



**Talking Sport & Tech**  
**Ep. 1 Huw Edwards, CEO, ukactive**  
**Episode Transcript**

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**Milly Pelmore:** Hi everyone and welcome to this episode of the Talking Sport and Tech podcast, this week brought to you by me Milly Pelmore.

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**Alex Zurita:** And me, Alexa Zurita. We have a great guest for you today, and this is a sneak peek at what is in store.

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**Huw Edwards:** How can you read where the next move is going to be? What's going to change? Who's going to wake up tomorrow morning and say: You know what? I quite fancy having a physical activity strategy for the nation which is going to transform people's lives. That could happen tomorrow. The question for us as a sector is, are we ready for when the wind changes?

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**Milly:** So let's get into today's episode. Today's guest is Huw Edwards Chief Executive Officer of UK Active. In 2019 July, he was appointed as the permanent CEO having been interim CEO for a few months beforehand and before that, Director of UK Active's Public Affairs, Communications and Research department since 2016.

UK Active has a member base of over 4000 sports organisations all working to make people in the UK more active. During 2020 Huw steered UK Active through multiple lockdowns lobbying the government for the extension of rent relief and furlough support, and to change the planning regulations around use class orders, which was a big part in allowing gyms to open on high streets.

Huw has been in the sector for 20 years previously in public affairs, including roles at the Mayor of London's office, the Olympic Delivery Authority and British tennis.

Thanks for being here today, Huw, it's great to have you on the podcast. We like to kick off by asking all of our guests if you could be a professional sports person in any sport, what would it be?

1:28

**Huw:** Well, thanks for inviting me to be here today. It's a great opportunity, and great to meet up with you guys. I'm gonna say cricket. My dad was a professional cricketer in the 60s and 70s, and it kind of rubbed off on my brothers and myself. I played relatively high standard borough and county level. So, I would probably be a professional cricketer.

Cricket is my favourite game. I love the combination of dramas and nuances and layers that you get, especially in the longer form, which is not to everybody's taste. But that's probably my favourite sport and probably having a career associated with that would probably be the thing I would go after.

2:02

**Milly:** And do you think that love of cricket, growing up playing a lot of it, was what inspired you to have a career in sport?

2:08

**Huw:** I think to a level, I think growing up in a sporting family, in the sporting environment, obviously, it was part of the fabric of family life growing up. I think it's a marriage of sport and politics. I'm a political nerd, as Alex would appreciate, having known me for a long period of time. And so, the marriage of sport and politics, two of my favourite things, is probably the thing which has driven that most.

It is the fact that this is a hugely transformative sector and things that can really change the lives of millions of people on a day-to-day basis, which... why wouldn't you want to be part of that? And I really want for the sector and the work I do to be taken as seriously as it possibly can be. I think it's a hugely underrated sector and industry, and I think too much of it is seen in the superficial. And actually, it is something which can transform millions of lives, so why wouldn't you put that very high up your priority list of your government and make it a priority, which can really have an impact on the physical, mental and social wellbeing of so many. So, it's that combination of factors, I would say.

3:15

**Milly:** And do you think the government's attitude towards sport has changed in the last few years? I guess, particularly since London 2012?

3:23

**Huw:** Well, that's a very good question. I think, I worry that it's got narrower in terms of view. I still think that there is a belief that the shop window, and the shiniest thing in the shop window is all that matters. And in fact, there are so many things that take place in the rest of the shop, and in the engine room of the shop, and then the back of the shop, which is hugely important for how our sector really operates and how it can have an infrastructure that can transform people's lives. And so having elite sport and having that shop window is really important, but there are so many other layers to our sector, which need to be supported, protected, and given the opportunity to thrive. And there's a huge amount more work that needs to be done on that. And a cultural shift, and a mindset shift across our decision makers to really, really embrace that I would say.

4:10

**Milly:** And elite sport doesn't exist without grassroots. I mean, clearly not every grassroots cricket player is going to go on and be a professional cricketer, but elite sport needs everybody at that grassroots level, enjoying their thing, finding their thing.

4:23

**Huw:** Absolutely. And I kind of look at our sector in three crude-ish buckets. You know, there is the spectator, the elite sport, which is hugely important for national pride, self esteem, the shop window, UK PLC, soft power, you know, millions of people will have been glued on watching Man City, Liverpool on Sunday, and that's hugely important for people's enjoyment right - where they watch it, how they celebrate success at games like 2012 or this coming

year at the Commonwealth Games in Birmingham. That's hugely important and that should be one thing.

