

## Coaching neurodivergent athletes



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# Introduction

## Introduction

This course is designed to improve the knowledge and understanding for anyone working with neurodivergent athletes in sport and exercise settings or with an interest in coaching neurodiverse athletes. Within the sport and exercise sector this may include those in coaching roles, as well as fitness instructors, personal trainers and wider exercise professionals. Throughout this course when referring to neurodivergent athletes this will include athletes who may not be aware of a condition.

The course is divided into 4 weeks with approximately 2 hours of study allocated to each week. How and when you complete the content is entirely up to you. The first week provides a general introduction to neurodiversity with the three remaining weeks exploring neurodiversity from different perspectives within sport and exercise settings, and bringing this all together in the final week. The weeks are:

1. What is neurodiversity?
2. Neurodiversity in sport and exercise: an athlete's voice
3. Neurodiversity in sport and exercise: the family's voice
4. Supporting athletes in practice: creating a safe environment

Throughout the 4 weeks you will gain a unique insight into the lives of athletes, coaches and families to understand what it means to be neurodivergent and how this can influence participation and athletic development. You will apply theory to practice in a range of sport and exercise settings to begin to consider how you can shape your own coaching practice to support athletes with a neurodiverse condition. Although the audience is specifically those working or intending to work with neurodivergent athletes the course may also have some interest for others working with neurodiversity in different settings.

The content of the course is not designed to elicit difficult emotions in any way, but we recognise that sometimes covering emotive topics like this means some learners may be reminded of challenging past personal experiences, or experiences of those close to them. Identifying sources of support and self-care can be really useful for your wellbeing whether you are a coach, athlete or student, so you might want to do this at regular points during the course. If at any time you feel uncomfortable during the course try taking some time away, invest time in some self-care strategies, and return to the course when you feel comfortable

You may wish to download the OU Wellbeing App (on [Android](#) or [Apple](#)) which contains a range of information, tools, resources and interactive support all about developing and monitoring good habits to maintain your wellbeing. The app will help you learn new techniques and methods to monitor your wellbeing progress over time.

By the end of this course, you should be able to:

- define neurodiversity and explain why it is significant in a sporting context
- describe different neurodiverse conditions and their potential impact on athletes
- consider how coaching practices can be tailored to meet the specific needs of neurodiverse athletes.

### **Moving around the course**

In the 'Summary' at the end of each week, you will find a link to the next week. If at any time you want to return to the start of the course, click on 'Full course description'. From here you can navigate to any part of the course.

It's also good practice, if you access a link from within a course page, to open it in a new window or tab. That way you can easily return to where you've come from without having to use the back button on your browser.

You can now go to [Week 1](#).



# Week 1: What is neurodiversity?

## Introduction

In this first week of the course, you will familiarise yourself with the key terminology and how this will be used throughout the course. Following this the concept of neurodiversity is explored including the potential strengths and challenges that may arise when working with neurodiverse athletes in a sport and exercise setting. You will be introduced to a range of neurodiverse conditions and the different models of neurodiversity and start to consider the importance of understanding how neurodiversity is viewed within society and the implications this may have on neurodiverse individuals. The power of the communication between a coach and neurodivergent athlete is examined, alongside the research linking neurodiversity and mental health.



By the end of this week, you should be able to:

- explain the concept of neurodiversity and define a range of neurodiverse conditions
- understand what influences communication between individuals with different neurotypes
- describe the links between neurodiversity, mental health and wellbeing.

# 1 Defining key terms


Before you explore this topic in more detail, a quick note about terminology throughout this course. Firstly, the term 'athlete' is used in a broad way to describe any participant of any age and ability engaging in a range of sport and exercise activities. Secondly, the term coaching is used to refer to any scenario where an individual is working with a participant in a sport and exercise setting. Thirdly, you will see the use of 'condition first' rather than 'person first' descriptions of neurodivergence. This includes phrasing such as an 'autistic person' as opposed to a 'person with autism'. There are different ideas on which approach is most useful, with varied approaches being adopted in different countries.

As this course is written in the UK, by UK-based authors, the condition first approach is adopted throughout. This reflects the lived experience of neurodivergent people in the UK, and how they feel their condition is an important part of them and their identity – hence 'autistic person'. However, it is also important to note that some people do prefer person first phrasing. As many elements of this course will highlight, this reflects the need for person-centred approaches and can often mean asking individuals how they prefer to be addressed.



Neurodiversity is by its very definition diverse in nature, covering a range of brain functioning. Neurodivergent conditions include ADHD, autism, dyspraxia and dyslexia among others, and the term 'neurotypical' is often used to describe what the majority of a population may experience. The first activity introduces you to these terms and explores them further.

## Activity 1 Matching exercise on key terms

 Allow 20 minutes

1. Below are six terms frequently used within the topic of neurodiversity. Are you already aware of any of these terms? If so, note down their meaning for any that you are able. If not, do not worry and move on to question 2.

ADHD

Autism



Dyslexia

Provide your answer...

Neurodiversity

Provide your answer...

Neurodivergent

Provide your answer...

Neurotypical

Provide your answer...

2. Now visit the Neurodiverse Sport website and use their [Glossary page](#) to check your understanding by completing the drag and drop activity below, matching key terms to their definitions.

ADHD

Autism

Dyslexia

Neurodiversity

Neurodivergent

Neurotypical

Match each of the items above to an item below.

ADHD: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a neurodevelopmental condition characterised by differences in attention and regulation of impulses which can impact on daily tasks.

Sometimes known as Autism Spectrum Disorder, this is a condition which displays different patterns in communication, behaviour and other social interactions.

This is a difference in learning which impacts how someone reads, writes and/or spells.

This term describes differences in neurological development which we see across a whole population of people, often viewed as natural variation.

This term describes an individual whose neurodevelopment is not considered typical. This is often accompanied by a diagnosed condition.

This term describes an individual whose neurodevelopment is considered typical and within an accepted range.

