like that. It felt so much better."

Foden admits he has a different outlook on life since becoming a parent.

"Becoming a father, say you have a bad game or something and you come back and see your little one smiling, it makes you think there's more to life and definitely brings the best out of me," he said.

"To always see him smiling and things, it just makes me more happy."