



THE SHOT PAPERS

THE FAR PITCH.

ACCESS IS DESIGNED, NOT DONATED.

Most of the world's players will never be scouted, sponsored or streamed. Whether they get proper coaching, and whether sport ever feels like it was built for them, is decided by postcode, cost and circumstance. This paper is about the kids on the far pitch, the ones the system was never designed for, and what it takes to design it for them on purpose.

FOR FUNDERS · FOUNDATIONS · FEDERATIONS · PARA SPORT BODIES

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1 THE MOMENT

Before SHOT existed, I ran a not-for-profit football club. It started with five girls on a Saturday morning and grew, over the years, into hundreds of kids a week, boys and girls, across every age group we could staff.

The thing about a club that grows like that is you never get to choose who turns up. Some of our kids had disabilities. Some had mental health struggles. Others just wanted to play football. Nobody had built the system for any of them. Not the pathways, not the coaching courses, not the software, none of it assumed a child like the ones in front of us. So the sessions bent around whoever arrived, because that is what volunteers do. The structure never bent at all.

We managed, mostly, because volunteers always manage. A coach would quietly learn one child's triggers and routines. A parent would stand a little closer to the touchline for the first month. The kid who could not cope with the big group got the far pitch, the quiet one, with a patient coach and three mates. It worked, in the way a rope bridge works: because good people held it up, and only for as long as they did.

THE RETOLD STORY

One detail from those years has never left me. Parents of children with medical conditions, diabetes, epilepsy, autism, telling the same story over and over. Every new club. Every new coach. Every new season. What to watch for. What to do if it happens. What not to make a fuss about. The same conversation in the same car park, repeated for years, with the whole weight of it carried by the family, and the quiet fear underneath it that one day, somewhere, the one person who needed to know would be the one person nobody had told.

A form gets filled in at September registration and lives in a folder nobody opens. The coach who was told moves on in November. The child goes to a holiday camp, a school team, a second sport, and the telling starts again from zero. Sport asks these families to be their child's living medical record, permanently on duty, and calls it inclusion when it lets them through the gate.

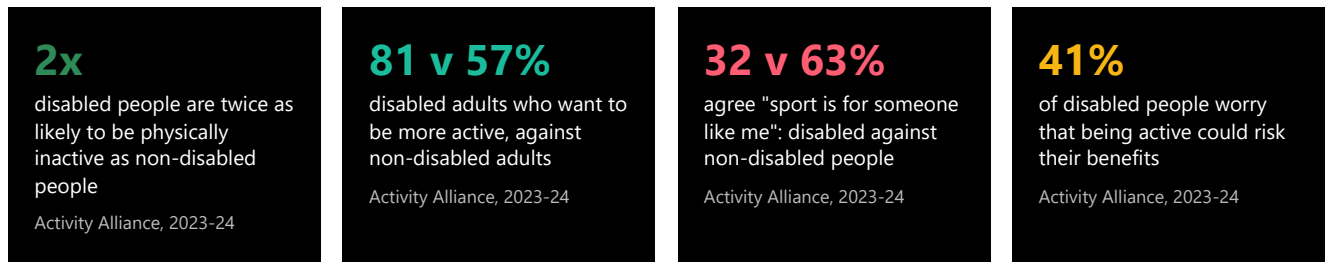
That is the moment this paper comes from. Not a strategy document, not a policy review. A parent, mid-story, in a car park, starting the same explanation for the fifth time.

The kids the system was never designed for still turned up. The question was never their commitment. It was ours.