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### Discussion

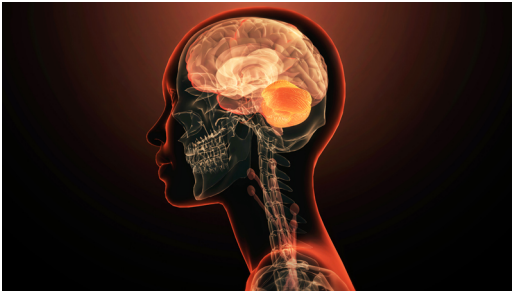
Some of these terms may be new to you, and some may be terms you have heard of or are quite used to. This activity only touches on some of the language used to describe neurodiverse experiences in wider society as well as sport and you may have noticed that a key thread running between them is how individualised these terms can be. How one athlete experiences, manages or communicates about a neurodivergent condition can be very different to another athlete. This means as a coach you cannot for example assume how one person experiences their autism is the same as the next person, so it is important to be open to individualised experiences of this and therefore adjust any coaching approaches accordingly.

The definitions included on the Neurodiverse Sport website also include strengths, which will be explored throughout this course. You may wish to make a note of this webpage as it will be useful to return to if you need to reinforce your understanding of these key terms.

This course will help you consider the importance of acknowledging how neurodiversity impacts athletes in coaching environments and explore how coaches can make their practice and environments supportive of neurodivergence. You will now look in more detail at different models of diversity and how this impacts the ways neurodiversity is viewed and talked about in wider society.

## 2 Models of neurodiversity

As Activity 1 explained, the term neurodiversity is at its core a description of differences in how all our brains work and function. It could be suggested that as individuals, all our brains work in slightly different ways anyway due to genetics, health, and social factors which influence our development. In a more day-to-day sense, the term neurodivergence is commonly used to describe individuals who have developed one or more of the six conditions you have just learned about.



The variety of conditions described by neurodivergence has often meant viewing neurodiverse experiences through a medical lens, focusing on those diagnoses and a 'deficit' model and creating stigma around it (Hoare *et al.*, 2023). This means viewing any form of neurodivergence as something different from what society describes as normal experiences (neurotypical), therefore that individual is 'missing' something in how their brain works or processes information. Consequently, these experiences are compared with what might be termed normal experiences which results in not only highlighting and maintaining difference, but importantly suggesting these differences are a sign of something being wrong with an individual. This keeps the medical condition at the centre of any discussion, viewing it as something which needs to be cured or treated, often preventing an individual from accessing everyday experiences.

More recently, social models of neurodiversity (and other disabilities) have emerged which position neurodiverse experiences within social interactions and influenced by the world around us. This has helped shift thinking from a deficit model to a strength-based one and has been reflected in informal approaches by coaches in sport (Hoare *et al.*, 2023; Kimber *et al.*, 2023). As a result, elements of neurodiversity which in the past were viewed as negative and not 'normal', can now be viewed as something to be championed and utilised. For example, an autistic person who may have taken a lot of time to write a report at school may have been highlighted as requiring additional support to meet deadlines, rather than viewing their thoroughness as a positive. For example, in a study by Kimber *et al.* (2023) exploring coaches' experience of working with neurodivergent athletes, one participant captures how this applies within a sporting context:

I think some of their focus and determination is rooted in the(ir) autism ... their determination and single-mindedness with the task at hand, that can be quite helpful.

Through a strengths-based approach like this, an athlete's neurodivergence can be viewed as a trait which means they are very thorough and likely to stay focused on the task at hand.

With these key definitions and models in mind, the next section looks at how neurodivergence influences communication with others.

## 3 The power of communication

In line with looking at neurodiversity through a deficit model, it is often assumed that autistic people in particular experience difficulties in communicating effectively. Recent research has suggested that difficulties may not arise from something 'wrong' with a neurodivergent individual, rather this comes from a mismatch in the neurotype of who they are communicating with (Crompton *et al.*, 2020). Crompton *et al.*'s study found that communication of information between two autistic individuals can often be very successful, and it is when two individuals of very different neurotypes are communicating where difficulties may occur. This suggests that any miscommunication is a result of differences between both autistic and non-autistic individuals. Due to the prevailing deficit models around neurodiversity, this often means the 'fault' in any communication breakdown is directed at the neurodivergent individual rather than the neurotypical one. This is something which can be challenged in coaching practice, and you will learn more about this throughout the course. The next activity will help you explore how neurodivergent individuals experience everyday challenges and start to consider how this applies to your coaching.



### Activity 2 Communication and coaching environments

 Allow 20 minutes

Click on the link below to view an interactive resource produced for the *Inside Our Autistic Minds* television programme produced by the BBC and The Open University.

Open in a new tab or window so you can easily return to the course.

[Explore Inside Our Autistic Minds](#)

Once you have accessed the resource, click on the blue arrows in turn within each of the five themes: anxiety; communication and language; routine and predictability; sensory issues; social comprehension and interactions. Depending on your device, you may need to scroll down the interactive to see all of them.

When you click on each theme consider the following questions:

1. How might some of the lived experiences being described be experienced by an athlete in a sport and exercise setting?
2. How might some of the experiences described influence athletes before they arrive at a coaching session?
3. If an athlete has similar experiences to some of those described, how might this influence how they communicate with their coach?

*Provide your answer...*

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### Discussion

1. When working through each theme, you may have more detailed thoughts on some more than others – don't worry if this was the case, it would not be surprising! However, you may have thought about how an unexpected change in routine during a coaching session may be difficult to manage for some athletes. You may also have thought about how encountering new people in a session might influence how an athlete may communicate with their coach, or even their teammates.
2. Prior to turning up to a coaching session, an athlete may have had an overwhelming experience at school or work which would impact how they engage with the session. They may have had a change in routine when travelling to the session or been delayed on their way.
3. These experiences could mean an athlete may find it hard to communicate with their coach and their peers. Reflecting the individualised nature of neurodivergence, this could mean they appear withdrawn, display emotions more readily, or generally present with behaviours you are not used to.

Activity 2 touched on how a range of issues inside and outside of a coaching environment may impact neurodivergent athletes and how effective communication could be impacted. To help you understand the wider impacts of this, the next section looks at the relationship between neurodiversity, wellbeing and mental health in more detail.

## 4 Neurodiversity, wellbeing and mental health

There are well-reported links between neurodiversity and mental health (Graf-Kurtulus and Gelo, 2025), with this often being a response to issues around fitting in with a neurotypical world rather than direct psychological links. The emotional and sometimes physical energy required can lead to poorer mental health outcomes, alongside clinical diagnoses of depression and anxiety (Graf-Kurtulus and Gelo, 2025). Sport and exercise psychologist and former athlete Kristin McGinty-Minister describes her personal experiences of neurodivergence in sport as follows:

I believed that my sensory challenges, masking, and confusion about social expectations were universal experiences that I was a failure for not being able to cope with. I began to see my autistic traits as flaws and fortified my own masks, eventually leading to a shutdown diagnosed as depression and anxiety at the time. Despite engaging in therapy, I still felt something was 'off', prompting a deeper search for answers.

