



Award-winning Inspiration: East Birmingham's Sport Inclusion Project

Kameron Hussain is not a man short of ambition. Although he's self-deprecating – he's played sport for various clubs, yet says he's "rubbish now" – and prone to banter, he is evidently serious about his belief in the social significance of sport. He'd have to be to have come this far with a distinctly aspirational project.



Bend it Like Birmingham, the sports inclusion project operating in the east of the city, aims to bridge gaps between ethnic and religious groups through bringing people together to play sport. Despite the name, there's no Keira Knightley in sight and it's by no means limited to football – or even sport, with the relatively new Asian beauty project. Dads play cricket in the summer, children learn the discipline of boxing and the project is branching out into netball sessions.

The project gets around 500 participants in an average week. Black, white and Asian people attend. Against the backdrop of historic segregation in the area of housing Ashram Housing Association is challenging the idea that generation upon generation of working class people must live in areas deemed for their particular ethnic group. Its social landlord status means it has the necessary access to deprived communities. And so Bend it Like Birmingham has been bridging gaps – and improving health and fitness – on and off the pitch since its launch in November 2007.

Breaking down hostility between communities is a fundamental part of what Bend It... does. When I first ask Kameron what inspires him, he talks of the need to give kids a break, to "get them away" from what may be a difficult home life. Yet the more we speak the more it's clear the project goes beyond

providing a temporary breather. It's about bringing kids out of what Kameron refers to as the "postcode culture". It's about letting kids come to their own conclusions about how legitimate stereotypes really are. And it's about giving people ambition, confidence and self-esteem. Women have been brought out of unemployment to become qualified sports coaches thanks to the project. Kameron says female participants' feedback has been extremely positive, despite taboos in some Asian communities around women playing sport.

Volunteer Adeel, 16, states confidently the project's potential to "improve all communities". Kameron is a friend of his family, and he's been volunteering since the start. Adeel knows that sport can help you, simply, "become something". And indeed he has the potential to become a qualified coach in three years time; additionally, he has observed his brother become more and more interested in sports of different varieties.

Yet there are obstacles. Volunteers need to be trained, upskilled and retained. They're often parents of the participants, and Kameron would like to see them able to take on more responsibility; yet his vision in this area is arguably hampered by the fact that his is the only full-time paid post. In addition, young people are liable to apathy and need to be constantly entertained. They need to be engaged with as individuals, reflecting again the emotional intelligence that necessarily underpins the project and Kameron's work. Sometimes conflict arises: one example being between participants of Pakistani and Indian descent after the attacks in Mumbai. But Kameron denies that this ever gets really serious, and one gets the impression he is able to maintain order through a 'carrot-and-stick' approach.



Young footballers with initially taxing personalities are offered chances to prove themselves – in a structured, disciplined framework of leadership. Both Adeel and Kameron think teenagers are often able to resolve their own disputes with no need for leaders to pull their weight. It's most likely the case that this reflects a broadened mind-set as well as improved hand-eye coordination. Regardless, zero-tolerance remains on certain issues such as racial abuse – and punctuality. Latecomers turned away five minutes after the 7:45 start of one particular Friday football session must, Kameron thinks, have felt pretty bad walking home seeing people playing games. He's not smug about it, but obviously knows the mentality of teenagers well.

Getting kids to play an enjoyable game of football is enough of an achievement in an environment in which Kameron and Adeel have witnessed players state bluntly that they do not want to be on someone's team, simply, "because I hate him." But for the project to be judged a long-term success, it

must encourage socialising between Small Heath and Shard End *outside* of playing sessions. Ideally camaraderie developed on the playing field sees in the long term young people challenging the mental and physical distance between their respective parents. So how common is this?

Well, for one thing, not many white non-Muslims can claim to have opened fast at Ramadan. Yet this is exactly what one youngster, Marcus, decided to do after developing a friendship with a fellow sport enthusiast – who happened to be Muslim. Kameron is clearly proud of this example. In addition Adeel explains to me that the forthcoming Bend it Like Birmingham website, which he's going to be instrumental in overseeing, is another opportunity for



developing social capital off the pitch. And indeed arguably the virtual world transcends parochialism like no other environment.

And there's also the health aspect, which is extremely significant in this city. 25% of Birmingham's population are obese, which is the third highest rate in the UK; 40% of children leaving primary school here are either overweight or obese. In light of these frightening figures, the popularity of Bend it Like Birmingham is a comfort. Indeed Kameron thinks that many parents were inspired to join the group because of New Years 'keep fit' resolutions! But he's found that when this wore off, the appeal of playing cricket in the summer encouraged dads to keep attending.

But playing sport – or drawing or swapping make-up tips – isn't just a vehicle for a greater good. It's hugely important in its own right to many of the Bend it Like Birmingham participants. The project has both casual and competitive sessions and those who are particularly dedicated are signposted to clubs. One child has been scouted by South Birmingham College Football Academy, another by Warwickshire Cricket Club. And a disabled snooker player represented the project in a trip up to Manchester, almost winning a tournament in the city – but losing on the last ball.

So it's no surprise that Kameron's confident his athletes should play a part in the 2012 Olympics! And it's encouraging that his ultimate goal for the project is sustainability: for it to "run itself" after three years. Bend it Like Birmingham is doing an awful lot for young people, for parents, for the east of the city and beyond. And so many of its athletes are in turn committing their talent to the world of sport. As for Adeel, who is continuing to contribute so much to the project: he will "hopefully be coaching Arsenal someday".