



## The Homeless World Cup through storytelling: The narratives of Street Soccer players from Scotland and the USA<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** The purpose of this paper was to explore: (a) What stories do the Street Soccer players draw upon to construct meaning around their experiences of trauma, social exclusion, and homelessness? and (b) What stories are linked to the subjective sport programming experience and resulting future orientations?

**Design:** A longitudinal narrative approach was adopted with semi-structured interviews conducted with players from Scotland and the United States ( $n = 16$ , 7 female, 9 male,  $M$  age = 27.5) across three time points. Interviews were also conducted with significant others ( $n = 13$ ) at time point three. All data were analyzed using thematic narrative analysis and represented in creative non-fiction approaches through three composite narratives.

**Results:** These narratives depicted visceral accounts of complex and developmental trauma, along with consequential experiences that unfolded before, during, and after the Homeless World Cup. While both preparing for and attending the event, players recalled concurrent feelings of anxiety and pride which manifested in various resilient and maladaptive coping behaviors. As the stories progressed, players battled a post event crash by engaging in support seeking and/or self-destructive behaviors before positive implications of the Homeless World Cup materialized.

**Conclusions:** Through creative narrative approaches, this study presents novel and engaging accounts of players' experiences before, during, and after the event. We also identify potential safeguarding concerns that can be addressed through trauma-informed practices.

Social exclusion and homelessness are global health concerns, with social exclusion defined as being emotionally and physically separated from others (Lutz et al., 2022), and homelessness defined as an absence of sustainable housing (Flike et al., 2022). Both are often caused or exacerbated by multiple intertwined adversities in childhood, known as complex and developmental trauma (Côté et al., 2022). It is estimated that 100 million people worldwide experience homelessness (UN Commission on Human Rights, 2005), 1.6 billion do not have adequate housing (Habitat for Humanity, 2014), and 113 million people in Europe are at risk of poverty or social exclusion (Eurostat, 2013). In Scotland, approximately 50,000 adults are homeless (Fitzpatrick, 2017), while in 2017 an estimated 2.1 million people experienced homelessness in the United States (US; Peng et al., 2020). These numbers are expected to rise

given the challenges introduced by the coronavirus pandemic (Barocas et al., 2021) and the refugee crisis (Strang & Quinn, 2021). Worryingly, those experiencing social exclusion and/or homelessness also disproportionately battle physical, psychological, and environmental adversities (Henwood et al., 2018), including addiction, which relates to habitual behaviors to achieve pleasure or escape from internal discomfort (Goodman, 1990).

Government-supported interventions have been introduced to address social exclusion and homelessness in the United Kingdom (UK) and the US (Hwang & Burns, 2014), such as permanent supportive housing or rapid housing. However, these do not always alleviate the wider issues of addiction, mental health issues, and unemployment, which have a considerable influence on social exclusion and

<sup>☆</sup> HWC Participants have been called players for the remainder of the manuscript.

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homelessness (Larkin et al., 2016; Pilla & Park-Taylor, 2022). When individuals experiencing social exclusion and/or homelessness also have a history of complex and developmental trauma, the ability for traditional services to meet their needs is even more challenging (Greenwood et al., 2020). This can result in individuals feeling trapped in an “institutional cycle” of homelessness, hospitals, jails, and prisons (Greenwood et al., 2020). Consequently, there have been calls for alternative, low-threshold services which place minimal demand on the service user, embrace trauma-informed practices, and provide strength-based care to those who need it most (Fitzpatrick, 2017; Fitzpatrick et al., 2013).

## 1. Sport-based interventions

One low-threshold approach that has been recognized for its potential to support socially excluded and homeless populations is sport-based programming, given its strength-based approach and popularity (Whitley et al., 2019, 2022). These interventions can provide access to a supportive climate, caring mentors, meaningful friendships, and new opportunities, along with viable routes to services such as mental health charities and housing services that are often inadequate in areas of deprivation (Cowan & Taylor, 2016; Whitley, 2022). Sport-based interventions have been credited with developments in emotional, social, and cognitive skills, which can transfer into other life domains (Whitley et al., 2019). Additionally, sport-based interventions can have psychological benefits for participants including reductions in depression, anxiety, stress, stigmatizing attitudes, and trauma-associated illness (D’Andrea et al., 2013; Sutcliffe et al., 2021). The benefits, however, depend on multiple conditions being met, such as trauma-informed programming, collaboration with interrelated services (i.e., housing, mental health, addiction), and guidance from caring and empathetic coaches (Cowan & Taylor, 2016; Whitley, 2022). Research examining a sport programme for disadvantaged populations found that coach transformational leadership behaviors positively predicted both life satisfaction and resilience when mediated by competence (i.e., when coaches helped players feel effective and purposeful at the programme). Surprisingly however, the only coach transformational leadership behavior to directly impact the lives of the players was high performance expectations which is usually an appropriate leadership behavior in military and elite sports contexts (Donnelly et al., 2023). Though interventions endeavor for optimal outcomes, success is determined by catering for the complex and ever-changing care needs of the service user.

Two of these sport-based interventions are Street Soccer Scotland (SSS) and Street Soccer USA (SSUSA), which offer support for individuals who experience social exclusion, homelessness, and other challenges such as substance abuse, mental health issues, and unemployment. Both SSS and SSUSA provide soccer sessions and other programming designed to cultivate growth and resilience in their players, along with access to educational, volunteering, and employment opportunities. They also facilitate referrals to addiction, mental health, and homelessness services. As the long-standing national partners of the Homeless World Cup (HWC), SSS and SSUSA also select players from across Scotland and the US to attend the annual HWC tournament. The HWC started in 2003 and now operates in partnership with a large network of Street Soccer interventions in over 450 locations in more than 70 countries (Prosocial Valuation Service, 2020). Unlike most international sports events, all teams compete for the same number of days, with a format comprised of a group stage followed by knockout rounds as teams compete for one of the eight trophies available. The HWC aims to empower homeless populations through various opportunities such as travel, networking, and support, while also raising awareness and shifting people’s attitudes about homelessness. The HWC attracts a global audience with local fans packed into purpose-built stadiums and games streamed online for fans watching at home (Prosocial Valuation Service, 2020).