(McGinty-Minister, 2024, p. 25)



**Figure 1** Kristin McGinty-Minister

Kristin's experiences demonstrate how 'intersectionality' can influence an individual's mental health. This is a key concept which describes how multiple parts of someone's

identity overlap, or intersect, to amplify their experiences of inequality and the subsequent impact this may have on their wellbeing. Other intersecting parts of an identity can include things like gender (Collins, 2024), ethnicity (Green, 2020) or sexuality (Beato *et al.*, 2024), among others. Therefore, athletes who have multiple intersecting parts of their identity can be more adversely impacted than others. For example, a neurodivergent Black, female, bisexual athlete would be more likely to experience poor mental health than a neurotypical white, male, heterosexual athlete.

Neurodivergence can be more common in sporting contexts than wider populations, with suggestions being that traits associated with neurodivergent conditions can be beneficial in these environments (McMurtry *et al.*, 2025). It is important to recognise that many athletes exhibiting neurodivergent traits, with associated needs, will not have a formal diagnosis. This could be the case with adults in particular. Some of the negative views attached to neurodivergent individuals rooted in those deficit approaches may even mean athletes actively avoid being labelled as such. This reinforces the need for individualised coaching approaches to supporting the wellbeing of athletes.

## 5 Summary of Week 1

This week has introduced the concepts of neurodiversity, neurodivergence and defined a range of conditions associated with this. It has discussed the different models of neurodiversity and the importance of adopting strengths-based approaches, alongside how concepts like intersectionality can impact athletes you may be coaching now or in the future.

In the next week of study, you will look at these experiences from the athlete's perspective and start to consider how you can apply this learning to your own coaching practice.

You can now go to [Week 2](#).





# Week 2: Neurodiversity in sport and exercise: an athlete's voice

## Introduction

This week applies your learning from Week 1 to consider neurodiversity from an athlete's perspective. You will explore the real-life experiences of neurodiverse athletes from grassroots to elite level, through viewing a range of quotes, case studies and videos. Some of the research within this area that is beginning to inform practice is also considered.

The sensory issues that may be experienced by neurodivergent athletes in a range of sport and exercise settings are also discussed as well as a consideration of how coaching practices can be altered to meet an athlete's needs.

One athlete who has been vocal about her neurodivergence is England footballer Lucy Bronze. At the time of writing the course, Lucy plays for Chelsea Women in the Women's Super League and represents the England women's football team. You will watch further clips later in the course to hear more about Lucy's experiences, but for now watch the clip below and consider how some of the information in Week 1 is reflected in Lucy's story.

[Lucy Bronze opens up about autism & ADHD diagnosis](#). Watch from 0:37 to 1:40.

By the end of this week, you should be able to:

- consider how athletes with sensory issues may experience different sporting physical spaces
- describe the term 'masking' and its relevance to neurodivergent athletes and their mental health and wellbeing
- recognise how the structure of the coaching environment may impact a neurodivergent athlete.

# 1 The sports environment

The mental health of athletes has become an increasingly prominent topic in recent years, both in elite sport performance environments as well as grassroots and recreational participation. However, the role of neurodivergence is largely absent in this discourse, from the perspectives of both the athlete and the coach. One factor that can impact an athlete's mental health is the environment in which sport is conducted. In particular, for neurodiverse athletes the physical sporting environment can sometimes offer more protective factors, or conversely individuals can be exposed to factors that require increased effort and stress to maintain performance and participation. The next activity considers the physical environments in which sport and exercise takes place and the impact that may have on a neurodivergent athlete.



## Activity 1 Experiences of autism

 Allow 20 minutes

Watch the clip below of Chris Packham, a television presenter and naturalist in the UK, describing his experiences of autism. You will watch the clip in two halves, with a different question to reflect on for each.

### [Demystifying autism and overstimulation](#)

1. Watch the clip from the start and pause at 2 minutes 46 seconds. While watching, consider how the experiences described by Chris and Dr Luke Bearden arise from a deficit perspective and how this may result in the negative impacts being described. Can you think of any examples where this experience of autism may be seen in a coaching environment? This could be the facility, the changing rooms, or even the temperature of the environment.

*Provide your answer...*

2. Now watch the clip from 2:46 to the end. While watching this section, think about how Chris's experiences may demonstrate looking at his autism from a strengths-based perspective, giving him a greater sense of 'joy' from his sensory experiences. Can you think of any examples where this element of autism may be encouraged in a coaching environment?

*Provide your answer...*

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### **Discussion**


1. For these questions you may have thought about some experiences from your own participation in sport, your own coaching experiences, or maybe just thinking about an athlete you are familiar with. Thinking about these experiences from an autistic perspective can help us consider how neurotypical athletes may be able to 'filter' out sensory cues in a coaching environment. However, an autistic athlete may experience this same environment as overwhelming and harder to manage, for example due to different teams being coached on the same rugby pitch, or a small indoor facility with lots of lights, echoes and changes in sounds.
2. The second clip may have made you think about Lucy Bronze's story in this week's introduction, where she refers to 'hyperfocus' and this being a positive component of her autism. You may also have thought about things like an athlete finding joy in playing outside, in the order of patterns of play in a team sport, or even in a similar way to Chris just enjoying running in nature.

The next section will help you explore in more detail how athletes can experience the same sporting environments very differently, reinforcing the importance of individuality in coaching practice.

## 2 Experiencing diverse sporting spaces

Athletes taking part in sport and exercise experience a range of environments as part of their preparation, training and competitions. This shift between different environments, or 'spaces', can therefore be experienced differently from athlete to athlete. With an individualised approach to neurodiversity in mind, we can explore how one athlete could experience these changes, in contrast to what a neurotypical teammate or training partner may experience as normal or easy to navigate. The following activity will help you do this by focusing on potential issues posed by different sporting spaces.

### Activity 2

 Allow 30 minutes

#### Part 1

Watch the clip below of Sam Holness, talking about his experiences training and competing in Ironman and triathlon events (the interviewer, Nick Ransom is also neurodivergent). While watching, make two lists, one of the positive things Sam says he gets from being a triathlete, and one of the negative things. You may want to watch the clip twice to help you.

