

A background image showing two male rugby players in action on a grass field. One player, wearing a red and black jersey, is lying on the ground holding a rugby ball, while another player in a similar jersey is leaning over him, possibly assisting or competing for the ball.

THE IMPACTS OF MIXED ABILITY RUGBY

Dr. Jen Dyer and Martino Corazza

Mixed Ability (MA) is changing the way we think about grassroots rugby.

It is well known that participation in sport benefits individuals' physical and mental health, as well as creating social change for the wider community (Sport England, 2016). However, many people face significant barriers to participating in mainstream sport through, for example, disability, age, gender, background or poor self-perception.

MA rugby takes an innovative approach to breaking down these barriers. MA participants from a wide range of backgrounds and abilities share experiences and learning through interactive and accessible training and resources. This creates sporting environments that are safe, welcoming and non-judgemental. MA emphasises regular, frequent and sustainable activities, self-determination, club membership and opportunities for social interaction for all.

This research summary outlines key findings from focus groups and surveys carried out with MA rugby participants from the Bumble Bees RFC (UK) and Chivasso Rugby (Italy).

In summary, the impacts of MA rugby are:

- Regular activity and the associated physical benefits for participants who previously faced barriers.
- Increased social capital and networks through building closer and more diverse friendships.
- Personal development including increased confidence, skills, empowerment and pride.
- A sense of belonging and community within MA clubs, and associated mental health benefits.
- Positive shifts in perception around ability both for the participants and local community.
- Increased confidence when interacting with people perceived as different to oneself.
- Increased awareness of the value of social difference in society.
- More inclusive rugby clubs which cater for everyone regardless of, for example, ability, disability, age, background, sexuality and skill level.
- Increased numbers of new and returning players, as well as retention of those engaged with the game.
- Promotion of social inclusion far beyond the rugby field.

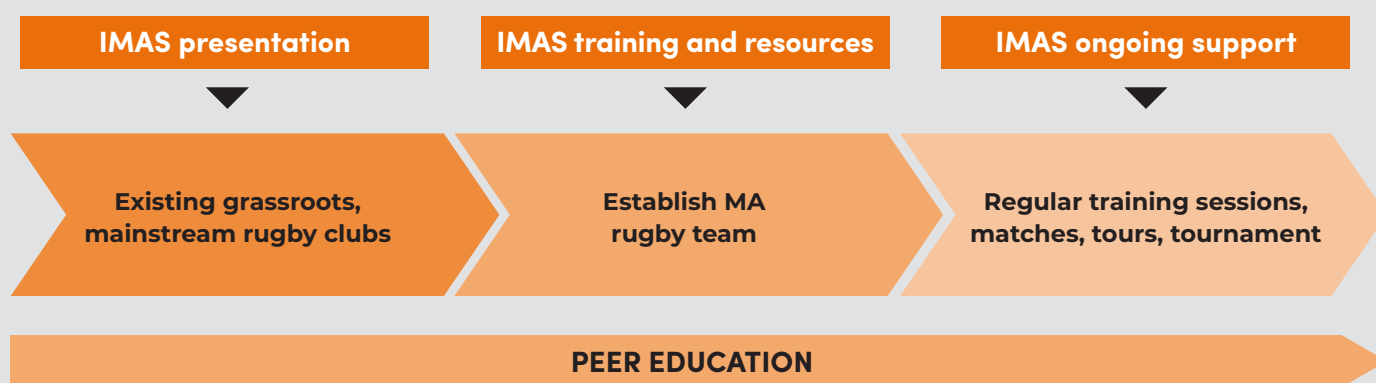
The background to MA rugby

MA rugby grew organically from a lack of provision for disabled participants to play full-contact rugby. Players with and without physical and learning disabilities began playing in the same, mainstream, full-contact rugby game. However, the MA Model has broadened out beyond its original focus on disability, and beyond rugby. This is because it offers a safe, non-judgmental and welcoming environment for anyone

who has faced any barriers to participation in any sport - for example, through age, gender, self-perception, self-esteem, sexuality, background or disability.

IMAS is championing the MA Model using it to break down barriers to participation in sport, promote social inclusion and generate long-term positive change in our communities.

The MA rugby model



The figure above outlines the process of introducing MA rugby into existing grassroots, mainstream rugby clubs. IMAS approaches, or is approached by, these clubs for an initial presentation to introduce the model. These clubs are then supported to establish an MA rugby team. They are provided with IMAS training around MA as well as broader equality awareness training, and resources to support them in the process. Everyone then works together to aim for regular (ideally weekly) training sessions, matches against local community sides, rugby tours and tournaments. The ultimate aim is that the

MA teams are seen as 'just another team' in these clubs, equal in status to the Firsts, Seconds, Ladies etc. Indeed players from England's first MA side, the Bumble Bees, now regularly play for the other teams at the Bradford and Bingley Club and in the local area.