Coinciding with the growth of the HWC is increased scholarly

attention on its impact. This includes research exploring players from Australia (Sherry & Strybosch, 2012), France (Trejo et al., 2017), and the UK (Magee & Jeanes, 2013; Sherry & O’May, 2013). Findings suggest that the increased opportunities for bonding, shared trust, motivation, and coaching support during the event can develop participants’ social capital (i.e., relationships involving mutual trust, shared objectives, and benefits) and self-esteem, while also helping them to overcome mental health issues, access new educational pathways, and connect relationships with housing, rehabilitation, and employment services (Sherry & O’May, 2013; Sherry & Strybosch, 2012; Trejo et al., 2017). In contrast to these positive accounts, research findings have also indicated that HWC participation can be a negative experience. For instance, a study exploring the impact of the HWC on players representing France found that players intent on winning the event experienced increased stigma, fear of failure, and competition anxiety (Trejo et al., 2017).

## 2. Narrative inquiry: theorizing trauma exposure and growth through sport

Thus far, the HWC evidence base has featured the experiences and outcomes associated with participation in the HWC, without much attention to the players’ identities, the embodied experiences that led to their HWC participation, and their actions and emotions upon returning from the event. Previous research has shared heavily fragmented insights of players’ sporting experience which only begins to scratch the surface of what it means to carry the residual effects of complex and developmental trauma, which is so often an antecedent to social exclusion and homelessness (Côté et al., 2022).

In order to dig deeper into embodied subjectivity and sociocultural narratives, this study operated within a relativist narrative inquiry (McGannon & McMahan, 2022). Narrative inquiry is both a theoretical and methodological approach which places humans centrally as meaning makers, as people construct stories to make sense of their identities, experiences, and (inter)actions (Smith, 2016). Simply put, stories are specific tales people tell. Narratives, in contrast, are socially and culturally available *resources* which can shape beliefs and influence the construction of the stories people tell (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Within this narrative inquiry, the Street Soccer players’ subjective and multifaceted identities are theorized, as humans interpret the world by engaging in narrative practices (e.g., sharing personal or collective stories) that allocate identity meanings (e.g., addict, victim, soccer player) and storylines (e.g., ready to compete in sport, crashing after sport) circulated by cultural means (e.g., coaches, peer group, support workers) (McGannon & McMahan, 2022). With this in mind, we also engaged significant others (i.e., coaches, family, friends) who may act as social architects who also craft narratives within the players’ stories as a result of their interactions and through the exchange of tales (Smith & Sparkes, 2009).

Narrative inquiry offers a framework to contextualize how the bodies of the Street Soccer players engage and make sense of the social world through stories drawn from socially available narratives (Frank, 2010; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Narratives are personal and cultural resources, as they have the capacity to *do things* by shaping our emotions, beliefs, and experiences through the witnessing and telling of stories (Smith, 2016). Thus, by eliciting the stories of homeless and socially excluded Street Soccer players, we may be able to contest the simple, socially constructed narratives regarding their identities (e.g., troubled vs. resilient), experiences (e.g., failure vs. failed by society), and future potentials (e.g., prison vs. employment). With this in mind, we must also recognize that stories told within certain narratives can evoke acceptance as intended or stigmatization as unintended because stories resonate in multiple ways and *do different things* to different humans depending on their own identities and experiences (Frank, 2010). These varying ‘takes’ on stories may hold significant pedagogical potential by generating critical reflections, challenging assumptions, and

encouraging discourse (McGannon & McMahon, 2022). Furthermore, as narratives resonate with a wider audience (Smith & McGannon, 2018), more people may gain awareness and insight about the lives and experiences of HWC players through narrative inquiry – which may, in turn, have a bigger impact on policy, practice, and research (Erickson et al., 2016; McGannon & McMahon, 2022).

This approach also challenges simplistic and segmented representations of Street Soccer players' engagement with the HWC. In essence, we prioritized the person who attended the HWC, rather than the intervention itself, to illuminate the broader historical and sociocultural implications of their journey (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). To establish a strong understanding of their identity as well as their lived experiences, a life history approach to narrative inquiry was adopted in the initial interview (Cowan & Taylor, 2016). Additionally, during that initial interview, along with subsequent interviews, we sought a deeper understanding of players' unfolding stories about their lives including but not limited to Street Soccer programming, the HWC and their future orientations.

### 3. Study purpose and research questions

This is the second paper published from a larger, multi-site, multi-stakeholder research project, with the first paper exploring the life histories of SSS and SSUSA players and their experiences in Street Soccer programming prior to the HWC (Whitley et al., 2022). That paper revealed the complex and developmental traumas (i.e., abuse, neglect, mental health problems) that act as antecedents to social exclusion and homelessness, shared stories of growth and resilience, and examined the impact of SSS and SSUSA programming. In the present paper, the focus shifts to players' journeys before, during, and after the HWC through cohesive and engaging stories. Specifically, we were concerned with: (a) What stories do the Street Soccer players draw upon to construct meaning around their experiences of trauma, social exclusion, and homelessness? and (b) What stories are linked to the subjective sport programming experience and resulting future orientations?