[Neurodiversity in Sport](#). Watch from 2:03 to 2:59.

Provide your answer...

#### Discussion

You may have picked up on how Sam describes the positives of competing and how this helps him feel better about himself and improves his feelings of anxiety. This demonstrates the links previously discussed between neurodiversity and wellbeing. You may also have noted how Sam describes feeling overwhelmed when there are too many other athletes around him, as well as worries about not only being autistic, but also how he is often the only Black athlete. This links strongly with the concept of intersectionality introduced in Week 1.

#### Part 2

The table below lists a range of potential challenges faced by neurodivergent athletes. For each one, complete the right-hand column with issues that you think an athlete like Sam may experience as part of their training and competition routine. These issues could be sensory, or to do with communicating and interacting with others. Try to hold in mind an individualised approach as you work through each challenge. When you have completed the table, you can compare your answers with those in the Discussion.

Challenge	Potential sensory or communication issues
Changing room area	Provide your answer...

Surrounding area (transport links, car park)

*Provide your answer...*

People

*Provide your answer...*

Indoor facility

*Provide your answer...*

Outdoor facility

*Provide your answer...*

Equipment

*Provide your answer...*

Coach

*Provide your answer...*

**Discussion**

**Challenge**

**Suggested sensory or communication issues**

Changing room area

- smells
- noise
- lots of people moving in and out

Surrounding area (transport links, car park)

Unpredictability of:

- journey
- weather
- lighting

People

- new athletes
- change in coaches
- social interactions with other athletes

Indoor facility

- noise levels
- echo
- temperature
- artificial lighting

Outdoor facility

- other athletes
- members of public
- weather

Equipment

- 'feel' of grips, for example in tennis or hockey
- footwear
- kit – type of material, what has been washed with?

Coach

- clarity of communication
- tone and volume of voice
- demonstrations

This activity will have prompted you to think about how different sporting spaces can be experienced by neurodivergent athletes. You may have come up with similar issues to the ones suggested in the final column, or you may have thought of some different ones too. As a coach, planning for these issues is what McMurtry *et al.* (2025) describe as part of the process of implementing 'reasonable adjustments' to support athletes, remembering that no two athletes will experience these spaces in the same way. This reinforces the importance to really focus on the practice of talking to athletes and asking them what they may need to make these experiences less difficult or overwhelming. By doing this, coaches can make sporting spaces more accessible, supportive, and ultimately promote positive wellbeing in those they are coaching.

The individualised experiences of neurodivergent people can mean things which are a protective factor for some, can cause difficulties for others. For example, one athlete may find the structured way that athletes and coaches interact with each other as something which helps them. Conversely, an athlete in the same session may find those structured interactions too rigid and overwhelming. This should not mean that both athletes are unable to take part in the same session. Instead the coach can explore what those individual needs are and what reasonable adjustments they can make to their coaching practice to ensure that both needs are being met. The next section helps you explore a key factor which makes this approach difficult – when athletes often 'mask' their neurodivergent experiences.

## 3 Masking

A key phenomenon to consider in coaching environments is one of 'masking'. Masking is a term used to describe how someone tries to adopt more neurotypical traits to cope with different challenges thrown up by a social situation they may find themselves in (Quigley and Gallagher, 2025). This process takes a lot of effort and energy from that individual (Billington, 2023) and impacts not only how they will engage and behave within a coaching session, but also how they feel once they leave. The next activity introduces you to an example of masking and encourages you to consider the implications of this.



### Activity 3 Experiences of masking

 Allow 10 minutes

This podcast episode is of two young people, Ginny and Andrew, discussing lived experiences of autism. Listen to the clip, where Andrew describes his experience of masking. While listening, consider the three questions that follow.

Audio content is not available in this format.



Being autistic and living a good life

1. Why might an athlete feel the need to mask their neurodivergence?
2. As a coach why is it important not to encourage neurodiverse individuals to adopt neurotypical behaviours?
3. Why is it important to understand what has been happening in an individual's day prior to coming to their sport or exercise sessions?

Provide your answer...

### Discussion

1. In line with Andrew's description, an athlete may feel the need to mask their neurodivergence if their experiences, behaviours and needs are not accepted or understood by those around them resulting in poor mental health outcomes (Cassidy *et al.*, 2020). This means that neurodivergence in sporting contexts



can often go unnoticed or not be recognised or acknowledged (Hoare *et al.*, 2023). These are behaviours adopted early in childhood through school environments, with these experiences being characterised as bullying by both peers and staff (Billington, 2023).

2. Often, this is further characterised by teachers encouraging individuals to adopt neurotypical or 'normal' behaviours with the result of individuals being 'othered', made to feel different, and marginalised (Billington, 2023). Experiences of stigma like this can exacerbate feelings of anxiety, stress and exhaustion which is associated with poor mental health.
3. Athletes may turn up to a coaching session already in a heightened state of anxiety or stress depending on how their day has gone up to that point. Neurotypical athletes may have similar experiences before any given session, but as a sport setting may be built around neurotypical needs, they are likely to be impacted very differently.

The content of Week 3 will help you explore strategies on how this can be managed for a neurodivergent athlete, but at this stage you might want to reflect on whether you have experience of an athlete attending a coaching session in this way, and how this may have manifested itself.

## 4 Summary of Week 2

This week has focused on the athlete's perspective and what it means to be neurodiverse in a sport and exercise setting. You have explored the role of the environment and how this can elicit different sensory experiences for a neurodivergent athlete and why this is important to consider when working with athletes. You have also gained an understanding of key issues like masking, and how this can lead to an athlete attending a coaching session in a heightened state of stress or anxiety.

In the next week of study, you will hear the voices of family members and their own experiences of supporting a neurodiverse athlete. You will consider these experiences from the perspective of an athlete's family, and the unique insights to be gained from improved communication with parents and carers.

You can now go to [Week 3](#).



