

# Progress over 30 years should not mean principles have to change: a Society of Sports Therapists' perspective

Graham N Smith

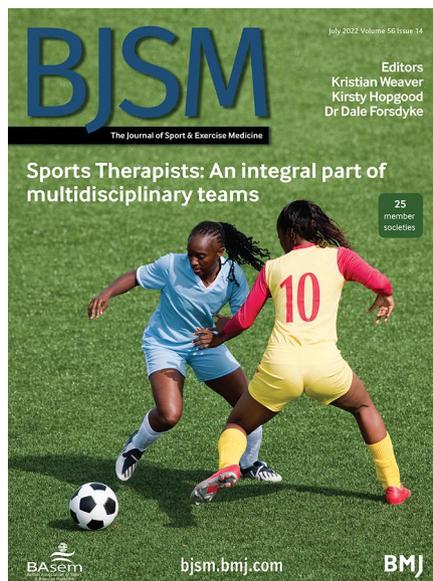
## THE DEVELOPMENT OF SPORTS THERAPY PRINCIPLES

When The Society of Sports Therapists was formed in 1990, the Sport and Exercise Medicine (SEM) landscape, especially in the UK, was significantly different to how it is today, even though the overriding principles of care and protection remain the same. Many of the practitioners working with teams and/or governing bodies at that time, did so primarily on a voluntary basis, that often required them to use either annual or unpaid leave to accompany teams or attend tournaments, including Olympic and Commonwealth Games.

It was also a time when the need to have formal qualifications in SEM in order to work with teams was being introduced. Until this point, appointments were frequently made on a 'who knows who' basis. Minimum qualifications to work as a therapist in professional football, predominantly in England, were also being introduced. Before this, anyone could be the 'physio' and more worryingly, there was little SEM cover for the lower levels of the sporting pyramid, especially in recreational and youth sport.

Notwithstanding the above, medals, cups, tournaments, championships were still being won and world records achieved. Significantly, many of these successes were being supported by clinicians and therapists who may not have had any formal training but through experience knew what was required to treat, manage, rehabilitate, and more importantly prevent injuries from occurring. Many such individuals worked in professional football in the UK and were doing a sterling job without any formal recognition.

However, after a review of regulations and criteria, and the introduction of minimum qualifications to work as a therapist



apist in football from 1990, an education pathway was developed. Such a pathway gave these individuals the knowledge and understanding to support the practical and sport specific skills that they already had and were using daily. This led to the formation of The Society of Sports Therapists, with its first 100 members coming from professional football. The Society of Sports Therapists became a professional organisation to provide support to therapists that other practitioners such as doctors and physiotherapists already had. It also provided an opportunity to progress educationally, academically and professionally. This enhanced the skills of therapists working with athletes at all levels, minimising the risks associated with injury, including proficiency in basic lifesaving skills. These were the founding principles of The Society, and they are still as strong now as they were in 1990.

## GROWTH OF THE SOCIETY OF SPORTS THERAPISTS AND SEM OVER THE PAST 30 YEARS

As The Society of Sports Therapists has progressed, so undoubtedly has SEM, especially at the elite levels of sport. Medical and scientific support has grown with the financial resources and sponsorship that

have increased during the intervening years. At the time The Society was formed, teams frequently travelled supported only by one practitioner who was often the therapist (physio, massage, sports) and occasionally a medical practitioner, with much of this dictated by financial constraints. Now the support team can be as big as the actual squad competing, and is almost certainly multidisciplinary. SEM professionals involved are adequately and appropriately educated and qualified to do so. Consequently, it is hoped that the care being given to athletes is done so with expertise, professionalism and empathy.

The recognition of SEM as a medical specialty rather than 'a hobby' that the clinicians did in their spare time has also increased the quality of care and the presence of full-time medical practitioner specialists working in clubs and governing bodies. Similarly, research has become much more sport, exercise, health and performance orientated, as can be seen by the progress the BJSM has made within the scientific community.

## LOOKING FORWARD AND STAYING FOCUSED

As sport and exercise and performance medicine has progressed, so too has The Society of Sports Therapists, with its members being an important and integral part of many multidisciplinary teams across a broad spectrum of sport. Much of this is due to fulfilling The Society's original aim to produce an academic pathway, built on a strong sport and exercise science foundation. This has produced practitioners (therapists) who understand the physical, physiological, and psychological demands that are placed on sports participants, whatever their level and ability.

**Contributors** This article was written by Professor Graham N. Smith

**Funding** The authors have not declared a specific grant for this research from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

**Competing interests** None declared.

**Patient consent for publication** Not applicable.

**Provenance and peer review** Commissioned; internally peer reviewed.

© Author(s) (or their employer(s)) 2022. No commercial re-use. See rights and permissions. Published by BMJ.



**To cite** Smith GN. *Br J Sports Med* 2022;**56**:775.

Accepted 16 May 2022

*Br J Sports Med* 2022;**56**:775.  
doi:10.1136/bjsports-2022-105912

The Society of Sports Therapists, Glasgow, UK

**Correspondence to** Professor Graham N Smith;  
g.smith@society-of-sports-therapists.org