Then there is that the second sort of bucket I suppose which is around the importance of wider sport recreation at grassroots level, which is really part of the fabric of communities, sport for good, how can you use the very best of sport to improve people's lives, enhance communities, bring communities together, integrate communities in a really positive way.

And then the third bucket is around how you use sport, physical activity to change the population levels of activity in this country. I think for far too long, all these three things have been seen in exactly the same way in terms of policy, and they're very different. And they complement each other, of course, but they are very nuanced, and the policy interventions for elite spectator are not the same as they are for population changes.

And so you have to have strategies that reflect how you get those areas going. So they're different and that's the way I see it. And I think that's where we need to really develop plans and strategies associated with those complementary areas of our sector.

5:57

**Alex:** I want to pick up on that point around almost that return investment, isn't it? And you guys are very good, and being very good for years, at producing research, white papers, lobbying, really trying to drum up the: "Hey, this is what we are contributing," whether it is to the economy, whether it is to people's lives, community integration, and so on. So Reason P is by Made by Sport, that publish their findings that for every pound invested in sport for development, six pounds worth of return on investment are provided back. The point there is around I suppose, we need to lead with evidence, right? And you guys have been doing that for a number of years.

6:44

**Huw:** Yeah, absolutely. And from my perspective, I think there's a library worth of evidence now the government has, from all our organisations over the last decade. I'm sure we'll come on to it. You know, I spent time, six years on London 2012. And all the evidence that really important organisations use - Sport Trust, Sport & Rec Alliance, London Sport, Sport for Development Coalition - all these organisations - UK active - have produced over the last decade is overwhelming evidence for England - Sheffield Hallam - overwhelming evidence of the value of sport and physical activity to the economic and social fabric of our society, and how much more it could do than what it already does right now.

So, the question is not around, for me, around evidence, the question is around political will. And is there political will to make change? I've seen political will move, right. I've seen it in 2012, when no one believed that those facilities would be built in five years, and they were. And do you know why? Because of political will and bringing all the key parts together and bringing in the best. And having a desire to do that. You look at the last two weeks, we've created an energy strategy in this country in three weeks, right? Political will. And so, the debate is not about how much more our sector has to give the government. It's how much our government can give back to our sector.

7:55

**Alex:** So, if you're a leader in the sector, I suppose what you said in that is, look, there's a renowned amount of evidence, it is about really knocking on doors and having those conversations and mobilising the conversations. You mentioned a range of bodies just now. Because now at London Sport, we've got a new CEO that came from digital behaviour change, comfortable in that sort of central government space and environment and wanting to do a lot more of that. But if you're a listener, a leader, in whatever shape, form, type of organisation, what can you do? What is your advice in terms of how can you play your part?

8:32

**Huw:** Yeah, a really good question, I think it's around being prepared for when the wind changes. And let me expand on that a bit. I think, politics right now, decision making right now is as fluid as in my 20 years of professional working. It's not really the politics of strategy, it's a politics of pinball. So, it's going in all different directions. Who knows? How can you read where the next move is going to be? What's going to change? Who's going to wake up tomorrow morning and say: you know, what, I quite fancy having a physical activity strategy for the nation that's going to transform people's lives. That could happen tomorrow.

The question for us as a sector is, are we ready for when the wind changes? I think we pretty much are. Great work taking place across the umbrella organisations in collaboration, really important, and that's a great legacy of the last couple of years that we've had. Now, are we ready for when the wind changes? And I think we will be, and we'll just keep knocking on that door and making sure that we're really putting the biggest possible pressure on, for a sector that deserves a seat at the very top table. Because as we all know, we work in the sector because we know how it can change millions of lives. And so, it's just about being ready and trying to read a very fluid political environment where things literally change from day to day, and hour to hour with experience of the last couple of years.

9:51

**Alex:** I want to just tap into that political narrative, and you just mentioned the last couple of years' collaboration. I can't sit here and think of how enjoyable or not the last couple of years might have been - clearly extremely challenging. But I suppose with that marriage of sport and politics I suppose you know, how many calls were you picking up from government around the sort of things that you guys were lobbying, ukactive were lobbying. Ultimately, March 2020 comes, if you're operating a brick and mortar space, which a vast majority of ukactive members are. All of a sudden, the rug has taken away from you, right? You're potentially now thinking, well, this might be just a shock to our business for two or three weeks, the reality is that that went into months, and you know, multiple lockdowns.

