



## Games are called games for good reason



**Douglas Robb, Headmaster of Gresham's School, says sport should be fun and schools need effective organisation to ensure children recognise this**

Researchers at the University College London (UCL) Institute of Education Centre for Longitudinal Studies examined data from more than 10,000 teenagers who are taking part in the Millennium Cohort Study – a study tracking the lives of thousands of youngsters born at the turn of the century – and revealed that “more than one in three British teenagers are overweight or obese”.

Cue educators, health foundation spokespeople and campaigners writing about what can be done. Professor Mary Fewtrell of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health suggested: “A range of measures must be considered including... statutory school-based health education in all schools.”

Health education in schools would certainly provide children with the knowledge to make informed decisions about their health. But let's not forget how, as youngsters, we might have reacted to being told to eat five a day or avoid sugary drinks, or to being forced to go on a long walk in the summer holiday. I remember feeling immortal, and I'm sure that many young people do today too. So while I don't disagree with providing young people with health education, I am not convinced that doing so would resolve the issue of one in three teenagers being overweight or obese.

Nor do I think it would address concerns about young people at the opposite end of the fitness spectrum. When schools and governments consider how to instil in pupils positive habits for a long and healthy life, they must recognise that not only are one in three teens overweight but, of the other two in three, many will have different, but equally unhealthy, relationships with fitness and diet.

Many of today's young people obsess about achieving levels of muscular definition that are worryingly

unhealthy. Bombarded with images of well-defined six packs, tiny waists, taut and defined upper arms, and slender or muscular legs, they develop skewed ideas of what is 'normal' or achievable. They feel under such pressure to achieve so-called 'perfection' that sport and exercise are viewed merely as a means to achieving an extraordinary physique, rather than as an integral part of a healthy life – both physically and mentally.

But the links between sports and wellbeing are clear. Sport encourages people to spend more time outside, to have a go, to lose, to try again, to work in a team, to hone skills and, finally, to see the results of determination! Young people need to see these benefits if they are to move their thoughts away from gyms and diets, towards thinking instead about sport and exercise for developing strength and stamina and, essentially, for having fun!

For me this is the crux of the matter: sport should be fun. Games are called 'games' for good reason, and to ensure children recognise this, schools need effective organisation. The right people need to be involved at all levels, to schedule suitable fixtures and events, to carefully timetable and manage facilities, and to communicate with pupils and parents about expectations, pressures and positive attitudes.

Sensible coaching is paramount too. We have pupils from two to 18, so PE lessons understandably vary a great deal in terms of challenge and competition across the school. That doesn't mean, however, that 'sport for all' – a term often used by schools to denote that they allow pupils to choose which sports to do during PE lessons – is the answer. If pupils avoid sports they find most challenging, they'll also miss out on the positive aspects the sport entails, such as working in a team, or developing the dedication to improve.

Yet there's no exact science. While some children will take to competitive sports and teamwork more quickly, others will be hesitant, and require more coaching and encouragement. So, if we want to encourage children to develop positive relationships with sport and exercise, schools need to have the very best staff. From heads of department and sports teachers to coaches and staff running clubs, those who can read each situation and identify the appropriate level of competition or encouragement for each group are going to be the ones who ensure children experience the right combination of challenge, and joy.

And only with the right balance will young people develop positive attitudes to sport and fitness that will serve them well, physically and mentally, for life. ■

“If we want to encourage children to develop positive relationships with sport and exercise, schools need to have the very best staff”



famous alumni | gresham's school



# Reaping the rewards of rugby

## International School Sport

<http://flickread.com/edition/html/index.php?pdf=5baa0294502fa#18>

*Gresham's School staff have inspired hundreds of pupils to progress with careers in rugby with outstanding results*

At Gresham's, while we completely understand that rugby might not be everyone's cup of tea, we are firm believers that all pupils should still experience the thrill of it.

There is such pleasure to be had from competitive team sports. The rugby pitch is often the place young people learn to develop discipline, and respect for teammates, coaches and competitors. The way teams work together in rugby also offers fantastic rewards through the camaraderie that is developed, and the shared disappointments and successes experienced.

The extreme competitive nature of the game is something all young people should experience at some point too: it encourages resilience, but also a sense of perspective when it comes to overcoming failures and pushing through to make progress.