# Week 3: Neurodiversity in sport and exercise: the family's voice

## Introduction

This week's content focuses on the experiences of the families and carers of neurodivergent athletes and so holds particular relevance to those working with children and young adults. However, even into adulthood relationships between the coach and athlete's family can still be equally important. You will hear parents talk about experiences outside of sport, which highlight wider difficulties experienced by individuals in day-to-day life, which as previously discussed can influence how athletes may present at coaching sessions. It is important for all coaches within youth sport to maintain good communication with parents and carers and you will explore why communication with families of neurodivergent athletes holds great importance within coaching practice. Furthermore, within adult sport coaches often maintain good communication with the spouse, partner, or even friend of a neurodiverse athlete. Allyship can be extremely valuable within the neurodiverse community.



By the end of this week, you should be able to:

- consider the experiences of neurodiverse athletes and their families
- reflect on how the views and experiences of family members may be missed in sport
- appreciate the valuable information families may hold about an athlete, and how this can positively influence your coaching practice.

# 1 Living with neurodivergent athletes: family insights of young athletes

The role of family members in supporting successful athletes is well documented (Pinchbeck, 2021). However, families often feel undervalued and underappreciated in the social and educational experiences of a neurodivergent athlete, despite the important role they can play (Kimber *et al.*, 2023). This means that when coaching or working with neurodiverse athletes there are important opportunities to open dialogue with families to help understand the needs of individual athletes. These opportunities are important to explore whether we are talking to parents and carers, wider family members, spouses, close friends, or even their own children. This week's first activity will help you reflect on how these opportunities may be handled by a club or organisation you are familiar with.

## Activity 1 Starting the conversation: engaging with family members

 Allow 10 minutes

Take some time to consider how an organisation you are familiar with engages with parents and carers of young athletes. Or if you are a parent or carer with a child who attends a sports club and has contact with coaches, think about how that club engages with you. Use the following questions as a guide:

1. Are parents and carers given the opportunity to share if their child is neurodivergent? If yes, is this done in a public way or in a personalised and supportive way?
2. How do coaches know if parents or carers feel comfortable to approach them to discuss specific needs of their child?

Provide your answer...


## Discussion

1. It is likely your experiences in this area will be different to another coach or parent studying this course, to varying degrees. This is because there is still low awareness of neurodiversity in the sport and fitness sector, in particular at grassroots levels, with a lack of coach education cited as a key factor in this (Townsend *et al.*, 2022). Opportunities for families to share information about a neurodivergent athlete could be developed in formal ways through registration processes, or informally at coaching sessions or competitive events.
2. Often, the only way a coach knows a family is comfortable to discuss specific needs of their child, is if and when they actually do this. Whether a family may share this information is influenced by a combination of factors, including the policies and culture of a club or organisation, to the interactions with other parents and carers on the sidelines, or the attitude and behaviours of coaches. Indeed, research has shown that in addition to athletes experiencing stigma, caregivers can endure similar experiences in being socially isolated by parents of neurotypical teammates (McMahon *et al.*, 2020).

While this activity focused on the example of a young athlete, it is important to acknowledge how these principles also apply with adult athletes. Athlete-centred and strengths-based practice remains key, remembering to be led by their needs and wants. In these situations, wider family members may offer important insight about routines or how an athlete talks about their experiences in training or competition settings. It may be an athlete finds it hard to communicate this to their coach, so creating an opportunity for others to share information can be insightful and helpful.

The next activity helps you to understand the unique challenges an autistic adult athlete can encounter in their sporting career, the perspectives of their family, and how some of these challenges can be overcome.

## Activity 2 A family's story: Super Sam

 Allow 30 minutes

Watch the clip below to hear Tony Holness talk about his experiences as a parent of a successful triathlete, his son Sam, and answer the following questions. This is a longer clip than you are used to in this course, so feel free to take a break during it if this helps you.

Video content is not available in this format.  
Overcoming adversity with sport



The whole clip has been included but for this activity you should watch from 6:58 to the end.

1. What emotions does Tony describe he and his wife went through when Sam was diagnosed with autism?
2. The table below includes some of the difficulties Sam's parents have had to overcome when supporting Sam to access sport (and his university lectures). For each one note the opportunities this provided Sam to demonstrate his unique skills and talents.

### Potential challenges

Travel disruption to lectures

### How Sam has overcome this

*Provide your answer...*

Not being able to talk in early life

*Provide your answer...*

Low educational expectations

*Provide your answer...*

Struggle with team sports

*Provide your answer...*

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### Discussion

Tony highlights a range of emotions felt by Sam's family including fear, feeling worried, and a lack of understanding over the condition. These feelings can be experienced by parents and carers long after a diagnosis is made so it is important coaches and practitioners are sensitive to this when communicating with an athlete's family.

Potential challenges	How Sam and his family faced this
Travel disruption to lectures	High determination to be on time, so ran
Not being able to talk in early life	Focused on being able to swim very early
Low educational expectations	Completed BTEC and degree
Struggle with team sports	Explore opportunities in individual sports

Tony describes how Sam's personality traits linked to his autism have helped him to overcome challenges. Examples of this include his desire to not be late enabling him to overcome travel disruption, his determination helping him to navigate difficulties with physical contact, and how despite not being able to talk in early life his ability to swim at a very young age. All these examples demonstrate how neurodivergent athletes can use their strengths to achieve in sporting environments if they are given the support and opportunity to do so. This is an important and valuable tool within coaching practice.

The next section will help you explore ideas on how to support positive family experiences within practice, and also how to use these stories to stay athlete led and strengths focused.

## 2 It's good to talk: improving communication with family members


In the video clip for Activity 2, Tony refers to a range of professionals including teachers, educational psychologists, speech and language therapists among others. He talks of the challenges of being told to have low expectations and feeling the need to push back against this. These experiences are common among families of neurodivergent children (Billington, 2023), making it a key consideration when working with neurodiverse athletes.



Talking to family members like Tony about their experiences can reveal important information about the strengths their child can bring to sport and exercise, rather than just talking to the athlete. Research also suggests that parents and carers express a strong desire for children to find a degree of challenge in their lives, as well as discovering things they can excel at and master (Streach *et al.*, 2023). As Tony says in the clip, 'we had to exist in his [Sam's] world and learn how he was thinking to maximise on his life opportunities'. This reinforces the practice of treating each athlete as an individual and the importance of communication with parents and carers as part of this.

The next activity explores parental experiences even further.

### Activity 3 A parent's experience

 Allow 30 minutes

Listen to a section of the podcast episode below created by students of Tettenhall Wood School in England, which is a school for autistic young people and adults.

This episode is presented by a staff member and student who interview the former professional footballer, administrator and author Pat Nevin about his experiences of parenting an autistic child.

