

IT'S NEVER CLEVER TO BE STUPID So Just Show a Bit of COVID Common!

When you hear leaders of any organisation saying things like 'it is what it is'; or 'we've just got to do what is needed', it rarely suggests that there is a firm grasp or understanding of what the problem is. It more suggests that things are going a bit wonky and everyone is working on the hoof to try and get out of a corner. Be it politics, science or sport if we don't show we have control then people soon work out that you haven't got control.

I've been looking with interest at how difficult it has been for sport to restart during these difficult times. The need for safety has been paramount but at times I always believe that you have to look at problems more bravely and imaginatively to find the solution that creates a longer-term benefit. Fortune really does sometimes favour the brave and turning a problem on its head may just give you an answer you wouldn't have initially considered.

As the grounds of lower league clubs stood deserted for months it was clear that big football was seen as important and that lower league was merely a hobby. The Premier and Championship were allowed to restart, be it without fans, but anything under that was given the order stand down or more accurately 'stand over there, wait till we think of something and keep quiet'!!

It really felt that stark didn't it? Clubs like Cheshunt were sitting in limbo with little idea of what the future would hold for it. With average crowds of 175-200 fans were perceived as an unnecessary risk and one that if allowed to return would commence the immediate return of spiking COVID figures and another lockdown. Consequently all clubs at Steps 1 and below sat empty for ages, facing business ruin and the loss of huge amounts of community history.

So here is my twist in thinking. Why was that decision taken? Why was shut down allowed to last so long?

I won't argue with the initial lockdown as we had scientific risk assessment that said we faced a meltdown in NHS functioning and an increasing fatality rate if we did not take drastic steps. Where I disagree with how football was managed is failing to see how important it could have been and still remains in demonstrating positively how football can be used to get communities to take safety recommendations seriously.

Right now what seems to be the biggest issue is no longer gaining an understanding of how to manage the pandemic but how we get communities

to accept their responsibility in controlling the virus. Areas across the UK are currently going under further restrictions because they seem incapable of controlling their behaviour and taking some degree of social responsibility.

On a few weeks ago during a trip with my wife to Folkestone in Kent I was walking along Marine Parade and was shocked to see what appeared to be huge family gatherings happening on the beach and promenade. One group was well over thirty, another in excess of twenty. No social distancing, no thought and no common sense.

The *Rule of Six* wasn't being introduced for another twenty-four hours but the publicity about rising infections was everywhere so why did people take such an irresponsible attitude to safety?

My mum used to say 'It's never clever to be stupid', in this instance I genuinely wanted to preach her gospel. However in that moment I also thought what positive images have been used to really educate the public? What events have been held that demonstrate that you can manage fun and still be safe?

People not using common sense has always been fairly common hasn't it? Nobody should be surprised to see behaviour that is inexplicably stupid at a time like this, what we should be angry about is what opportunities have been wasted to communicate managing risk in areas that people will use day to day.

Keeping crowds away from stadiums may actually be a very counter productive move. In fact it can make it appear that we are powerless to control things when the opposite may well be nearer the truth.

Stadiums like Cheshunt's have very large areas of safe outside space, and it has a strong committee in place that looks at how we can do things rather than assume we can't. The stewarding and sign posting of the stadium is already good and there is no reason we cannot make it better. With co-operation of supporters across all sport we can help give real positive examples of how we can have society operating safely through good example, good structures, and the maturity of supporters. I doubt very much that this group of people would let us down given their desire to have some of things they enjoy in life back.

So as we move into a period where the risks of increasing infections is a clear reality are we again going to lockdown areas or are we going to take a different view of using some areas of communities as an opportunity for positive illustrations of what we can do if we keep to guidelines. It may be difficult to

steward Westfield Shopping Centre on a Saturday afternoon but is it impossible to make Theobalds Lane a safe environment for two hours?

If such decisions are taken bravely, risk assessed properly, are well managed and well communicated then they can provide communities with positive illustrations of how you can achieve things and be used to demonstrate to local people what they can have if they are prepared to work and function as stronger communities.

The language around this pandemic needs to change and positive images of what works will have a far greater impact than continually criticising communities or age groups. We all know that some groups are not taking management of the virus seriously but surely by now we also know that just repeating the criticism is unlikely to work either.

Hopefully within the next few months we will see some advances in introducing a vaccine and that will more than anything else allow us to get back to a way of life but until then we have to build a new way of life and it is in my view no longer enough just to put people behind doors.

Allow the most popular sport in the UK to be part of showing what we can do if we work together as a community and just how positive that can be for the future of that community and our wider society.

Written by Tony Madden