

“You don’t have to dribble with your thoughts alone anymore.”Marit Borg¹, André Muri², Aina Rype², and Bengt Karlsson¹¹University of South-Eastern Norway ²Asker Football and Asker Municipality (*Corresponding author: marit.borg@usn.no*)

This is what a player in a Norwegian street football team said about his experiences of being a football player. The players in these teams are people with lived experiences of mental health and/or substance abuse problems. In a study about street football (Ogundipe, Borg, Thompson, Knutsen, Johansen & Karlsson, 2020), the participants talked about the value of belonging to real football team and playing football at a real arena. They talked about a place where they could make friends, simply be with people “like yourself” and the joy as well as the struggle of getting in better shape and having a purposeful everyday life.

Somewhere to belong

Loneliness and feelings of being an outsider in society are typical experiences of people living with mental health and substance abuse issues. Social support and available and accessible community places are essential (Bjørlykhaug, Karlsson, Hesook, & Kleppe, 2021). It is well known that it can be hard to find meaningful work and inclusive and welcoming places, where you feel accepted and can be yourself (Karlsson & Borg, 2023). Social recovery and citizenship have for long been at the core of health and welfare policies (WHO, 2022). However, people continue to report the challenges of being included and accepted as equal human beings. There have been many promising community mental health programs aiming at accessible community places, social inclusion, and citizenship. Still, time in the community is not the same as a life in community. In a paper by Hamer, Finlayson, and Warren (2014), the journey towards full citizenship for those using mental health services was explored. The findings revealed that the degree to which the persons were accepted as full citizens with the same civil, political, and social rights as others was contingent on their ability to adopt their society's rules and norms and appear as 'normal' citizens. The participants often experienced being “othered” and excluded from the many rights and responsibilities of citizenship. They reported that being labelled with a mental illness involved being marginalized and ignored, thus placing barriers on their citizenship status.

Available inclusive and friendly arenas where you feel respected and accepted are essential for supporting people’s mental health and citizenship. Welcoming places are social communities where you can “be yourself”, contribute and take part in ways you are comfortable with (Karlsson & Borg, 2023; Snethen, Jeffries, Thomas, & Salzer, 2021). Inclusive places can be found in fitness centers, at libraries, in shops and cafés and on the football field. These environments are meaningful to be a part of, inviting and friendly. We have all experienced them – the sensation of entering a room and feeling welcomed and wanted. I am accepted and am good enough as I am. In local communities, organizations, at virtual meeting places and through interests or hobbies one can experience this. Welcoming community groups can also be based on relationships of faith and spiritual matters, lived experiences that are shared or practical issues. Just doing things together, like helping a fellow human being with gardening or in the kitchen.

Health and welfare policies

In both national and international health and welfare policies, it has been stated for decades that mental health is an integral part of our general health and well-being and a basic human right (WHO, 2022). The WHO report (2022) reminds us of that mental health is critically important for everyone, everywhere. Having good mental health means that we can connect, function, cope and thrive. Mental health exists on a complex continuum, with experiences ranging from an optimal state of well-being to states of great

suffering and emotional pain. WHO (2022) states that at the heart of mental health reform lies a major reorganization of mental health services. This reorganization ought to shift the locus of support and care away from psychiatric hospitals towards community-based mental health and welfare services. It also involves reshaping the physical, social, and economic characteristics of environments – in homes, schools, workplaces, social places and the wider community – to better protect mental health and prevent mental health conditions. These environments should afford everyone an equal opportunity to experience citizenship, to thrive and reach the highest attainable level of mental health and well-being. Citizens' needs of support should be met through a community-based network of accessible, affordable and quality services and tailored help. Individuals, governments, care providers, nongovernmental organizations, academics, employers, civil society, and other stakeholders all have a part to play. So, how can this be followed up and made real? Where are the good ideas and successful stories? Who can we learn from?