So, in summary, I'm just trying to delve into: You've got a 4000 membership, very diverse membership base, right, from a start-up to a service, to a large tech provider, to many leisure operators, boutique studios, gyms, and so on. What are the challenges as a leader? And how do you try to approach, to be that voice for those 4000 members and trying to bring a bit of relief to their businesses?

11:03

**Huw:** Yeah, well, I had to walk through many emotional doors, I would say in the last couple of years, and I couldn't have done that without many other people supporting me. Looking,

reflecting on that is really interesting. I've just a couple of weeks ago, I gave evidence in terms of, to the initial forays of the COVID 19 inquiry, looking at the terms of reference, and the accounts was asked to contribute to the framing of the terms of reference, it's really important. And that allowed a bit more reflective time thinking about what happened the last couple of years.

And I think it first at least, it starts with my team, you know, it has to start with my team. I've got a duty of care over 40, 50 people at ukactive and they were looking at you and thinking what is going on. The world was changing by the hour surrounding us, right, and you had a duty of care to those guys. And you tried your very best through very difficult circumstances, through furlough, through the mental wellbeing of your staff who were going into areas of isolation, and how you kept them going day in day out, week in week out, with the level of support they needed, was hugely important.

We went through organisational change last year as well, which many organisations went through, which was incredibly challenging, but for the right reasons and for the right need for the organisation going forward. And so, first things foremost, is my team, I hope has come out of this stronger, a bit more resilient, a great focus on the physical and mental wellbeing of staff. And I think we've all been on a journey a little bit around what that is, as organisations. I'm very proud of what they've done in the last couple of years, and the level of professionalism.

When it comes to the members, yeah, I mean, it was an existential crisis, and it was a moment where people who did not know where their livelihoods and their businesses, whether it be the largest operators in society, through to the small independents, were going to survive. And they were looking at you, and they were looking at you as the conduit for government. And for you to get the answer out of government. And you had every range of emotion, and every understandable range of emotion, in that period of time too, because of the desperation, especially in that first period. And then the disappointment about being, when reopening, we were behind pubs, right, and a completely lack of understanding about why.

And we went through that and probably the best thing that we did was within that 24-hour window with some incredibly robust conversation with government, which I'll come on to, we were able to then agree that Jonathan Van Tam and Sage and Public Health England at the time, and the government would then tour these facilities. And they'd never been in a gym for 20 years. They didn't know what they were going into. So all the considerations around gyms and leisure centres were made from a theoretical perspective until that point.

I remember being with Jonathan Van Tam, standing outside Kensington Leisure Centre, which you guys will know, which is in the shadow of Grenfell tower. And that facility played an incredibly important role at the toughest moment in that community's history. And he just looked and realised that these facilities are essential to the communities in which they operate in.

And that was an extreme example, but they are a hugely important for the fabric of communities, and then we were able to get open and if you look, move on a year and 2021 reopen, we opened before last chance of hospitality. And that gap between the 12th of April

2021, the 17th of May 2021, which was phase two and phase three of the reopening roadmap is estimated to have saved our members 600 million pounds, through data, through evidence, through collaboration, through showing how safe and essential our facilities are because we collected a survey of 2000 members on a weekly basis, and we're showing that we're about one case for 100,000 visits, right, safer than many other parts of society you are going into.

And so that was a huge moment for the collaboration of a sector coming and unifying under a single shared threat. And then the government has been on an educational journey and will continue to be on an educational journey. I would say there was very little understanding of the mechanics of our sector going into that crisis and there's a better understanding now. And we're still on the journey, but there was an awakening of the fact that, my members primarily, are the engine room of activity where they're dealing with tens of millions of visits per week. And if you remove that, from society, then you're gonna have a detrimental impact on the health and wellbeing of millions. So, you have to find a solution, right. And that's where we got to, and those conversations were constructive, but they were robust. And they had to be robust, and you had to get your elbows out, and get stuck in, right. That's what you had to do. And that's what we did, and you had to get your elbows out, and you had to walk through doors you had not been through before.