2 THE PROBLEM IN NUMBERS

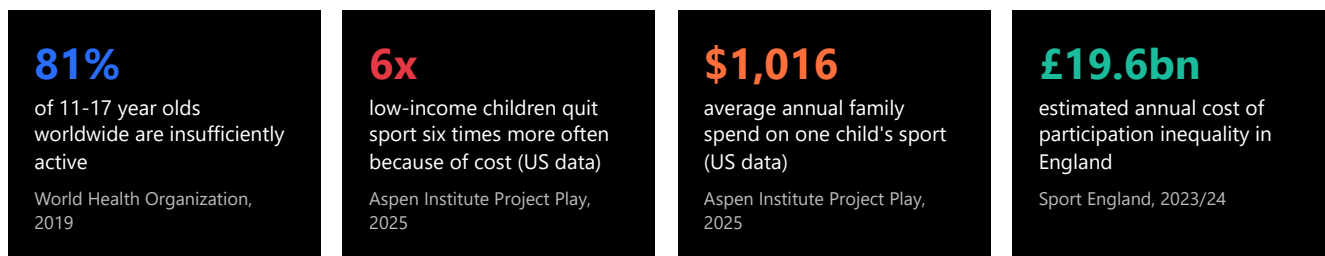
The far pitch is not an edge case. Measured honestly, the people sport was not designed for are the majority of the people sport exists to serve.

DISABILITY: THE WANT IS THERE, THE WELCOME IS NOT



Read those four numbers together and the story is unambiguous. Disabled people want to be more active than non-disabled people do, by a wide margin, and are half as likely to feel sport is for them. The gap between 81% wanting and 32% belonging is not a demand problem. It is a design problem, and the benefits statistic shows how far outside sport's control panel the real barriers sit: two in five disabled people carry a fear that moving more could cost their family income.

COST AND GEOGRAPHY: THE QUIET FILTERS



The World Health Organization's figure is the one I keep coming back to: worldwide, four in five adolescents do not move enough for their own health. The far pitch is not a corner of sport. At global scale it is most of the field.

The cost numbers are American, and I flag them as such, but the mechanism they describe is universal. Where a family's income decides whether a child keeps playing, children from low-income families quit six times more often, and the average family bill for one child's sport has passed a thousand dollars a year. Cost does not announce itself as exclusion. It just quietly decides, season by season, who is still there in the spring. Sport England's own analysis puts the price of that inequality in England alone at an estimated £19.6 billion a year in lost social value.

3 WHY THE CURRENT ANSWERS FAIL

Sport already has answers to all of this. Discount schemes, inclusion programmes, disability awareness weeks. They fail for the same structural reason: access is treated as an exception to the product, not a property of it.

ACCESS AS CHARITY OVERFLOW

The standard model works like this. A platform, a programme or a facility is built for the paying customer. Then, at the edge, a portion is given away: a hardship fund, a discounted tier, a grant-funded pilot that runs for two years and disappears when the funding cycle turns. The kids it reaches are genuinely helped, and I will never sneer at any of it. But overflow is not infrastructure. It is unpredictable, it is small against the scale of the problem, and it teaches the families on the receiving end exactly where they stand: outside the real product, waiting on generosity. When only 32% of disabled people feel sport is for someone like them, this is part of why. Charity, however well meant, tells you the thing was built for somebody else.

COST AS THE QUIET FILTER

Nobody publishes a policy that says poor kids play less. The filter works silently, one reasonable decision at a time. The club needs the subs to survive. The platform charges per player because that is the business model. The better coaching sits in the paid tier because something has to. Each step defensible, and the compound effect is a sorting machine: the families with money get structure, feedback and development, and the families without get a register and a fixture list. By the time a talented kid from the wrong postcode meets a properly resourced pathway, the six-times-more-likely-to-quit statistic has usually already done its work.

INCLUSION RESTING ON ONE HEROIC VOLUNTEER

The third failure is the one I watched from the touchline for years. When a disabled child, or a child with a medical condition, thrives at a club, it is almost always because one volunteer took it on themselves to learn that child: the routines, the warning signs, the things that help. That knowledge lives in one head. It is not written anywhere a successor can find, it does not transfer to the school team or the summer camp, and it leaves the moment the volunteer does. The family knows this, which is why they retell the whole medical story at every doorway. We call this inclusion, but it is really improvisation, sustained by exceptional people, and it collapses to zero the day the exceptional person moves on.

