

**Discussion Paper: Considering the contribution of snooker in the context of a policy brief on 'Sport and physical activity, COVID-19 and the mental health and wellbeing crisis'**

***Author: Rohit Sagoo, on behalf of the English Partnership for Snooker and Billiards (EPSB), April 2021***

**Background and context**

As the COVID-19 pandemic has spread throughout the world, it has caused widespread disruption in many countries that has enforced varying degrees of lockdowns including rules around personal hygiene, social distancing and wearing facial masks.

In order to limit the spread of the virus many institutions including sports facilities were forced to close during the lockdown period, and in some cases for over a year during the pandemic. In the case of snooker, the closure of snooker clubs since March 2020 in the UK has had an impact on the 'everyday' snooker players that enjoy playing the game either as a pastime or competitively.

Though the elite snooker players have been playing on the World Snooker Tour with COVID-19 regulations in place, the snooker clubs that support the amateur and everyday players have not been active throughout the pandemic. For the everyday player, playing snooker has an impact on their mental health and wellbeing and this paper will gather evidence to show that snooker can be used to aid the recovery of everyday players that have been starved of playing snooker during the pandemic, and how snooker supports their mental health and wellbeing from a holistic perspective.

The 'everyday player' is a reference to all snooker players of all levels that visit local snooker clubs to play the sport as opposed to those who play the sport professionally on the World Snooker Tour.

This paper will present evidence to demonstrate how snooker for the everyday player can contribute to policy drivers in sport with a focus on activity-based interventions aimed at supporting mental health and wellbeing outcomes, using snooker as a tool for social and emotional development.

As restrictions in England are relaxed there will be many hurdles to jump for the participation in sports at local level such as re-engaging people from the local communities to participate in sports events, such as clubs with competitive sports and leisure activities. More so, the World Professional Billiards and Snooker Association (WPBSA) – the governing body for snooker – continued to offer and promote mental health support throughout the pandemic to players, partnering with organisations such as the Sporting Chance Clinic.

The WPBSA also launched home-schooling resources for young people during the pandemic, while the English Partnership for Snooker and Billiards (EPSB) – the English governing body of snooker – will be relaunching its junior snooker summer holiday club programme to encourage young people back into snooker clubs this summer. These planned activities are linked programmatic interventions and social networks that will help to improve mental health, support wellbeing and resilience, and help to tackle social isolation among young people.

With the recommencement of club snooker from mid-May, it is important to recognise the mental health and wellbeing of everyday snooker players. To support everyday players, the WPBSA signed up to the Mental Health Charter for Sport in April 2016. There was a need to create an awareness of mental health in the world of snooker. By signing the Mental Health Charter, the WPBSA ensured its commitment to making a positive contribution to mental health awareness through published research, putting support mechanisms in place for everyday players to contact organisations such as the Sporting Chance Clinic and Silence of Suicide and also having in-house support for professional players from the World Snooker Tour.

By signing up to the Mental Health Charter the WPBSA has committed to the following objectives:

1. Promote wellbeing
2. Adopt good mental health policies and best practice
3. Promote positive messages using diverse role models and ambassadors
4. Tackle discrimination
5. Support a pan-sport approach, sharing resources and best practice

6. Monitor performance, assess progress, and take positive action on mental health issues

Mental health and psychological wellbeing are a large segment of the core root of human life. Consequently, mental health and wellbeing has grown in its stature of awareness in society. For the everyday snooker player, one of the most important aspects of health promotion in snooker is that the everyday snooker player enjoys playing snooker, which contributes to positive physical and mental health, and is psychologically beneficial.

When stating that snooker can be viewed as mentally and physically positive, we point to the 'feel good' factor around playing snooker that makes it enjoyable for the everyday snooker player. Research suggests that there is growing evidence to support the link in positive effectiveness, such as increased feelings of happiness and satisfaction when partaking activities as part of developing one's positive mental wellbeing. This suggests that engaging in social activities such as snooker may possibly have a contributory impact on an individual's mental health and wellbeing, especially as playing snooker could also be viewed as an independent activity. Sagoo (2017) asserts that snooker is an independent activity, as playing snooker is primarily a solo activity, even if played with a partner.

Over the last year COVID-19 has highlighted the health inequalities that we face in the UK, highlighting the barriers that prevent individuals participating in sporting activities. These barriers include social inclusion, economic costs, geographical location, poor physical or mental health and wellbeing, age and disability.

There exists a well-established need to support and enhance the wellbeing of all people through utilising opportunities within sport and leisure. Interventions through social pastimes give greater access to older people to actively participate in sport and leisure in their daily lives. Studies have shown that when older people engage in social activities, whether it be in day care centres or social clubs, they gain a sense of collectiveness amongst the group of participants.

Studies have also shown that there is a sense of 'inclusiveness, belonging and ownership' when groups of people come together to play snooker. There is growing evidence to support the link in positive effectiveness, such as increased feeling and emotions of happiness and satisfaction, when partaking in activities as part of developing one's positive

mental wellbeing for all everyday snooker players. Moreover, we need to consider the impact of those in our communities that have been hardest hit by loneliness caused by the pandemic.