### 4. Methodology

Our narrative inquiry operated within a relativist ontology (multiple viewpoints exist), while occupying a constructionist epistemology (knowledge is socially constructed) (Smith, 2016; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Within a relativist narrative inquiry, researchers can adopt approaches as a story *analyst* (communicating analytical accounts of narrative) or *storyteller* (producing analysis within the story; Smith, 2016). In Whitley et al. (2022), we operated as story analysts by using thematic narrative analysis to communicate narrative themes of trauma, growth, and resilience among Street Soccer players prior to their participation in the HWC. Here, we furthered this analysis by shifting to a storyteller approach, communicating stories through Creative Analytical Practice (CAP). CAP encompasses creative forms of representation to show layers of lived subjectivity and theory in research findings (McGannon & McMahon, 2022). We used creative non-fiction, a form of CAP, to create composite narratives. A composite narrative is the creation of a single narrator or set of experiences to centralize a story, as opposed to snapshot (i.e., narrative sketches of an experience within a particular time and/or place) or portrait (i.e., narrative sketches providing insight into individual lives) (Spalding & Phillips, 2007). Creating composite narratives allowed us to: (a) protect the anonymity of the players, (b) present findings in an engaging manner, and (c) create composite participants based on the themes identified in our story analyst phase (Erickson et al., 2016).

#### 4.1. Positionality

While embracing our roles as storytellers within narrative inquiry, we were also cognizant that we, the researchers, have co-constructed the

stories shared by the Street Soccer players (Smith, 2016). As such, we were conscious that we bring our own reflexive baggage to the fore, requiring us to be aware of our positionality and how we alter the research process through reflexive practice. The primary Scottish researcher, Jordan, is an early career academic and former soccer coach who has experience living and working in Scotland's most disadvantaged communities, along with multiple years embedded in sport programmes evaluating their impacts on various populations. The primary U.S. researcher, Meredith, is a former university athlete and coach whose life has been both positively and negatively impacted by sport. Meredith also has extensive experience in qualitative research and in designing, delivering, and evaluating sport programming in under-resourced communities. Both Jordan and Meredith have developed multi-year partnerships with the respective Street Soccer organizations (i.e., SSS and SSUSA), which have been maintained through collaboration and reflexive processes regarding how we engage with Street Soccer staff and players to ultimately co-construct a research space to tell and hear stories.

Jordan conducted all interviews with SSS and performed the initial analyses of their stories, while Meredith did the same for SSUSA. Daryl collaborated with Meredith to develop the study design and to coordinate the data collection across multiple international sites. Daryl and Rosie also played the role as supervisors and critical friends to Jordan during the collection and analysis of the SSS stories, while Sara enacted the role of critical friend for Meredith. As a research team, we framed the research within a multidisciplinary lens of trauma-informed practice and psychosociological perspectives in an aim to advance the research in this field.

#### 4.2. Participants and procedures

Following ethical approval from the primary researchers' institutional research committees, Jordan and Meredith met independently with SSS and SSUSA to discuss recruitment procedures. Both Street Soccer organizations facilitated identification of the participant pool and consideration of who should be contacted: (a) to ensure those invited to participate were comfortable being interviewed, (b) to enhance the diversity of those invited to participate, and (c) because staff were required for logistical purposes (e.g., access to facilities for interviews). Both SSS and SSUSA supported the player recruitment process by inviting each player attending the HWC to participate in the study and by making each potential research participant aware of each stage of the research process through our participant information sheet. Those recruited by the respective Street Soccer organizations represented a larger participant pool than the final sample, ultimately meaning that the organizations were unaware of which HWC players would be interviewed for the study.

Our sample comprised 16 Street Soccer players (eight from SSS, eight from SSUSA) with a range of experience in Street Soccer programming (2 months–11 years). Players (seven female, nine male) ranged in age from 18 to 45 ( $M = 27.5$ ), with 11 players identifying as white, four as Black, and one as Latinx. Five players were immigrants or refugees born outside of the US or Scotland. The interview timeline is outlined in Figure 1, with data from time point one interviews reported in Whitley et al. (2022). At time point one, life history interviews ( $M = 45$  min) were conducted with players in-person ( $n = 15$ ), with one conducted through video call due to geographical challenges ( $n = 1$ ). The interviews encouraged players to focus on specific moments throughout their life stages and domains (i.e., childhood, school, early sporting experiences) in approaches consistent with life history interviewing (e.g., Cowan & Taylor, 2016), along with questions about the Street Soccer programming and the upcoming HWC.

To explore players' experiences at the HWC, semi-structured interviews ( $M = 37$  min) were conducted at time point two in-person ( $n = 4$ ) and, due to geographical challenges, over the phone ( $n = 8$ ). Four of the original sample were not interviewed at this time point for various

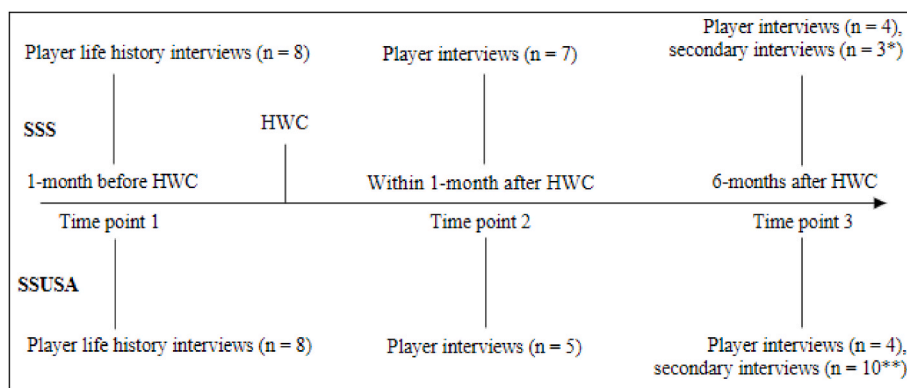


Fig. 1. Interview timeline and participation.