Discounts, pilots and heroes all share one flaw: none of them survives contact with a change of season. Access that depends on generosity, luck or one person's memory is not access. It is a lottery.

4 THE PRINCIPLE

Access is designed, not donated. Free must be a product decision, made at the foundation of the business, not a charitable gesture bolted on once the paying customers are served.

"Sport is also an important enabler of sustainable development. We recognize the growing contribution of sport to the realization of development and peace... as well as to health, education and social inclusion objectives."

UNITED NATIONS · 2030 AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, A/RES/70/1, PARA 37

The UN's language matters because of what it implies. An enabler is infrastructure, and infrastructure has a different design standard from a product. A road does not have a hardship fund. It is built, from the first drawing, to carry everyone. If sport is genuinely an enabler of health, education and inclusion, then access to it has to be engineered to the same standard, and anyone building for sport should be able to pass four tests.

1 FREE IS STRUCTURAL, NOT PROMOTIONAL

The free layer is written into the business model and priced into the paid tiers from day one. It survives every funding cycle, every board change and every hard year, because removing it would mean redesigning the company, not trimming a programme.

2 THE FULL PRODUCT, NOT THE LEFTOVERS

Whatever the paying customer gets that actually develops a player, structure, feedback, progression, the free layer gets too. A free tier that keeps the register while the development sits behind the paywall is the cost filter with better manners.

3 INCLUSION IS WRITTEN DOWN AND TRAVELS

What a child needs to be safe and included is recorded once, owned by the family, and moves with the child to every new coach, club and sport. No system should ever depend on one volunteer's memory or ask a parent to retell a medical history in a car park.

4 GROWTH FUNDS ACCESS AUTOMATICALLY

The link between commercial success and free access is mechanical, not discretionary. Every unit of paid growth creates a unit of free access somewhere it is needed, without a committee deciding to be generous that year.

None of this requires SHOT. Any federation writing a digital strategy, any foundation setting grant conditions and any platform choosing a pricing model could adopt these four tests tomorrow, and I would count that as a win. The point of a principle is that it works whoever holds it.

5 THE BUILD

This is how we hold ourselves to those four tests at SHOT. Not as a manifesto, as a set of product decisions already made and already binding on us.

FREE AT THE BASE, FOREVER

The club and coach layer of SHOT Clubhouse is free for every club, team, school and coach, forever. Not a trial, not a starter tier, not free until we need the revenue. The tools a volunteer needs to run and coach a club, including the structured session-by-session development frameworks, cost nothing, permanently. That decision was made before the pricing model, and the pricing model was then built around it, which is the only order that works. Free that arrives after the spreadsheet is charity. Free that arrives before it is design.

EVERY PAID PLAN FUNDS A FREE ONE

SHOT is a member of the UN's Football for the Goals initiative, the UN's platform for the football community to engage with the Sustainable Development Goals, which counts around 370 member entities from more than 120 countries. Membership is a commitment, not an endorsement, and ours is concrete: every paid development plan on our platform funds a free licence for a club that could never pay for one. That is test four made mechanical. As the commercial side grows, the free side grows with it, automatically, without anyone needing to approve a good deed.

A GRANT PROGRAMME, NOT A GESTURE

Alongside the funded licences, we run a grant programme for organisations using sport to reach the people the system forgot, with recipients across four continents. The grants are assessed against criteria, not sympathy, and they are ongoing infrastructure for the recipient, not a two-year pilot with a cliff edge. I will not name recipients here; the point of the programme is their work, not our publicity.

THE STORY THAT TRAVELS WITH THE CHILD

And the car park conversation, the one this paper started with, is the problem the Sport Head ID exists to end. A player's Sport Head ID is a sporting identity that belongs to the person for life, and it can carry what a child needs people to know: a medical condition, the signs to watch for, what helps, what to avoid. The family records it once and controls it entirely, deciding who sees what. Every new coach who needs it has it from the first session, at the club, the school team, the holiday camp, the second sport. The knowledge stops living in one heroic volunteer's head and stops being the family's job to re-perform at every doorway. The story travels with the player, because it is the player's story.