Norwegian street football

We would like to share a promising initiative in the context of the top-level football leagues in Norway. It's called street football. This concept does not mean that football is played in the streets or that the players live on the street. The concept has its early roots in a football initiative for homeless. In Norway street football is organized in partnership with top-level football clubs and community mental health and substance abuse services and other welfare services. The first street football team in a national football club started in 2011 and the following years several others came along. An umbrella-organization, the Football Foundation ([Fotballstiftelsen \(gatelaget.no\)](https://www.fotballstiftelsen.no)), was established to organize matches, tournaments, and support in a variety of ways. One important aspect of the Fotballstiftelsen's activity is that it did not rise from a desire to represent an alternative to existing services. It came from a passion for football and finding new ways of supporting fellow human beings. The Football Foundation see football as a huge force in that it is inclusive and engaging. The Football Foundation wants to use its position to make a difference for citizens who are not included in the society in a respectful and rights-based way. The goal is to create a better everyday life in partnerships with the persons.

In 2024, there were 31 street football teams in Norway affiliated with one of the football teams in the top divisions ([Fotballstiftelsen \(gatelaget.no\)](https://www.fotballstiftelsen.no)). To play in one of the teams, one does not need a referral or application. You just show up. The aim is to create a more meaningful everyday life for the athletes. The focus on activity and the inclusiveness of sport can contribute to better health - both mentally and physically. The various clubs in the Football Foundation arrange two to three training sessions a week at daytime. The teams have well-qualified football coaches who often have long backgrounds in football themselves. Food is served at every training and every match. Players have access to changing rooms, various facilities, and a shower. The club provides all players with the necessary football equipment. Joint social activities are also arranged outside of training. Many players have found a paid job through the street football partnerships. Results at the end of 2022 showed (Oslo Economics, 2023: <https://osloeconomics.no/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Rapport-gatelag-2.pdf>) that:

- 1171 players were registered in a team
- 102 players got paid employment during the year
- 40 players started school/education during the year
- 98 started in work training projects during the year.

In all areas, the results were considerably better than the previous year.

The street football teams act as a low threshold initiative, where anyone with a mental health and substance use problem can participate. No distinction between gender or age is made. Everyone is welcome. A unique aspect of the street football teams is the partnerships developed with local mental health and substance abuse services and welfare services. Defined professionals in the services attend and support the players in various ways at trainings and matches. This has a great advantage as professionals as well as services

become far more accessible. It is easier both to establish contact and to have continuous contact with specific professionals.

A few studies have been carried out about street football in the Norwegian context, and several internationally (Friedrich & Mason, 2017; Benkwitz & Healy, 2019; Benkwitz, 2022). In the context of this paper, we will present the findings of a Norwegian research project (Thompson, Knutsen, Johansen, Borg, & Karlsson, 2019).

Recovery on the pitch

In the evaluation study, eight focusgroup interviews with four street football teams were conducted. 51 people participated. The focus was on the players' experiences of whether and in what ways the street football contributed to their recovery processes. A research report was published (Thomsen et.al., 2019), and below are some of the findings.

A meaningful everyday life was one of the areas that was emphasized. There were various stories behind why a person became a street football player. Some had a lifelong and fundamental passion for football while for others it was more about being involved in an activity and experiencing meaning. Having something to go to, meeting others and getting in shape was highlighted. The participants emphasized the value of having a good time together and supporting each other. Descriptions that were reported repeatedly were fellowship, team spirit, having something to look forward to, being engaged, coping and having fun. The fact that the football team was a safe context, and that training took place in a safe environment was crucial. This had to do with the fact that there was not too much talk about drugs and the misuse environment. Being a team meant awareness of respect for and value of each other and about common rules and routines.

A training ground for many things was another theme that emerged. Through the football community, the street football teams emerged as "training grounds" for two areas in particular: the sport itself and the social part. The sport aspect was about improving physical as well as mental health and becoming better football players. Several talked about the joy of getting in shape. Many had had a passive lifestyle. It was liberating to experience being stronger, healthier, and simple feeling well. Being part of a well-respected football team in the community provided feelings of pride, hope and inspiration. The team was also described as a training ground for the social aspects of life. For example, the players talked about how they developed friendships, and some mentioned having a safe place to discuss issues like being a parent or struggles with finding a job. Learning to accept compliments as well as tolerate criticism and corrections was also brought up.