\*SS coach ( $n = 2$ ), sister ( $n = 1$ ).

\*\*SS coach ( $n = 6$ ), sister ( $n = 1$ ), friend ( $n = 1$ ), (step) parents ( $n = 2$ ).

reasons (e.g., unresponsive to researcher invitation, disengagement from Street Soccer programming). The purpose of these interviews was to explore their experiences at the HWC and their return home to their respective countries in the immediate aftermath of the event. Following each interview at time point two, we asked players to identify significant others who could provide further insight into their stories. These interviews would be conducted to gain a more holistic insight into the players' stories. Yet, we were aware that some players would be hesitant to identify others and therefore, we did not push any player to do so.

Time point three interviews ( $M = 38$  min) took place in-person ( $n = 2$ ) and over the phone ( $n = 6$ ). Four players who took part in time point two interviews were unable to take part in this final interview for various reasons (e.g., full-time employment, unresponsive to researcher invitation, disengagement with Street Soccer programming, changes in psychoactive medication, return to addiction rehabilitation center). These final interviews further explored players' experiences at the HWC, the long-term implications of the HWC and interrelated Street Soccer programming, and players' future orientations. At this time point, semi-structured interviews ( $M = 42$  min) were also conducted with 13 significant others (see Figure 1 for more information). These interviews explored their relationships with the players, along with the players' life stages and domains (i.e., childhood, school, family, homelessness, immigrant, and refugee status) and the players' experiences in Street Soccer programming and the HWC.

#### 4.3. Thematic narrative analysis

As story analysts, we adopted analytical guidelines outlined by Smith (2016). These principles act in meaningful coherence to our relativist ontology as it recognizes that narratives are cultural sites of analysis that "do things" to different humans by impacting beliefs, experiences, and (inter)actions (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Our analysis was conducted in a cyclical and interactive manner which began with a process of narrative indwelling (reading and re-reading transcripts) while noting memos and initial impressions. Narrative themes and relationships were then identified by Jordan and Donnelly, while the subsequent authors served as critical friends to challenge their construction of knowledge and the narrative threads and tensions that were observed in the players' stories (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Following this, themes and thematic relationships (first within country, then across country) were identified which was followed by further critical discussions regarding the detailed descriptions and interpretations of these themes and thematic relationships. Within this process, we endeavored to keep the stories intact, seeking both manifestations and latent meanings of data without segmenting the data into fragments. The initial findings from this analysis are presented in a realist tale in Whitley et al. (2022).

#### 4.4. Storied representations

Furthering this analysis, we shifted to a storyteller approach by centralizing themes from participant interviews to create storied representations of the chronological themes that were identified in our story analyst phase. The centralized themes of trauma, growth, resilience, Street Soccer experiences, HWC experiences, and future orientations existed in all the players' narratives, but manifested differently based on their embodied experiences. As storytellers, we aimed to communicate theory in stories, by conjuring images and vivid descriptions of the players' lived experiences before, during, and after the HWC (Smith, 2016). To achieve these, composite narratives were crafted by the co-authors by merging fragments into typologies which reflected players' and significant others' experiences and reflections, which was enhanced by centralizing authentic words, phrases, and passages from participants' experiences to retain their voices (McGannon & McMahon, 2022). To best depict the longitudinal nature of the data collected, and in accordance with guidance from Smith (2016), we developed each composite narrative through a chronological and cohesive plot with a beginning, middle, and end. However, we leave the final word open for ongoing interpretation (Smith, 2016) or, as Frank claims, 'in the interpretation of a story, as in the telling of a story, no speaker should ever be finalized' (2010, p. 16).

### 5. The narratives

#### 5.1. Alex: struggling forward

My childhood was filled with chaos, violence, and drugs. I witnessed more than I could bear. It was only a matter of time before the madness caused Mum and Dad to split – they resented each other in the end. At times I thought Mum even resented me; it sure seemed that way with the amount of time I spent on my own. Dad left, and then Mum started looking for comfort elsewhere. She always picked the wrong men who were drunks or wasters and these relationships never lasted. There was this one guy who she would spend more and more time with, and he would come around our house a lot. He was violent and they were fighting all the time. I can still hear the noise of that diesel engine coming up the driveway. When the car pulled up, I knew I was getting it. I could feel it. I would try to protect my mum; I felt that responsibility, but I was only a teenager fighting a grown man. He'd always get the best of me, I always took second prize, and I hated him. There are only so many times someone can batter the fuck out of you before you have to leave. So ... I left. I left my Mum with him. Part of me felt guilty, part of me thought "fuck you, you chose him over me; so ... have him."

That's when drugs came into play. I started off with weed and a bit of coke, but eventually, that wasn't enough. This led to party drugs and the



club scene, then to heroin and crack. I spent years at rock bottom, injecting drugs that weren't taking away what I was feeling inside. Everyone closed their doors to me and told me to "fuck off" and I was just walking around the streets of my own town. Totally lost. Sleeping on the streets underneath the cameras because it's not a safe city when you're alone at night.

I eventually found a hostel and began a cycle of some treatment, and at some points, I'd get clean for long enough to be allowed to go and see my kids, but the pressures of trying to stay clean would get too much for me and I'd relapse. My kid's Mum found my stash of needles and my foil for cooking, and I was back on my own again. They were ashamed of me, and I was ashamed of myself. Being back on my own without being able to see my kids, suicide was a constant thought on my mind. I even tried – unsuccessfully. After that, I was back alone in the hostel and that was the darkest time of my addiction. People would find me in piles of vomit and force me to go back to treatment again. It was absolute torture.