Loneliness has been a significant public health issue during the pandemic and has an impact on peoples' mental health outcomes because of physical distancing and the decline of personable social contact. Evidence suggests that this has caused the following for some individuals:

- An increase in mood disorders, self-harm, and suicide
- A rise in situational loneliness, causing experiences of chronic loneliness
- A negative impact on personal hygiene and physical health, e.g. control of diet and alcoholism

Hence, public concern for the impact of social isolation must be addressed and one of the ways in which to assist is to enable people to support others managing their feelings of loneliness. Therefore, once lockdown measures have been lifted in England, people will be able to participate in sporting activities such as snooker, and this will increase social engagement, thus, lowering their risk of being lonely and reducing the experiences of loneliness.

To highlight the sport of snooker as a sociable activity that helps to reduce the impact of the pandemic, one study (Sagoo,2019) suggests that snooker has the ability to build social participation, increase knowledge, especially around the sport of snooker, increase engagement in sport and maximise the social experience.

### **Objectives and Focus**

To better understand how to protect and enhance the contribution sport and physical activity can make to addressing the mental health and wellbeing emergency brought on by COVID-19, it is important to consider snooker as one of the sports that has held its own during the pandemic. Certainly, the professional sport run through the World Snooker Tour has continued to entertain sports fans around the world.

However, snooker clubs have been closed during the lockdown period. The closure of snooker clubs has led to non-participation of the sport for the 'everyday' snooker player. The pandemic has decreased people's regular activity and people have tended to be less physically active, have longer screen time on mobile phones, consoles and other technological equipment, irregular sleep patterns as well as worsening diets, resulting in weight gain and loss of physical fitness and mental focus.

Sagoo (2017) showed that snooker can be used to improve cognition from using mathematics, physics and memorising the rules and regulations of the game. This in turn improves focus when playing snooker and reduces the everyday anxieties that individuals may face. Hence, Sagoo (2017) found snooker was viewed as a calming and a somewhat therapeutic sport. And the benefits of such periodic moments of playing snooker have proven very helpful, especially in times of anxiety, crisis and fear.

To enhance the future policy and practice to promote the contribution of sport and physical activity to mental health and wellbeing outcomes, it is beneficial to address the issues from a four-framed perspective, as follows:

**Issue:** Social and physical distancing measures, lockdowns of businesses, schools, and overall social life, which have become commonplace to curtail the spread of COVID-19 have also disrupted many regular aspects of life, including sport and physical activity. COVID-19 has hugely challenged the sporting world with regard to physical activity, wellbeing, and mental health, including for marginalised or vulnerable groups (United Nations, 2020).

**Proposal:** The development of a snooker ecosystem that comprises of all snooker club owners, organisations such as the EPSB and WPBSA, snooker fans and all everyday snooker players to find ways of initiating support for one another for a return to playing snooker. Engaging with communities is essential, collaboratively working with local snooker clubs and mental health organisations such as MIND to address the mental health challenges that everyday players may face, e.g. a return to in-person socialisation, motivation to play sports again, encouraging people of all ages to participate in snooker as a way of creating an activity of daily or weekly living. Thus, creating a flexible weekly routine of playing snooker as a physical

exercise every day to help with stress and restlessness. There is evidence from Sagoo (2017) to support the case that snooker can foster physical fitness, mental wellbeing, as well as positive social attitudes and behaviour. The snooker ecosystem will include all genders and those with disabilities who enjoy playing snooker. The EPSB and WPBSA, along with MIND and the Sport for Development Coalition, will support their mental health and wellbeing when everyday players return to play snooker. This proposal must include investigation of the experiences of everyday snooker players to use as case studies for the transformation of playing snooker in post-pandemic times. The case studies will consist of a wide variety of experiential and reflected views from everyday players including those with disabilities (seen and unseen) and all genders.

**Rationale:** To maximise the benefits of sport, physical activity, mental health, and wellbeing in all age groups and abilities, and increase the participation of playing snooker from the pandemic and beyond. Moreover, to reflect the experiences of everyday snooker players of all abilities, ages and genders from previous research and case studies.

**Potential Impact:** Reigniting positive social attitudes and behaviours, and increasing positive mental health and wellbeing in all communities that have a local snooker club or the facilities to play snooker. We will engage with hard to reach individuals in communities to encourage them to play snooker as a social pastime.

## **Summary**

Playing snooker can indeed be an important factor in developing social integration and improving people's mental health and wellbeing and it would be a pleasure to see a greater proportion of all age groups becoming engaged in snooker as an everyday activity.

Our proposal will highlight the challenges COVID-19 has posed to the snooker community from all aspects of physical activity, and mental health and wellbeing, including for marginalised or vulnerable groups. We will also consider the economic repercussions, the cancellation of snooker as a local sport and its impacts on social benefits which cement

social cohesion, contribute to the social and emotional excitement of everyday players and fans, as well as the identification of the greater physical and social activity that snooker represents.

Through sports participation with a focus on snooker, various social groups can play a more central role towards social transformation and development, particularly in divided societies. This is evident from the research carried out by Sagoo (2019) which found that snooker as an activity for older people contributed to positive social cohesion and wellbeing. Thus, creating learning opportunities around the sport of snooker and enjoyment in playing the game. But most of all it offered access to sport for marginal or at-risk populations.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic has had and will continue to have very considerable effects on sport and exercise as well as the physical and mental wellbeing of people around the world.

Moving forward, we must maximise the benefits that sport and physical activity can bring beyond the pandemic. With this borne in mind, the sport of snooker and its governing bodies, wish to be involved with the Sport for Development Coalition and MIND in tackling the mental health and wellbeing crisis created by a lack of playing and participating in sport through the pandemic.

## **References:**

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