But to support all pupils in experiencing rugby as a thrill, rather than as a threat to be avoided, we have to make sure that we are running lessons, clubs, training and fixtures in a way that all pupils can enjoy.

Traditionally, schools like Gresham's would have had 'school sports', whereby fixtures would be offered to those who made the team. A more modern take is to offer everyone the opportunity to play in a competitive game if they want to.

For this to work, however, schools need to run a sufficient number of fixtures. It's never been too difficult to organise an



ABOVE: Former Gresham's School pupils and brothers, Ben and Tom Youngs, both play for Leicester Tigers and England  
LEFT: Harry Simmons is a Tigers academy graduate who plays for the Leicester Tigers Development Team



impressive schedule of fixtures for first XV teams, but making sure third XV teams also have opportunities for regular competitive games is just as important.

At Gresham's, our third XV boys, who may initially have been quite reticent rugby players, will happily talk about how they enjoy especially muddy afternoons of rugby, because they play in groups where they feel they are on equal footing with their teammates.

What's more, as well as creating the right number of teams and organising fixtures at the right level, a good Head of Games will have the confidence to approach his opposite number ahead of a competitive fixture with another school and say, for instance: "We've got quite a weak team playing this week – could you weaken yours so that the boys all get a good, competitive game?"

An 80-nil score is not a positive outcome for either team, so ensuring all players have a good match is much more important than one team feeling like they have thrashed the other!

Much of this is common sense – it just takes those in charge to remember that this is what school sport is about – and this is as true for rugby as it is about any other sport.

### THE RIGHT COACH

Having the right coach is key. If schools are going to start to rotate captaincies and encourage full competition at the right time for a particular group of pupils, it takes experienced coaches to ensure the right balance is achieved, to create an experience that is positive for all players.

One such 'right coach', Mr Richard Brearley – former Deputy Headmaster at Gresham's Prep and a very well-loved 'coach' – retired this summer, after 35 years



“My words of advice to pupils would be to be bold and have a go. I was afraid to fail, as a pupil, but I've learnt that, through failure, come the best of life's lessons. I feel really lucky to have had all of the opportunities available at Gresham's”

at the school. On his departure, Mr Brearley reflected on his passion for rugby, explaining that it was borne from the sport's inclusive nature. Rugby caters for all shapes and sizes and inspires so many pupils, including those who are not typically sporty, but who have gone on to achieve wonderful things.

His enthusiasm and dedication to rugby inspired hundreds of pupils to progress with careers in rugby – most notably, professional international players (and brothers) Tom and Ben Youngs, who both play for Leicester Tigers and England, and Harry Simmons, a Tigers academy graduate who plays for the Leicester Tigers Development Team.

Tom and Ben Youngs visited Gresham's in the summer to speak at the Prep School Speech Day. Speaking of his time at Gresham's, both on and off the rugby pitch, Ben, who plays at scrum-half, said: "Everyone always has a couple of teachers that make a lifelong impression on them and Mr Brearley was certainly one of mine. His ability to bring the best out of you in the classroom and on the sports field

shows how talented he is. He was a brilliant motivator on the rugby pitch and he played a big part in helping me achieve my potential.

"My words of advice to pupils for the future would be to be bold and have a go. I was afraid to fail, as a pupil, but I've learnt that, through failure, comes the best of life's lessons. I feel really lucky to have had all of the opportunities available at Gresham's to try things out, and to have had the support of coaches like Mr Brearley when doing so."

Tom Youngs, hooker, said: "Mr Brearley was the first coach who showed me the passion and winning attitude you need to have to play rugby well. This has stuck with me over the years. I have some wonderful memories of my school days on the rugby field, playing under his guidance, and I remember so many opportunities to excel. The sports field really helped me to find my feet, develop my passion, and build my work ethic – and not only on the rugby pitch. Hard work gave me the reality of living my dream. Part of this is being able to take criticism, and to use it as guidance to help you do better."

Harry Simmons, reflecting on his own time at Gresham's, said: "Mr Brearley was a brilliant coach. He was always incredibly dedicated and passionate about the sport, and having a coach like Mr Brearley definitely played a huge part in inspiring me to play rugby from a young age. I'm hugely grateful for the influence that he, and school rugby in its entirety, has had on me." ■

