

## Dr Mike Clark on Sporting Memories and Dementia Care

As we slip in to autumn, a super summer of sports draws to a close. How much did you enjoy the Test cricket series? Glasgow hosted the Commonwealth Games and Wimbledon delivered its annual festival of tennis. Yorkshire played host to the Grand Départ of the 2014 Tour de France with Cambridge and London hosting stages 2 and 3 respectively. And will you ever forget the shock result of the World Cup semi-final between Brazil and Germany?

Perhaps you aren't especially interested in sports and none of these events really lit up your summer, but I bet you recall something from the 2012 London Olympics. Or perhaps you have memories of sports at school, or during childhood holidays, or of members of your family who were keen sports fans.

Sport is such an integral part of our culture and history that it is difficult for anyone to not have some powerful memories associated with it. This is where the **Sporting Memories Network (SMN)** is working to draw together the power of sports memories to help in the care and support of older people, especially those living with dementia. SMN's projects have included delivering training to staff in care homes, community groups, and specialist dementia care units on using sporting memories as reminiscence therapy – a way of engaging in conversation and social contact with older people, especially men who may so often feel excluded from things.

Sitting in a training session with a group of staff from community groups and care homes provided the opportunity to see the potential power of sporting memories. People who didn't really know each other before the session were quickly exchanging stories of their sports memories, of school, communities and families – experiences that people hadn't thought about for a long time were suddenly rekindled by the reminiscences of others, and a huge amount of social history was recalled and retold. Another example of the power of unlocking sporting memories can be seen in the short film, *Bill's Story*.

I have been evaluating this work and collating the learning in this approach, and what I have found so far from my examination of the SMN's work is:

- staff in all of the settings readily take to sporting-memories work, even those who had no interest in sports or who were apprehensive about doing it before the training;
- staff report that they have engaged many older people who were not very engaged in the community group or care home;
- staff have felt a sense of satisfaction from engaging in sporting-memories work, helping with their motivation;
- some families visiting relatives in care homes have found the sporting-memories materials helpful to engage with their loved one who is living with dementia;
- the approach is very versatile and can be used in many different ways and in a variety of settings.

The SMN is now exploring the potential of sporting-memories work to also:

- open links between communities, older people and local sports clubs;
- break down some of the metaphorical walls between care homes and communities;
- develop intergenerational contacts and connections between people.

The SMN has been covered in the national media (for example, **Soundcloud**, **The Guardian** and **The Daily Telegraph**), has now attracted the support and sports stories of many sports people and other celebrities, has **won a national Dementia Friends award**, and has been **recognised for its work by the Department of Health and the Prime Minister**. Most recently, in September 2014 the

SMN was named by The Observer newspaper and Nesta (a charity promoting innovation) among their **50 New Radicals**.

I'll be continuing work with the SMN to learn about the impact of sporting memories in helping people to connect with their memories and each other through sports reminiscence and keep you updated with news of this work as it develops.

For me the summer included making some new sports memories with my son Noah. My super innings against him at beach cricket (it is a sport now) and watching him learn to ride his bike will live long in our family memory. Sporting memories go deeper in us than you might at first think—collect and treasure them: you may want to use them in later life.

*About the author: Dr Michael Clark is the Research Programme Manager for the NIHR School for Social Care Research and is based at the London School of Economics and Political Science.*

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September 11th, 2014 | [Dementia Care](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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