Audio content is not available in this format.



Pat Nevin: Football and autism

While you listen to the audio, consider the questions below to explore how Pat describes his experiences supporting his son.

1. What is the impact of changing routines for Simon, and the subsequent implications of this for Pat?



2. How can the experiences of parents like Pat help inform coaching practice, especially in how an autistic athlete can achieve 'happiness'?

Provide your answer...

### Discussion

1. The role of predictability and routine is key for families, alongside the idea that plans can change and the importance of supporting someone through that. The experiences of Simon demonstrate the importance of this consistency and can help you reflect on how to maintain this within your own practice.
2. As Pat suggests happiness isn't what society tells you it is, happiness is just happiness! This relates strongly to Chris Packham's experiences in Week 2 where he spoke about finding 'joy' in his sometimes overwhelming sensory experiences. These comments can prompt coaches to identify where their sessions focus on creating more 'fun' drills and activities for athletes to find their own joy. Practical tools like visual timetables can be useful for neurodiverse people to help them prepare for different situations, feel more relaxed, and therefore enjoy their participation more.

The importance of consistent routine, coaching environments and low levels of external distractions are considered important by parents and carers (Streach *et al.*, 2023). As part of their research on quality of experience for autistic children in sport, Stretch and colleagues (2023) further stress the importance of consulting with caregivers, alongside involving athletes themselves and providing choice within sessions where possible. Two simple examples of this in practice are outlined below.

Interactive content is not available in this format.



## 3 Summary of Week 3

This week has focused on the family's perspective of neurodiversity in sport coaching. You have heard the voices of caregivers as they describe their role in not only supporting an athlete access coaching sessions and competitions, but also as key sources of information about an athlete's individual needs, strengths and wishes. The significance of providing resources such as social stories and visual timetables to help athletes and their caregivers to navigate their experiences of coaching and competitions was also highlighted.

In the final week of study, you will explore the coach's perspective of neurodiversity in sport and exercise, hearing their voices and drawing together key elements from the whole course to reflect on how those working within sport and exercise can improve their practice to better support neurodivergent individuals.

You can now go to [Week 4](#).



# Week 4: Supporting athletes in practice: creating a safe environment

## Introduction

The final week of this course begins by considering the role of the coach when working with neurodiverse athletes. You will consider the role of coach education in equipping coaches with the knowledge and skills to work with neurodivergent athletes and be introduced to the strengths-based approach to coaching. The consideration of how coaching practice can contribute to the barriers experienced by neurodiverse athletes is also discussed, along with how coaches can create safe and inclusive spaces for all athletes to support athletic development.

Throughout this week you will review a range of case studies and research and consider how this relates to your learning from Weeks 2 and 3 to bring together the voices of coach, family and athlete to create a holistic picture of neurodiversity in sport and exercise.

An Instagram post from footballer Safia Middleton-Patel highlights the importance that the coach role can have to an athlete's sporting experiences and athletic development.

[Safia's Instagram post](#)

Safia says in her post that she almost quit football because of the misunderstanding by her coaches. She was given labels such as 'the rude one' by coaches who didn't understand her. She says 'Coaches can be the most influential and important role model to autistic people'. She also talks about the importance of patience and communication when coaching neurodivergent athletes.

By the end of this session, you should be able to:

- consider the experiences of coaches working with neurodiversity and the impact this may have on their coaching practice
- describe what is meant by 'strengths-based coaching' and how this can be implemented effectively with neurodivergent athletes
- recognise the role that coach education can play in assisting coaches to support all athletes.


# 1 Professional development

As you have seen throughout this course, research on coaching neurodiverse athletes has highlighted common themes, many of which are yet to be addressed within models of coach education. These themes include the reliance on deficit rather than strength based models when working with athletes (Hoare *et al.*, 2023), the practice of masking and the increased emotional strain this can place on an athlete (Quigley and Gallagher, 2025), and the importance of listening to experiences of wider family members (Billington, 2023).



This means coaches are often learning through experience (Kimber *et al.*, 2023) with trial and error being a common method of discovering ways to support the athletes they are working with (Townsend *et al.*, 2022). This can lead to limitations in the effectiveness of support offered to neurodiverse groups, and decreased confidence among coaches. In the absence of this being covered widely in formal coach education, developing confidence and skills in working with neurodiversity may be more informal in nature. The following activity takes a small case study approach to explore this.

## Activity 1 Peer support in coaching

 Allow 20 minutes

Read the case study information below and then answer the two questions which follow. You may want to read the information a second time to help you consider your answers.

Erin is a coach for a local youth roller hockey team who take part in local and national competitions, and knowing you are a fellow coach has come to you for a bit of advice on how to manage a new situation. The team is mixed gender, and is comprised of 15 and 16 year old players. As the head coach for the team, Erin does the majority of planning and delivery of sessions but is supported by an assistant coach on training and match days.

Family members of two different members of the squad have recently approached Erin to share their children have diagnoses of autism, ADHD and dyslexia. Although she has noticed some players react differently to the drills she uses in training, this is the first time Erin has been prompted to consider neurodiversity in her practice. Her formal coach education sessions have never covered this as a topic before, so she is wondering how she should organise training sessions and match preparations in light of this new information. She has reflected on how her coach education experiences have at times focused on coaching needs of 'the team' rather than the needs of individuals, so she is feeling a little lost on what to do next.

Training sessions and matches take place in the same large indoor gymnasium. Training sessions with just squad members in attendance mean the environment has a lot of noise and echoes, which makes it hard for Erin to be heard. It is also well ventilated so can be quite cold. On match days there are fewer echoes as the other team and spectators are in attendance, making it feel like a very different environment. More people also mean it can be a hotter environment for matches and competition than for training sessions.

Focus on the following questions to help you.

1. What issues could arise in training or competition days which might impact neurodiverse squad members?
2. What could you advise Erin to do in order to feel more prepared to meet the additional needs of these two squad members?

Provide your answer...

### Discussion

You may have identified a number of potential answers based on your learning from the course so far. Some suggestions are discussed below.