Free forever at the base. Paid growth funding free access. Grants across four continents. A child's needs told once and carried for life. Access, designed.

6 THE INVITATION

The far pitch does not need pity, and it does not need another pilot. It needs the people who fund, govern and champion sport to demand that access be designed in, and to back the organisations that build it that way.

IF YOU FUND SPORT

Put the four tests from part four into your grant conditions. Ask every applicant one question: what happens to the people you serve when this funding ends? If the answer is that access ends with it, you are buying overflow, not infrastructure. Fund the models where free is structural, and your money keeps working after your cheque stops.

IF YOU RUN A FOUNDATION OR CHARITY USING SPORT

Our grant programme is open. If you are using sport to reach people the system forgot, disabled players, low-income families, communities nobody builds for, we want to put free infrastructure underneath your work: the tools, the development frameworks and the identity layer, at no cost, with no cliff edge.

IF YOU ARE A FEDERATION OR GOVERNING BODY

Your coach education already teaches whole-athlete development. Ask what delivery mechanism carries it to the volunteer on the far pitch, and ask what your digital strategy does for the child whose family cannot pay. We built our platform to be that answer for football through Football for the Goals; we are ready to have the same conversation for your sport.

IF YOU WORK IN PARA SPORT

You know better than anyone that the gap between 81% wanting and 32% belonging is a design failure. Help us get the inclusion layer right. The Sport Head ID's handling of conditions and needs was shaped by families like the ones I coached; para sport bodies are the people who can pressure-test it, extend it and hold us to the standard the far pitch deserves.

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Sport keeps telling itself it is for everyone. On the numbers in this paper, it is not, yet. But everyone is not a slogan, it is a specification, and specifications can be built to. I have seen what the far pitch looks like when somebody finally builds for it: a kid with a condition whose coach already knows, a club that pays nothing and misses nothing, a parent who does not have to start the story again. That is the whole ambition, and it is buildable now.



SOURCES

Every statistic in this paper is cited below at claim level. Where evidence comes from a single country, it is flagged in the text.

CITED SOURCES

- Activity Alliance, Annual Disability and Activity Survey, 2023-24: disabled people twice as likely to be physically inactive; 81% of disabled adults want to be more active against 57% of non-disabled adults; 32% of disabled people agree "sport is for someone like me" against 63% of non-disabled people; 41% of disabled people fear being active could risk their benefits.
- World Health Organization, global estimates of adolescent physical activity, 2019: 81% of 11-17 year olds worldwide insufficiently active.
- Aspen Institute, Project Play State of Play 2025 (United States data, flagged as such in the text): children from low-income families quit sport six times more often because of cost; average family spend of \$1,016 per year on one child's primary sport.
- Sport England with Sheffield Hallam University and Manchester Metropolitan University, Social value of community sport and physical activity in England, 2023/24: participation inequality estimated to cost £19.6 billion a year in social value.
- United Nations, Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, A/RES/70/1 (2015), paragraph 37: sport as "an important enabler of sustainable development".
- United Nations, Football for the Goals initiative, launched July 2022: approximately 370 member entities from more than 120 countries (UN published figures).

A NOTE ON THE STORIES

The accounts of the club I ran, the children we coached and the conversations with parents are my own first-hand experience, told from memory and reported as experience, not as measured statistics. No child, family, club or partner organisation is identified anywhere in this paper, and grant recipients are deliberately unnamed.

ABOUT THIS SERIES

The SHOT Papers are a series on the state of grassroots sport and the infrastructure it deserves: coach education, club administration, player development, drop-out, access, community and the commercial models that fund it all. Each paper stands alone, argues from evidence, and ends with something the reader can do whether or not they ever use our platform.

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