One of the times I was back in treatment, I heard of Street Soccer, and I wanted to try it out. It was the first time I'd kicked a ball in twenty years. It was daunting going there, but I got introduced to every player and the coach. They were amazing and so easy to talk to. They told me a bit of their story, then I told them mine. There was no judgment. That was so different to how I felt about myself - I didn't feel I was worthy, but they did. Street Soccer isn't only about football; it's about building lives and helping people to move on. I took part in their programme for a while and that's why I think I was selected to go to the Homeless World Cup.

Thinking about going was a bit of a rollercoaster for me and sometimes I can't see the light for the darkness. Even when good stuff is happening, it's really difficult to change that negative belief system because of everything I have been through. But getting selected was a bit of a turning point in the relationship that I have with my Dad. For the first time, he told me that he was proud of me. He booked a flight to come and see me play. When I told my sister that things were getting better with Dad before I left for the tournament, we just sat and cried together in the car. It was beyond my wildest dreams.

Leading up to the tournament, I was excited ... but I also had a lot of nerves. I was going to be representing my country. I wanted to do a good job, but I didn't have much experience with people expecting so much from me. It was so normal for people to think of me as nothing, so it made me nervous when I was expected to do well with everyone watching me. These nerves didn't go away, but things did shift a bit when I walked out to the pitch for the opening ceremony - hearing the national anthems. There was a buzz, a bonding, a camaraderie in our team and with other countries that I will never forget. I was with people from different countries who all have been through some really bad shit, and I thought, "*we have all been through the same thing*" – it felt like a celebration. I felt like if I can get through these moments, and see other people do the same, then anything is possible.

After the parades, we got into the games, and the first few days went quite well because we were winning, but after that, we did quite poorly and that's when I noticed a split happening within our team. You could see people disappear into their shell. I did my best to try and bring everyone back together, but it was a bit overwhelming. Here I was representing my country, with all these eyes on me and people were beginning to fall out towards the end. My nerves just spilled over. So, when the tournament ended, I made the decision to walk away from everyone, and went for a few drinks. I needed to escape, everything just felt so intense. When I got back, I got caught. Seeing the faces of the coaches – people I respected – was hard. They were disappointed in me. It was supposed to be a dry tournament, and they also knew about my lifelong struggle with drink and drugs. I took responsibility and I held my hands up and apologized, but even when I woke up the next day, I was like "*wow – that was a bad mistake.*" I spoke with the coaches on the way home, and they told me that it was a learning curve, that I should learn from it and work on building our trust back up again.

Coming home, I crashed hard! It was overwhelming. It left me

thinking, if I am looking forward and getting ready for something for eight or nine months or traveling to a different country, I think I need to be better prepared for coming home to normal life or I'm going to hit a dip that I will need to recover from. Sometimes I would see my teammates and Street Soccer would try to bring us all back together to process coming home. Sometimes, they would call to ask me how I was or try to get me to go down to the drop-in sessions, but I think it was difficult to take that first step to go back to Street Soccer after coming home. Fortunately, I was lucky enough to be coming back to some work and that I had other services and family there that could support me. I think without that and without some of the strength I've built up over the past few years, God knows where I would have been.

But I think looking back at it all, the most meaningful thing that happened in all this is that my father flew over to see me play for my country. We were able to share an experience and memories. After so many hard years, this experience was a catalyst for a more meaningful relationship with him. I just feel this sense of gratitude after Street Soccer and after the Homeless World Cup. It's untapped things that I thought I never had within me. I lost a lot of belief in myself because of the violence and my addiction. But I'm feeling more resilient and confident now and that's been amazing for me. I am financially stable. I have a job and a home. Now, I am rebuilding my relationships with my family, with my children. I take care of myself more now. And now I know that if I am struggling, it doesn't matter as long as I am struggling forward.

## 5.2. Jamie: were they ready? Was I ready?

Growing up wasn't easy. My family was distant. Mum was there physically, but not emotionally. She was always with us, but she was never there. Dad worked away from home a lot. At school, I always felt different and left out. People picked on me and the bullying turned violent at times. I was jumped once, but no one really cared. The school certainly didn't. I felt like an outsider when I just wanted to feel a part of something.

When I was 9, I was sexually abused by a neighbor. This continued for 7 years, several times a week ... I never told anyone. It was just part of my life. This made me suspicious of everyone, even now. Sometimes I think I see him, which makes it difficult to even get through the day.

To cope with everything, I dabbled with weed, coke, and sometimes heroin. Other times I would cut myself so deep that I'd end up going to hospital. I was clinically depressed. So low that I tried to end my life several times. I also became homeless because no place would take me in. My mental health made me look really bad on paper. I remember my social worker sent me to seven different facilities. They didn't even meet with me; they'd just read my file and reject me. So, I moved into the psychiatric facility. I lived a clinical existence in that place. I just existed. I got up, was given medicine under supervision, took part in supervised activities, and went to bed. Day after day, for three years. I was trapped.

My social worker at that time brought a football into the facility and saw me kicking it around. So, he emailed Street Soccer and that's when they arranged for me to try it out. I was terrified! That's when I met Anna – my coach. My social worker left me with her. I can remember feeling betrayed when she left, but Anna was kind and told me her story of battling mental health issues and addiction. This made me feel less alone ... and safe. We'd play football and I would run around kicking the ball. I didn't care that I wasn't fit, I just loved it. And the hugs! They gave me hugs and that just made me feel like I belonged. Finally. I was worth something. It's crazy – all of that came from a hug. Come to think of it, it was the first hug I'd had in months.