1. The differences in environment between training and competition could be an issue for all athletes, however this may be heightened for neurodiverse athletes. For example, the presence of echoes during training might make it harder for these players to engage with instructions from Erin. Changes in temperature and the number of people present on match days may also be difficult for these players to manage, potentially leading to them feeling overwhelmed.
2. Erin could take an athlete-led approach by asking each player and their parents what they find easy or difficult to manage on training and match days. Erin should be open to the fact both players may have very different experiences and explore what individual adjustments to her practice they would each find helpful. For example, if a player finds match days hard because of the increased numbers of people present in the building, one solution may be to see if they can get on the rink early and let the area fill up gradually around them. Erin could also take a strengths based approach by asking players (and their families) what they enjoy and find useful in these situations, before finding ways to bring that into training drills or match preparation. For example, if a player prefers a high level of detail in their lives, Erin could give more detailed explanations to her drills or share information with the player and their family before a session.

With limited access to any formal training on coaching neurodiverse athletes, there is a risk of unhelpful practices being adopted which may unintentionally create barriers for neurodivergent athletes participating in sport and exercise. Research by Kimber *et al.* (2023) uncovered views of inclusion which demonstrate this. The following quote from a coach in this research is one example (emphasis added):

I've got a passion for inclusion, but only when I feel it is the *right* inclusion.

(Kimber *et al.*, 2023, p. 178)

While comments such as this may be well-intentioned, they can also demonstrate a misunderstanding of developing inclusive practice, as the basis of this approach is being rooted in what the *coach* needs, as exemplified by this coach suggesting there is a 'right' or 'wrong' type of inclusion. For coaching practice to be truly inclusive, practice needs to be based on the needs of the athlete in front of them, therefore negating any need for the 'right' inclusion. Townsend *et al.* (2022) suggest where a coach may feel under resourced and under trained in these issues, there can be a comfort in seeking out rigid categories for athletes with additional needs. While this should be considered unhelpful and counter to developing inclusive practice, it should also be acknowledged as the reality for many working in sport and exercise settings. If we do not acknowledge this then it becomes more difficult to challenge and develop strength-based practices.

Townsend *et al.* (2022) go further and place the role of the coach as essential in helping any athlete with disability access sport as a human right, providing a regular point of contact via personalised responses and support. However, the potential for this process is severely hindered by a lack of training opportunities, relying instead on individual coaches' experiences and learning through trial and error.

## Activity 2 Athlete's experiences of supportive coaching

 Allow 15 minutes

Watch the next section of the video below of Lucy Bronze. Here she describes her experiences as an autistic athlete and her relationship with her coaches.

[Lucy Bronze opens up about autism and ADHD diagnosis](#). Watch from 1:16 to the end.

When watching the clip, think about the following questions:

1. What things has Lucy found hard in her sporting experiences to date, specifically related to her experiences of autism and ADHD?
2. How does Lucy describe some positives about her neurodivergence?
3. How do you think coaches could use some of Lucy's neurodivergence in positive ways?

Provide your answer...

## Discussion

1. Lucy's experiences tell us a lot about how as an autistic athlete she found it hard to communicate with others, often being 'ten steps ahead' all the time. Hugging and eye contact were also things she describes as making her feel uncomfortable as well as struggling with sleep. From a neurotypical perspective you may reflect on how these behaviours could be misunderstood. This leads to how Lucy describes her experiences of masking, which you learned about in Week 2, and how she copied her peers to try and fit in.
2. Lucy refers to how she now feels her neurodivergence is something which helps her. She describes her approach as having 'hyperfocus' and views this

as a strength in how she approaches her training and performance. She also refers to how her brain processes things 'super-quick', meaning she can think through thought processes very quickly.

3. You may have come up with a number of suggestions on how Lucy's coaches could use her strengths. An example could be using her ability to process information quickly to help teammates think through how tactical adjustments can play out in a match.

The next section will help you think about how to further develop strengths-based approaches in your coaching.



## 2 Putting a strengths-based approach into practice


Discourse around wider disability sport has been hindered by a lack of reference to neurodiversity, and wider disability sport within coach education frameworks (Townsend *et al.*, 2022). This means coaches across a range of sports may feel underprepared to coach athletes with these additional needs. Again, this is rooted in a deficit model of viewing these athletes, potentially limiting the support being offered by coaches and furthering ableist narratives. While this may at first seem bleak, in the same way as you have explored the importance of strengths-based approaches for neurodivergent individuals, we can apply this to coaching practice.

Townsend *et al.* (2022) propose a model for furthering coaching practice, with their 'social-relational model' containing four components to guide development in this area. Each component is covered in turn below (adapted from Townsend *et al.*, 2022):

Interactive content is not available in this format.



### Activity 3 Applying a social-relational model to practice

 Allow 20 minutes

For each component of the social-relational model outlined above, think about how someone like Lucy Bronze could experience them. You can use some of Lucy's comments in the clip from Section 1 to help you but also think about your wider learning of the course so far and how that could apply to Lucy. Once you have completed the middle column, note down how coaches could turn some of these experiences into strengths. An example is given in the first row to help you get started

Component	Possible experiences for Lucy	Potential strengths for Lucy
<b>Impairment effects</b>	Lucy's neurodivergence means she is sometimes viewed as a 'know it all' by others	Lucy's neurodivergence means she is always very focused on training drills
<b>Relational practices</b>	<input type="text" value="Provide your answer..."/>	<input type="text" value="Provide your answer..."/>
<b>Structural barriers</b>	<input type="text" value="Provide your answer..."/>	<input type="text" value="Provide your answer..."/>
<b>Psycho-emotional dimensions</b>	<input type="text" value="Provide your answer..."/>	<input type="text" value="Provide your answer..."/>

**Discussion**

This activity helped you explore the different ways athletes can present in coaching settings, and how you can turn these into strengths. Some suggestions for the remaining 3 sections of this model are below, but you may have come up with some slightly different ones too.

<b>Component</b>	<b>Possible experiences for Lucy</b>	<b>Potential strengths for Lucy</b>
<b>Impairment effects</b>	Lucy’s neurodivergence means she is sometimes viewed as a ‘know it all’ by others	Lucy’s neurodivergence means she is always very focused on training drills
<b>Relational practices</b>	Some coaches may treat everyone the same, meaning elements of communication which she may find hard are misperceived as being difficult or disrespectful	Coaches can utilise the strengths of an athletes neurodivergence by making adjustments to how they communicate with them
<b>Structural barriers</b>	Lucy may have struggled getting to new training facilities or away matches	Coaches could use Lucy’s determination to succeed in a positive way by helping plan transport routes to new venues
<b>Psycho-emotional dimensions</b>	If an athlete like Lucy does not feel supported or being part of a safe space, their wellbeing may be impacted	Coaches can find ways to help an athlete like Lucy feel comfortable in social situations. This could be using headphones to block out external noise, or sitting in the same place for team meetings

Your completed table can be used as part of your session planning process, to keep neurodiverse needs as a key focus in your practice. The coaching environment created is essential for a strengths-based approach to be successful, with a big part of this being informed by how ‘safe’ athletes feel to be themselves and not have to mask their experiences.