A place where you can be yourself was a key finding of the study. As we described above, communities develop through shared interests, hobbies and experiences. The participants disclosed previous experiences of fellowship in substance misuse environments. These communities weren't all that helpful. Still, it was a community with people having similar experiences and challenges. This meant that they could relax and be themselves. In the street football teams, they felt safe. They did not have to wrap up things and act. This was liberating.

Many participants called the street football teams *Norway's best aftercare and follow-up service*. The flexible and accessible collaboration with mental health and substance abuse services, NAV (Norwegian Labor and Welfare Administration) and various providers was unique. Especially the fact that familiar faces from the professional communities were present on the training and match days. The teams were a successful context in preparing the players for working life. Regular contact persons for the team in NAV were also helpful. In some teams the professionals in NAV attended the lunches or appeared at training sessions. This made it easier to raise crucial issues. The participants believed that mental health and substance abuse services and NAV could learn a lot from street football teams. The easy access to help and support and limited amounts of procedures and rules was a relief. Another factor was the value of getting to know the people who worked in services and knowing who one's contact person was. It was very different to collaborate with professionals right on the pitch, outside their premises and offices.

We would like to share the experiences of one specific street football team. They did not participate in the study mentioned above.

The Asker Street football Team

Andre Muri and Aina Rype are key persons in the street football team in Asker municipality. They reflect together and offer some concrete examples and insights into what makes the team work. Asker municipality has about 99000 inhabitants and is well developed when it comes to health, social and welfare services. Asker football club was established in 1899 and is at present playing in the 3rd division in the Norwegian league. Asker street football team was established in 2013.

Resources

Andre, as the main coach, has comprehensive experience as a professional football player nationally and internationally. As an experienced chief executive officer (CEO), he has worked with both men and women's football teams at the top level in Norway, and many different social projects in his former clubs. Andre's dedication, personal engagement and love for football and the great game, has a key value for the players and contribute to them feeling safe, welcomed and included in the club as valuable members and contributors.

Aina and her colleague Wenche, are working as social workers in Asker and spend most of their working time (one and a half position) in the street football team. Both have a background as social worker, and specialized education within addiction and mental health. However, the most important aspect of their professional qualities does not show on paper, this is their genuine wish to support the players in making better choices and helping them to succeed in achieving their personal goals is a big part of the partnership. They describe that the players are much more likely to improve their quality of life once they sense and realize that the support offered is genuine. A partnership this close between the municipality and the local football club facilitates a completely different way of maintaining contact and dialogue with the target group. Having to go through procedures with making appointments and feeling confronted by someone in power who wants to discuss overwhelmingly difficult issues inside an office, can be a huge barrier for people. Instead, the street football team offers three opportunities to meet each week in a much more welcoming way. The context and atmosphere reduce the stress and tensions that may appear in an office belonging to a public authority. The players and the professionals are provided with a context where it's easier to develop a trustful relationship, because of the time spent together, and more importantly, the way that time together is spent. The players choose to be involved and participate themselves, which is a good place to start to build relations as it removes much of the barrier of differences in power and hierarchy. Being part of the same football team enhances affiliation and similarity. By training and travelling together, sharing rooms, failing, succeeding, and sharing many different emotions and experiences, it opens up the possibility for more real and trusting conversations and offers a better space when it comes to supporting an individual's recovery process. We are also proud to mention that both social workers were rewarded with the "Social Worker of the Year, 2024" award from Fellesorganisasjonen, which is Norway's most important union for social workers. We proudly realize that this high-quality work was made in co-creation with a small football club.

The street football team works closely together with several organizations and providers. **Fotballstiftelsen (The Football Foundation)**. They provide financial support, arrange tournaments and other events, and provide knowledge and resources.

Local treatment and rehabilitation services. People in treatment are offered the opportunity to attend training sessions and matches. The team works together with the players and their treatment teams to sort out life issues and plan their future. Three players moved to Asker to be a part of their street football team and in this way work on their recovery through football.

Asker municipality. The team work primarily with the mental health and addiction services, but also other community providers. The municipality provides financial support in several ways. The two allocated social

workers have unique competencies, skills and insights into the community and services. They offer consultations, networking, practical help, transportation to and from the training and matches. The street football team is also supported and received interest from the local press, the mayor and local authorities.