Street Soccer was my only sense of freedom. That year, I never missed a session. Eventually, I was selected to attend the Homeless World Cup. I had so many mixed feelings from being shocked and honored, to thinking that they were joking. As the tournament got closer, I felt nervous about going to a new country. When we arrived, I experienced such a culture shock. But the anthems were fantastic on the

first night, and the parade made me feel so proud to be waving the our nation's flag. The football, however, was stressful. It made me realize that I don't handle stress very well. I wasn't alone. We were all stressed. And it was hard dealing with the team. We weren't used to being around each other all the time, with different opinions and feelings. At times, people just didn't get on. It was difficult, and a lot of people went out on the last night and drank. They drank because they struggled to cope with what they were feeling. I felt like I had been refereeing their arguments for days, but in the end they all left me to go away and drink. Many of us were away from home for the first time which was especially hard because a lot of us were addicts and needed extra help - I think some of us might have needed more support.

By the end of the tournament, I was ready to head home. But when I got back, I experienced the most unpleasant comedown because I was in my flat without my teammate to keep me company. I sat in my cold flat in silence. Coming back to this? There's nothing here for anyone. Having such a high of the tournament to the lows of returning home, I self-harmed again and ended up in hospital. I know I am not the only one. It got me thinking ... was I ready to be selected for the Homeless World Cup?

Although it was hard coming home, I do see the world in a different way now – after some time adjusting and getting the support from Street Soccer after the tournament. Looking back, I know I gained a lot from that experience. I have more confidence and I feel more motivated. It's also helpful to have Anna by my side. She saw how hard it was for me to come home, and she gave me the support I needed. And she keeps telling me how much I have changed. I'm still part of Street Soccer. Still haven't missed a session. So much has happened to me and I have had so many setbacks, but I feel that nothing will stop me now.

### 5.3. Casey: reaching out and moving on

Mom got pregnant with me when she was 19. She didn't want kids yet, but Dad put holes in the condom, and she was trapped. *What an asshole*. She tried her best, with me and my younger sisters, working all the time to pay the bills, but I just remember the fights. They were epic. They would start with the usual stuff – arguing about money, jobs, family – and then things would turn violent, especially when they drank, which was most nights. Dad moved out when I was 8 and they finally divorced a few years later. Mom tried on her own for a while, but we were really struggling. I feel like her marrying James was a business deal, in a way. He was verbally, physically, and sexually abusive to all of us, but Mom stuck with him. I remember the nights when he would drink too much whiskey, hearing him stumble down the hallway, praying it wouldn't be my turn ...

What's weird is that I didn't push back – or even, like, retreat into my own world. Instead, *I latched on* for dear life. I relied on Mom and James for everything. And when Aaron showed up, everything switched to him. He was my boyfriend, off-and-on, for 9 years. He treated me just like I expected. I can still hear him telling me “you're nothing” and “you're a fat piece of shit”, which I believed. But I felt safer with him than anywhere else. He told me what to do, where to go, and how to get through each day, which was hard because I was so anxious around people. He also gave me cocaine, which let me ‘check out’ for a while, making me numb while he used my body.

Over time, the cocaine wasn't enough to mask my self-hatred, and one morning, I grabbed a knife and cut my wrists. He called 911 and left me on the kitchen floor, where they found me. This should have been the turning point, right? It wasn't. I went right back to him, starting the cycle once again, but the one difference was I knew there were these people, these programs, these places that are there to *help* people like me. I didn't know it then, but this worked its way into my mind, sitting there, waiting for me to make *my own decision*, for once in my life. Well, I didn't have to wait long, because one night, he passed out on top of me, and as I was struggling to get out from under his body, he woke up, yanked my hair, and said “where the fuck do you think you're going?”

He then grabbed his gun, shoving it into my mouth, talking about how he owned me. I talked him down, and eventually got him back to sleep, and then got the fuck out of there.

I found a card I had stashed away with the name of some treatment center, called them up, and they got to me before he did. *Phew*. But now what?

Well, it's not like things turned around all at once, but after the treatment center, I was placed in a sober house that connected me to a therapist ... and to Street Soccer USA. This was the first time in my life where people started *showing up*. My case manager at the sober house came to one of my first Street Soccer games. My therapist held space for me each session to share and process what I needed, for the first time in my life. My coach and teammates checked in on me but didn't pressure me to do anything I wasn't comfortable with. It took 6 months before I finally opened up to them, but this group of women were there, every practice and game, sharing stories that were similar – but different – from mine. No judgment, only support. Over time, I also realized I had fun playing soccer and was actually a decent player, which felt *good*.

After about a year, I was selected as a member of the next Homeless World Cup team for Street Soccer USA. *Whoa!* This was maybe the first time I've ever felt ... special? And yet, I almost didn't go. I was so anxious. Anxious about traveling on my own, anxious about meeting new people, anxious about playing in front of the world. I packed and unpacked my bags so many times the night before my flight before I convinced myself to go. I'm so proud I was able to make that decision, but it was hard. Really hard.

It's not like it was a cake walk when I got there. My nerves were getting the best of me the first few days, but I reached out to my coach for help. This was a huge step for me. I didn't know her, but my time in Street Soccer USA has taught me that the coaches – and my teammates – will always support me, no matter what I'm going through. What also helped were the team building activities and games we played together, which reinforced the focus on relationships and our overall experience at the world cup. In fact, I don't think our coach ever talked about winning. *What a relief*. This seemed different from some other teams there, with rumors that some even stacked their teams with the best players. That wasn't us.