The next section explores the concept of safe spaces in more detail.

## 3 Creating 'safe spaces' for neurodivergent athletes: pulling it all together

In previous sections of the course, you have heard how 'safe' spaces are a crucial part of ensuring that neurodiverse people feel welcome, accepted, and supported. A 'call to action' below highlights the role sports organisations have in responding to the needs of those within their communities:


... employers, such as sport governing bodies and sports clubs, have a responsibility to make reasonable adjustments to ensure their employees (e.g. athletes, coaches) have an inclusive and accessible workplace (e.g. designated quiet rooms with dimmable lighting).

(McMurtry *et al.*, 2025, p. 355)

This call carries additional weight as it is developed with neurodivergent athletes so has their experiences at the centre of it. The focus on 'employees' in this context should be widened to include volunteer roles of coaches and administrators in grass roots sport, alongside the needs of their athletes. These inclusive spaces are essential in helping athletes feel safe and welcome when they take part in their chosen sport, whether that be a training or performance setting.

Just like other emotions you have heard athletes share so far, feeling safe can of course mean different things to different people. Through creating safer spaces for athletes, we can help develop a supportive environment where athletes feel free from judgement, critical opinions, or micro-aggressions from coaches, fellow athletes or others which is of great importance for those like Lucy Bronze who may already feel marginalised (Mikami *et al.*, 2019). Where coaches can foster these safe spaces, athletes are more likely to ask for help and support when needed. Importantly, you will also be positively impacting your athletes' wellbeing.

### Activity 4 Adjusting your practice

 Allow 25 minutes

Listen to two clips from the podcast below, which discuss the potential adjustments neurodivergent athletes may need to help feel comfortable, supported and accepted. You will hear from former athlete Caragh McMurtry, journalist Nick Ransom, and community-based rugby coach Jacob Kelly.

Across both clips, what practical things are mentioned by Nick, Jacob and Caragh as helpful adjustments for neurodivergent athletes? Select which strategies you hear from the list below by adding a tick or X in the second column. Finally, rank each one you hear about in terms of how easy they could be to implement into *your own practice*, with 1 being the easiest and 8 being the hardest.

[All about neurodiversity in elite athletes](#)

Clip 1: 36:47–40:13

Clip 2: 53:26–1:02:02

Adjustment	Present	Explanation	Rank
Sensory adjustments	<input type="text" value="Provide your answer..."/>	Managing lighting or noise	<input type="text" value="Provide your answer..."/>

		to support athletes. This can include allowing some to wear headphones or even sunglasses	
Bland food	<i>Provide your answer...</i>	Where food and drink are available for players, bland options can help athletes manage feelings of sensory overwhelm	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
Simple things, more often	<i>Provide your answer...</i>	Making simple and easy to manage adjustments for both coach and athlete are not only easier to implement, but also easier to maintain	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
Fidget devices	<i>Provide your answer...</i>	Sometimes called fidget 'toys', these devices can provide a tactile distraction for an athlete to help them manage	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
Systemic changes	<i>Provide your answer...</i>	This refers to policy changes at organisational or club level which help coaches and families provide individualised support for athletes	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
Extra time for drills	<i>Provide your answer...</i>	In particular for ADHD or dyslexic athletes, this reflects the	<i>Provide your answer...</i>

Work with families	<i>Provide your answer...</i>	different way they may learn new skills, so a couple of minutes extra for a drill can make a huge difference	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
Awareness with neurotypical athletes	<i>Provide your answer...</i>	Communicating with athletes and their families can mean any adjustments are reflective of each athlete's individualised needs  This can help reduce stigma associated with neurodivergent conditions, and reinforce sporting environments as safe spaces	<i>Provide your answer...</i>

**Discussion**

You will hopefully have recognised all of the adjustments from the table described in the podcast clips. What comes through strongly from the experiences described by the interviewees is not only the importance of recognising and supporting neurodivergent athletes, but also those individualised strengths-based approaches you have been learning about throughout the course.

## 4 Summary of Week 4

As part of this final week, you have explored more about how as a coach you can put the principles of supporting neurodivergent athletes into practice, focusing on strengths-based approaches and creating safe spaces. As part of Activity 4, you will have identified some examples you feel most comfortable to introduce to your own practice. You can use this as a guide to help you, and hopefully your colleagues, bring the course content to life and continue to improve the support experienced by the neurodivergent athletes you are working with.

## 5 Course summary

During this course you have had the opportunity to hear about the experiences of a range of neurodivergent athletes, to help you identify the importance of a strengths based and neuro-affirmative approach to coaching – from grassroots to elite levels.

Week 1 of the course has helped you explore different models of neurodiversity and different conditions which some athletes may present with. This also identified some links between neurodiversity and wider wellbeing.

Week 2 focused on gaining an understanding of the barriers faced by neurodivergent athletes and their families when accessing sport and exercise activities, and how coaching environments and practice can contribute to this.

Week 3 highlighted the important and often overlooked experiences of friends and family members of neurodivergent athletes. As part of this week, you will have gained an appreciation of the valuable information these groups can make, and how it can positively influence your coaching practice.

Finally, Week 4 explored how you can put this learning into practice. Using experiences of athletes and coaches, possible adaptations to coaching practices and environments were explored to help you develop those 'safe spaces' for athletes of all neurotypes.

After completing the course we hope you are able to take some of your learning into your coaching practice in the near future.

If you would like to explore more courses and information on OpenLearn you can access the [Sport and Fitness Hub](#) and more content on [neurodiversity](#).

You might also be interested in the [Open University's course and qualifications in sport and fitness](#).

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Section 2 audio: Tettenhall Wood School Podcast <https://www.twssportspodcast.co.uk/pat-nevin-football-and-autism/courtesy:AmethystAcademiesTrust> <https://www.aatrust.co.uk/>

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