Peer education underpins the whole process. Resources are co-developed and training is co-delivered by participants who have benefited from playing MA rugby themselves. This ensures realistic role models are present highlighting their diverse backgrounds and the range of barriers that have been overcome for them to participate in sport.

MA rugby benefits

Individual participant benefits



- + Physical wellbeing
- + Social networks
- + Friendship
- + Personal development

Club-level benefits



- + Increased membership numbers and diversity
- + Perception shifts around social difference and ability
- + Inclusive club environment

Community-level benefits



- + Healthier, happier and more inclusive communities through increased participation in sport
- + Breaking down barriers to participation in sport

Experiences of MA rugby

Anthony Brooke, founder of the Bumble Bees, England's first MA Rugby team

'I supported my local team for years. They would not let me play. The only thing I could do was to carry water bottles. They were afraid I could get injured. Of course I can get injured, it's part of the game. And since I joined the Bumbles I have snapped my Achilles, done my ligaments and I still want to play.'



'[MA rugby has impacted me] in a massively positive way ... leading to many new friendships and relationships with people with and without disabilities.'

Wayne Marshall



'The first time I joined the group, I thought of myself as different ... I felt like out of context ... And now, step by step, with my acquired new skills and abilities, I'm learning to realise that I can do more things than I thought.'

Walter Villan



'Disabled players have become more confident in their own abilities and non-disabled players have become more confident in being with disabled people.'

Jim Scott



'The biggest impact on me has been the change in my attitude to all people I come across now ... I do not worry about whether I'm saying or doing the right thing ... I see the person first.'

Andy Lewis

Jim Scott began playing for the Bumbles at 59 having been a life-long rugby fan.

Since joining the team, he has trained, played and toured regularly as well as gaining his UKCC Level 2 rugby coaching award.

'I am more confident and relaxed about being accepted and integrated by the group. They all make me feel part of the team, and they teach me the joy of the game.'



'Playing against the Bumble Bees has made [my local club] better and reconnected them to the reasons they play rugby: the enjoyment and the values.'

Dr. Mark Purvis



'For the vast majority it helps by including a whole new group of players, re-engaging former players, and engaging the club with the community.'

Mike Hawkes



'It's incredible because everyone is just himself, no one is afraid of being judged. It's like being a family.'

Sergio Rossetti



'The simple fact of playing with team mates who don't judge you ... On the contrary, they need you!'

Daniela Benzoni

Why is MA rugby resulting in these benefits?

The research has highlighted key features of the MA Model that promote these benefits at individual, club and community level.

1. IMAS peer education and training

increases awareness around equality and inclusion and offers support for individuals, coaches and clubs that might be anxious about welcoming diversity. The presence of realistic role models that potential participants can relate to also reduces the fear of not being accepted and being perceived as different.

2. Creating a supportive mainstream environment

increases social integration between different groups, thereby normalising, and indeed celebrating, social difference. Part of this is promoting club membership rather than a 'drop-in' status for participants, which fosters a sense of equality, belonging and community as well as financial sustainability. This sets it apart from, for example, segregated disability sport provision.

3. Regular, frequent and sustained activity

makes building relationships and friendships, as well as fostering a sense of belonging and community, much easier. The MA Model promotes weekly training, regular matches against local community teams, and participation in tours and tournaments. This again, sets it apart from disability sport provision which often happens in time-limited blocks of activity.

4. Promotion of self-determination

whereby participants have the freedom to decide whether to assume the risks inherent in playing full contact rugby, rather than alternative formats such as tag or touch. The research shows this is an important element of MA rugby, particularly for disabled people who often are not given this freedom.

Conclusion

This research suggests that supporting grassroots rugby clubs to establish MA teams has the potential to increase participation in sport for traditionally under-represented groups. It can also result in a variety of benefits for the individual, the club and the wider community in promoting broader social inclusion. Therefore the MA Model could be a useful and innovative tool for organisations such as grassroots clubs, healthcare providers and national governing bodies seeking to harness the transformational power of sport in communities. In order for these benefits to be realised, MA sport needs to be promoted and supported at all levels and across sectors.

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About IMAS

IMAS believes that everyone should be able to benefit from the transformational power of sport to create healthy and happy communities. To make this vision possible, IMAS provides interactive and accessible training delivered by participants from a range of backgrounds to create sporting environments that are safe, welcoming and non-judgemental. This has been shown to overcome a huge range of barriers for people who may otherwise struggle to participate, as well as benefiting clubs and the wider community.

Sign the manifesto

IMAS' values are upheld in its Manifesto.

To find out more about Mixed Ability sports, and sign the Manifesto, visit the website:

 www.mixedabilitysports.org