15:32

**Milly:** There's a lot in there that I'd like to dive into. I'm actually getting a bit emotional here sitting listening to you talking about you and colleagues, both internal and external, part of the driving force for opening those facilities, you know, whether it's - you're an elite athlete, and you need your swimming pool to train in for your livelihood, or whether that's where you see a friend for coffee and get your exercise in, you know, to think that you and the people you worked with, drove the government to open early, that's... yeah, I'm sitting here feeling a bit strange, and you know, so grateful for that.

Do you think, you know, COVID obviously brought out, yes, the robustness, the digging rail was in, kind of the best of collaboration of the sector and having no choice but to act robustly and act overnight within 24 hours. Do you think now we're, hopefully, coming out the other side of that, the legacy of that is that the sector, and outside the sector, is better equipped to know how to deal with, you know, the wind changing, like you were saying earlier?

16:27

**Huw:** I think there has been some real lessons learned. And I think a lot of it comes down obviously, to why we exist, which is to support people's individual physical and mental wellbeing. So, the customer is at the heart of everything, the customer's motivations, desires, aspirations, concerns about what they do, and how they look after their physical activity, is the fundamental to what we do as a sector and as my members do, as well.

So, I think there's a great sea change in terms of the growth and development of the sector. I think, looking at a number of areas. I think data and insight has been on a journey in the last couple of years. And I think there is a recognition of its importance in terms of not just issues around health and safety around what the customers want, and what their expectations are going forward. I think standards, and you look at the change in issues around hygiene and

sanitization and how we look at standards, not just in terms of a health and safety perspective, around societal issues as well.

We'll continue to be on a journey, until we ensure that our facilities are as inclusive as they can be within the communities they operate in. Because that has to be the litmus test, really, I think telling stories is still a big piece for us, and I think we're not there yet. And I'm really excited about what we can do as an organisation on behalf of our members over the next 18 months, talking about why, and the storytelling is huge. And then that level of collaboration around campaigns and around lobbying is getting stronger and is improving on a week to week and month to month basis, but it's not a finished article yet.

So, I think we're on a good journey. But we're not, I think in the next 12-18 months, I think we'll be even stronger than we are right now in terms of some of the core functions of our organisation and where our members thinking is, as well.

18:09

**Alex:** Just want to second Milly's comment earlier around your answer to the question around dealing with those two years. And we've heard already with other guests, the importance of the team, and surrounding yourself with people that are, I know it's cliché, and well, said lots of the time, but that are better than you. But I think it's also the culture that you implement.

I also love the analogy of just getting your elbows out, right, because every industry and every sort of leader for those industries are fighting for their own members, right. Hospitality are fighting to open first because they also want to save millions, and hundreds of millions of pounds for that part of the industry or the economy. So, a great role I suppose in you really sharpening those elbows and being able to get members out.

Back in, I suppose around that time, I'm always fascinated to learn from people. So, do you think, and you mentioned earlier 20 years of working in the sector: the marriage of sport and politics, you mentioned 2012, six years in and around that space. I know you've worked at the LTA before and so on.

So, do you feel that any of those previous moments somewhat prepared you for the last two years as a leader? Clearly not from a COVID point of view, we haven't seen anything like that, but from a role, responsibility environment that you worked in?

19:26

**Huw:** I think you learn as you go on whether it's a conscious decision around preparing yourself for leadership, I don't know. But you do... I've been very fortunate and very lucky to have worked with some incredible people and as line managers throughout my time from the GLA through to the six years at 2012.

I think it's the six years at 2012 that probably had the biggest impact. Working with a director of comms, Godric Smith, ex number 10, who was incredibly calm, strategic person and you looked at that style of leadership and thought, well, that's really good, but also there's a chief exec there David Higgins who was a genius and obviously oversaw the construction of the 9.3 billion pound construction of an Olympic Park and delivered it to time and to budget,

which, no one gave that, and his style was complete meritocracy, he didn't want a hierarchy he wanted, whoever knows the information, I go to the source, and that's really impacted me, that's the kind of style you want.

It is a bit of a cliché, but I'm pretty good at one or two things, right. And I'm incredibly relaxed and actually embrace having much more intelligent specialists around me because that's how it should be. I like to create a culture within UKActive of debate, discussion, empowering my executive, my senior leadership team, everybody in the organisation, to be able to have a view of a voice. Because only through that collective discussion, are you going to improve the output. And then my team will come to me with recommendations and based on the recommendations then I make the play.