Great arena for student practice. The municipality and the team work together with universities providing health and welfare education. The street football team is a much-appreciated place for practice periods.

The Church's Fieldwork has resources like community nursing services and a meeting place called Varmes-tua. Here players can get a meal or a cup of coffee. They can meet fellow human beings, have professionals available to them and opportunities to make phone calls or borrow a computer.

Sponsors and other resources. It has great value and impact that more people and the community as such get a more comprehensive understanding of people struggling with mental health and drug problems. Many have experiences of stigma and feeling like an outsider. Families also suffer. It is important with a more resource-oriented view on people who struggle. In our time with the street football team we have noticed positive changes.

Results in 2023

- 45 persons between 21-56 years participated in Asker street football team
- The team offered a minimum of 5441 hours of drugfree, meaningful and health promoting activities during the year
- 15 of the players are now in paid employment
- 2 players are full time students and 2 are engaged in supported employment
- Oslo Economics (<https://osloeconomics.no/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Rapport-gatelag-2.pdf>) confirms major socio-economic gains. The report is of great value for providers, the municipality, families and the street football community. A new report is due to be published in 2024.

Andre and Aina were asked to say something about why football can be such a recovery- resource.

What is it about football?

- Football represents history, traditions, and culture in a valued local social arena.
- People find it engaging and powerful.
- Football is basically social and offers competition, fun, challenges, and collective actions.
- Football helps people keeping fit.
- The pitches, premises and facilities are already present. Many of them are rarely used during daytime which makes the investment in the sports facility pay back to society in a larger context.
- Participation in a club representing the biggest sport in the world is great for inclusion. Football is always on the agenda in the news, social media, and small talks. Players are reminded of being a part of something important.
- Football exercises and various types of play are easy to adjust regardless of numbers. This is important because it is never possible to tell for sure how many players will show up at each session.
- Football is a team-sport, thus offering a context with role models both among players and coaches.
- Football tricks players into running and doing their utmost. By being distracted by everything happening on the pitch and everything that players are required to focus on, it becomes easier to conduct a good training with intensity and strength.

What is it about street football?

It offers

- Being in a group providing a lot of learning that many players may be more receptive to than in individual settings.
- Introduction to dealing with adversity. There are numerous of situations to practice in, many repetitions and other good role models.
- Easier with a holistic approach for those who are on the support side. Players don't just become num-

bers, or one only sees a small part of the picture. It becomes easier to see what really lies behind the individual's challenges.

- Availability and accessibility through training 3 days a week all year round.
- A context that may offer an effective shortcut into society again.
- Easy access to skilled nurses in the Church's Fieldwork and the A-team's physiotherapist. All are very committed and accommodating. This provides quick and good medical follow-up for many ailments and prevents queuing or being on a waiting list in public health services. It allows for minor issues to be solved before players need to see a doctor.
- Inclusion – a great arena as a place to belong. From hopelessness and isolation to inclusion in a short period of time. With the expertise and focus of the social workers, a culture has been built where players can find a safe place and feel a sense of belonging regardless of skills or fitness level. Through emphasis on unity, compassion for others and personal and team progress rather than on achievement and winning.



Memories from a tournament

Summary and reflections

In the past decades, recovery, social inclusion, citizenship and human rights have received growing interest in mental health and substance abuse services. Social aspects of recovery are given limited attention. Social recovery has to do with people's opportunity to lead meaningful and contributing lives as active citizens while experiencing some life challenges (Karlson & Borg, 2023). Social recovery includes the person's everyday life context, human relations and friendships, life conditions, and access to valued and meaningful social arenas. Street football offers some key learnings for recovery with its potentials for active community participation and citizenship. From our point of view, three aspects are particularly important. The first is the accessibility and sense of belonging to a well-recognized community arena, being the local football club. This presents something to be proud of, it inspires and gives hope. The second is the social aspect. Football is team play. It brings people together for friendship, learning, giving and receiving. It also brings services to the football pitch. The third aspect is the physical. Football improves physical health and helps keep fit in a variety of ways.

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