Towards the end of the tournament, I started introducing myself to people from other teams and had some cool conversations about their experiences back home. I'm even still in touch with some over social media! I did not see that coming. I was motivated when I got back, though it wasn't smooth sailing. The World Cup felt like *this bubble*; coming home was a bit of a shock to the system. Things weren't so simple. It's not like I didn't have any support, as I was still living in the sober house and taking advantage of the different resources there. I was also seeing my therapist and going to Street Soccer practices and games. But I think the experience at the World Cup was so all-encompassing that I struggled a bit when I returned, back to normal life. But some of the lessons did stick with me. For example, I got fired from my job soon after I got back, but rather than wallowing in self-pity or trying to figure things out on my own, I reached out to my team. They ended up helping me find another job quickly. I have also started having conversations with people I never would have spoken to before, such as chatting with the cashier at the grocery store or speaking with a new resident at the sober house. Rarely do these conversations lead anywhere, but I'm proud that I'm looking for opportunities to connect with others, rather than isolate – like I did in the past. I also like myself better than I used to if that makes sense. If I can represent our country at the World Cup, what else can I do?

## 6. Narrative reflections

This study was designed to explore: (a) What stories do the Street Soccer players draw upon to construct meaning around their experiences of trauma, social exclusion, homelessness? and (b) What stories are linked to the subjective sport programming experience and resulting

future orientations? To achieve this, we centralized the chronological themes that were identified in our story analyst phase to construct narratives which illuminated typologies and subjective experiences of sport programming (and beyond). These visceral and holistic stories extend the HWC evidence base in meaningful ways, offering a much greater understanding of players' lived experiences before, during, and after the HWC.

This is where we might dive into a more traditional interpretation of the findings, yet we were conflicted in our dual roles as storytellers and researchers. We harbored concerns that a more traditional approach features the researchers' voice, rather than the participants' (Carless et al., 2014; Smith, 2016), and that researcher-driven interpretation of participants' stories can hinder their capacity for evoking reaction and response from the reader (Erickson et al., 2016; Smith, 2016). With this in mind, we crafted this section to think and write *with* the stories rather than *about* them, drawing attention to their implications and contributions to knowledge (Frank, 2010). Since stories can inspire readers (both scholarly and layperson) to meaningfully engage with societal issues with fresh perspectives (Smith & Sparkes, 2009), we sought to raise awareness of specific moments in players' journeys, while highlighting their broader implications through and beyond sport programming. We invite readers to consider our reflections below, while also creating their own interpretations of the stories, which may result in deeply personal reactions and divergent conclusions.

First, we draw attention to the universal accounts of complex and developmental trauma (e.g., abuse, neglect, domestic violence, instability, substance misuse), before highlighting subjective depictions of the resulting adverse experiences (i.e., social exclusion, violence, substance addiction, mental health issues, homelessness, self-harm, suicide attempts). As noted previously, the existing HWC research explores the experiences and immediate outcomes associated with the event itself, without a deep exploration of players' stories of trauma, growth, and resilience that led them to participate in the first place. This has resulted in a limited understanding of *who* the players are and *what they need* from the programming. Without recognition of the player's identities and needs, we may continue to cultivate HWC programming that can end in feelings of failure and isolation (Trejo et al., 2017), alcohol binges (Magee & Jeanes, 2013), and post event crashes observed in the stories we share above. Continuing to overlook the players' vulnerabilities and capacities to engage in such an event may have catastrophic consequences in the future. Ultimately, these stories act as cautionary and compelling resources for those connected to the HWC, Street Soccer programming, and beyond. While there are many lessons to take from these narratives, we would like to highlight two in particular: (a) the need for empowering but protective environments for those selected to attend the HWC; and (b) the need for ongoing support from caring and trauma-informed staff (i.e., coaches, teachers, counsellors) (Whitley, 2022).

Our storyteller approach also highlighted the complexities that exist for those taking part in Street Soccer and HWC programming, which are dependent on a range of factors (e.g., sense of self, emotions, lived experiences) that can shift and change over time (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). For instance, the three narratives shared above portrayed the experiences of HWC selection and participation as being both a source of pride and anxiety, which unfolded and manifested differently based on players' lived experiences prior to the HWC as well as their embodiment at the event with coaches, teammates, and family members, along with the result of soccer matches. Through narrative inquiry, we were also able to highlight the role of wider actors (i.e., family, coaches) who shape and change the players' stories, with different influences and impacts depicted across the two Street Soccer programmes (Smith, 2016). For example, Alex's father attended the HWC, leading to the development of a stronger relationship and an avenue for support seeking behaviors which can further foster resilience building, growth, and development in the aftermath of sports programming (Whitley, 2022; Whitley et al., 2022). Casey's narrative emphasized the role of the

coaches throughout the HWC, which swayed the ethos of the tournament from a soccer competition to an environment that cultivated relationships, motivation, and resilience. Support from her coaches protected Casey from the competitive pressures that can arise at the HWC (Trejo et al., 2017), allowing her to establish more meaningful relationships with her teammates (at that moment) and with players from other countries. Street Soccer coaches, therefore, should be cognizant that their empowering and relationship fostering behaviors can have an impact on the HWC experience, which if successful and maintained, can lead to wider developments in resilience and life satisfaction in the wider world (Donnelly et al., 2023). Conversely, the social tension that arose in Alex and Jamie's recollections led some players to cope through isolation and/or alcohol use which has been referenced in the previous HWC research (Magee & Jeanes, 2013; Trejo et al., 2017). Without *speaking for* the players, we believe that these visceral and engaging accounts of their HWC experiences will draw the reader's attention to not only *what* but *who* is important in shaping a positive, meaningful, and sustainable experience in sport-based interventions.