That's ultimately my role to make the play once I've got all the decisions in front of me, and I get great advice, and then we go right. And I think that's probably a style, which is a marriage, probably of my own personality, but also seeing the very best of leadership, and the very best of leadership is around being inclusive and not being too detached from your team. It's all about the team for me, it always has been. We succeed as a team and we fall short as a team, but it's gonna be about the team ultimately, and not about the individuals.

21:23

**Milly:** And we saw that coming through from when Alex asked you about the pandemic and the first thing that you said was your team. You have to look after your team, they're the number one priority before anything else.

As a leader can sometimes be a bit of a lonely space, you know, particularly I suppose, internally, you have to, you know, you don't necessarily have to be positive all the time. But there are certain things that you can't chat to your colleagues about. How do you deal with that? What's your coping strategy?

21:48

**Huw:** That's a great question. And I think I've also got a board above me, you know, my chair, Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson, has been obviously fantastic to work for, for the last four or five years and provided great counsel in that period and support as well as the wider board as well.

And also, peers within the sector as well, you know, you can bounce ideas off as a leadership now across the sector, which is probably a lot closer, a lot emotionally closer, probably shared a lot more vulnerability in the last couple of years than we probably had done before. I think that's all for the good.

But ultimately, some of that is going to be in isolation and loneliness, you know, you have to make the hard calls, restructuring or changing an organisation, and reshaping the organisation comes with tough decisions and comes with tough conversations, and you have to walk in the shoes of the person who's sitting opposite you. And that's the hardest part of the role, and the essential part of the role, and you can't duck that. And you have to embrace it and find the best way, and find the best solutions for everybody. So, it's part of the package of doing what you do, right. And I think you can't get away from that. You can't duck it, you can't avoid it, and you've got to embrace it.

22:49

**Alex:** One is moving on to the role of Data Innovation. Your time in and around their space, potentially some future thinking about what the sector should be doing, could be doing. What also entrepreneurs that are listening, could be doing, should be doing in terms of that collaboration aspect.

So, when I first met you a few years back, ukactive have got Active Lab. We at London Sport are in the process of setting up Sport Tech Hub; launching Sport Tech Hub, what is our role to play? How do we collaborate? How do we add value to what's already in play? A little while after our Open Active accelerator is born to, and then between the three of us, we're trying to work out this superhighway to accelerate technology at every stage and ultimately trying to add value to the sector.

So, how have you seen that shifting, that change in the sector around the harnesses of technology, working with, whether you're a fitness tech entrepreneur, sports tech entrepreneur, or health tech, wellness tech - we have this conversation around really, we kind of taking this space plays a part in many of those categories as such.

So, in summary, how have you seen the role of tech changing, shifting? And what should it look like/ could it look like?

24:04

**Huw:** I think our particular role has probably changed in the last three or four years, and its agenda as well for the right reasons. I think that to be honest, there was a lot of tech innovation, digital propositions and offerings for people well before COVID, right. And our sector kind of lived and existed, especially my core membership, in and around that agenda. I think there was then a zero to 100 miles an hour moment during the crisis where we have to transfer, we have to transfer, we have to venture out to keep going.

I think where we are right now is I'm working very closely with Dave Gerrish and my team who leads our work around digital transformation is almost a stocktake of what is the value of ukactive in that space. There is going to be with great work that you guys are doing, the ability to facilitate huge creativity, which is going to support the innovations within the sector around, again the marriage of tech and digital, with health and sport.

I think our role to play here right now is probably twofold, firstly, to support the digital literacy of our sector, and actually, the work that we've done in the last 12 months, which is basically to kind of really get under the bonnet of the sector and understand where it is, and some of the white papers and reports that we've produced in last 12 months have shown that there is a real imbalance probably across the sector right now, in terms of digital literacies, like 30 percent of our members didn't have a digital strategy, 85 or so percent didn't have a revised one.

So, the starting point has got to be how you build the quality of decisions our core members are making around digital propositions for their members, and for their organisations as well, right. And then what I believe that we have a role to do is support creating them, facilitating the marketplace, which brings together my members, with the creative innovators out there.

And that's about just facilitating the marketplaces that should exist within our sector and working with other partners in that space. And being really clear about our role, what our role is, and being also clear about what our role isn't in that space. Our space is to help facilitate, our members and entrepreneurs will find their home together, as long as we can help facilitate the conversations and the environments and the marketplaces in which they can thrive.