Another area we would like to draw attention to, which we feel offers a significant contribution to the knowledge base, comes from the players' accounts of returning home from the HWC. Their experiences illuminate a universal depiction of a post event crash. Sport psychology researchers may be aware of the post-Olympic blues that elite athletes may face in the aftermath of the Olympic and Paralympic Games, which can result in depression, feelings of failure, and alcohol abuse (Bennie et al., 2021). While this is concerning for any athlete, it may be more alarming for HWC players, given the prevalence of their exposure to complex and developmental trauma, among other adversities (Whitley et al., 2022). This type of post event event crash and feelings of extreme anxiety and/or emotional unsafety could heighten the risk of re-traumatization (McMahon et al., 2022). In the narratives of Alex and Casey, it is clear how the post event crash manifested in a momentary shock to the system and low mood, which was followed by resilient support seeking behaviors from various sources (e.g., therapist, Street Soccer coaches, sober house, family, friends). In Jamie's case, however, this post event crash and feelings of isolation and loneliness resulted in self-harming behavior that required medical attention. Though Jamie fortunately recovered, her hospitalization is a reminder of the vulnerability of Street Soccer and HWC players. Despite these post event crashes, the players' resilience showed – as did the impact of the HWC – through the universal theme of “*nothing can stop me*” and “*struggle forward*.” That being said, and despite the benefits, it may be that the post event crash is the biggest threat to HWC players. When combining negative coping strategies at the event (Magee & Jeanes, 2013; Trejo et al., 2017), with potentially harmful post event crashes, it is important the Street Soccer staff are cognizant of their developmental potentials through and beyond sport (Donnelly et al., 2023), and their need to adopt trauma-informed practices (Whitley, 2022; Whitley et al., 2022). This requires careful consideration of how to optimally prepare players for the event and how to provide appropriate support to players long after their return for the event.

### 6.1. Practical implications

In line with our storyteller approach, it is not our intent here to speak *for* the Street Soccer players or to replace their compelling stories with own interpretations. Instead, we want to highlight practical implications which might address these broader safeguarding concerns, with a focus on how sport-based interventions might provide better support for players. This addresses a gap in the existing HWC research, which has not focused as much on the complex and developmental trauma faced by players and/or trauma-informed practices that were (or should be) utilized. When cultivating programming for those who have experienced complex and developmental trauma, a foundation of psychological, physical, and social *safety* is paramount (SAMHSA, 2014; Whitley, 2022;

Whitley et al., 2022). Indeed, when people who have been exposed to complex and developmental trauma are subjected to unsafe situations, they are likely to experience extreme anxiety and/or hypersensitivity which increases the risk of re-traumatization (McMahon et al., 2022). Therefore, both Street Soccer programmes and the HWC must consider the moments in which participants may perceive their safety to be threatened, with specific strategies to address these moments. In the first instance, it may be beneficial to create an evidence-based screening process to determine whether a player is ready to attend the HWC, if one is not already in place. For instance, if a player has recently experienced a substance relapse, significant mental health issues, or engaged in self-harming behaviors, then HWC participation may do more harm than good by disrupting their routine, separating them from their support networks and services, and taking them to an unfamiliar and competitive environment. There may also need to be mandatory post event programming to ensure a safe transition between the HWC and “normal life,” where the players may no longer be celebrated in a similar manner and/or have this type of support from their coaches and/or teammates. Furthermore, it is imperative that Street Soccer players are aware of what the experience entails, who will be involved, and how the event will unfold. This may ease players’ anxieties about *what to expect* at the HWC and beliefs that they *need to perform well* in the games, which can lead to emotional unsafety, maladaptive coping strategies, and even re-traumatization (Magee & Jeanes, 2013; Trejo et al., 2017). With *transparency* in mind, there is a need for clear and consistent boundaries regarding the developmental ethos of the HWC towards reintegration and rehabilitation. Though healthy competition is encouraged, allowing a dominant competitive narrative to prevail at the HWC will likely lead to maladaptive outcomes for players, placing them at risk of anxiety and/or re-traumatization (SAMHSA, 2014). Finally, we recognize the importance of peer support and that stories can *do things* and alter future horizons. With this in mind, we encourage Street Soccer programmes to cultivate environments where stories are shared to build trust, promote healing, and challenge stigma (SAMHSA, 2014). Like approaches of Personal-Disclosure Mutual-Sharing (PDMS) in sport psychology (Evans et al., 2019), it is important for players to feel support from their teammates and coaches before, during, and, perhaps most importantly, *after* the HWC, with an emphasis on sharing personal stories. When stories of complex and developmental trauma can be exchanged in a safe and caring environment – along with stories of growth and resilience – sustainable relationships can manifest, creating a pathway for healing and rehabilitation through storytelling (McMahon et al., 2022).

## 7. Conclusion

This study presented novel and engaging narratives from Street Soccer players. By using a storyteller approach to narrative inquiry, we prioritized the voices of socially excluded and homeless populations who are often spoken *for* rather than *with*. This extends the existing body of research on HWC experiences and outcomes, with a focus on complex stories that unfolded before, during, and after engagement in sport-based programming. This was of particular significance in gaining an understanding of who the players are, the adversities they endure(d), what they hope(d) to achieve, and what they may need from sport-based programming and beyond. In a similar vein, our storyteller approach highlighted how the players’ subjective realities of the HWC are not constant; rather, they change over time based on the support players may (not) receive from teammates, coaches, friends, and family members, along with a range of other individual and contextual factors. Such complex variables can be incredibly influential at the end of an event like the HWC and its aftermath when players may be at a heightened risk for a post event crash. Given this, we recommend the use of trauma-informed practices to increase the likelihood that the positive outcomes associated with HWC participation (i.e., meaningful relationships, resilience, new sense of self) can manifest, while mitigating the potentially dangerous outcomes associated with participation. We

identified these practices in the spirit of *peer support*, endeavoring to illuminate evidence-based, trauma-informed strategies that might help a wide range of stakeholders delivering or engaging in sport-based programming. Yet our commitment to the role of storyteller remained, with a focus on *hearing* the players, centering their narratives, and encouraging you, the reader, to draw your own interpretations.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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