But to get to that point, they've got to be confident in what they actually want to be doing around digital, which I think is actually for a number of them, and obviously, we don't have a homogenous profile, we've got huge variables of members, we've got to get them to that first real base and make sure that there is a real consistency of understanding about why digital strategy is so important for them. And then how they can then use that as a platform to really embrace what the solutions are out there for ultimately their customers, and ultimately, it's going to be the customer decides what they want and what they don't want. Right?

26:41

**Alex:** If I'm a listener, trying to ask - I suppose the next question is a bit of a twofold question - If I'm a listener, and I'm an innovator listener, an entrepreneur, co-founder of an existing sports tech, fit tech product, might have aspirations to work with ukactive because I see 4000 members, that access to marketplace is huge right? So, first part question, if you're an innovator, that's got aspirations to work with ukactive or with organisations, or with some of the members, I suppose. What maybe in your experience, do you think that they need to bear in mind to create a mutually beneficial relationship collaboration, part A, I'll come back to part B.

27:24

**Huw:** I think on the first point, it would be around having real empathy about where those individual organisations are, and being really clear about the fact that a lot of my members have a variety of different profiles, different motivations, different target audiences, where is it, what target audience you think you can excel in, in terms of customer profile, and then from that perspective, then thinking about where you potentially work with ukactive in facilitating those conversations.

I think we will ultimately be a marketplace to support and facilitate those conversations, and work with umbrella organisations and partnerships like yourselves, where you're really providing that fertile environment for creativity to flourish, which will then complement maybe our relationship going forward in a way which is probably an evolution of our historic conversations between the two organisations.

28:11

**Alex:** And then part B, I suppose if I'm a listener then thinking right, I mean, yeah, I've heard of sports tech, fit tech. We recently did a little bit of a snapshot on companies that fit those criteria that ultimately are developing technology, scaling technology, to help more people become active. And we worked out that from a snapshot just over 1000 companies, actually over 70% of those are outside of London.

So, if you even wanted to work at a micro level, you've got probably entrepreneurs in and around you, regardless of where you are in the country that you could be collaborating with.

Not that that should probably be a hindrance, right, but some people might want to actually, just want to be in a room with that co-founder, and really work out the issues and the problems that we're trying to solve.

So, if you're listening to thinking, right, there's tech out there, actually, yes, digital behaviours are influenced, or these are influencing the way that we live our lives, and I want to really make the most of tech to help more people become active. What then is potentially your golden nugget to that audience around how to better work with entrepreneurs.

Because there is a huge cultural difference, right? The way that public sector organisations operate, what we think is a fast decision, as one example, will be very different to what an entrepreneur thinks of as a fast decision. So, I don't want you to lead your answer into that particular example, but you know, just to elaborate the question – what would be your sort of guidance back to that individual?

29:38

**Huw:** I think where it works and where it doesn't work is when it feels like it's a bolt on. I think you've got to go and have a shared concept between the entrepreneur and the end of the operator, whether it be public or private, about what they want to achieve from any level of collaboration. And that's got to support a very clear objective, a really clear aim, about a target audience, or whether it be age, demographic, ethnicity, gender, etc. And then work Put them on that shared ambition around what they want to achieve from that. And then if they're on the same page in terms of core principles of approach, then you can get into the detail of the how. And I think that's really important.

I think when it comes as an add on or a bolt on to an existing strategy when it exceeds operational business, I think it's got less chance to succeed. How do you get to create the conversations, and almost build the shared ambition together between an operator and the entrepreneur themselves? I think in that space, you can have a lot more success.

30:30

**Milly:** We talk a lot about the co-development aspect with service users but, I don't want to put words in your mouth, kind of reading between the lines, are we moving away from that sales pitch - I've got a product that will solve your needs, you purchase it, and your members can access it - towards that more co-development with two partners, say an entrepreneur and a member moving towards that more development, co-creation, and shared... at least the shared vision, if not the shared approach?

30:56

**Huw:** I think we probably are and I think it's because of the volatility of the last two years that you're having all these organisations, and some of them are at different levels of maturity, of course, all of them having those sort of reset conversations about what is our offer? What is our proposition in terms of what the customer wants? What does our member want? What do the people who visit our facilities want?

And some of those fault lines are going to be, and some of those changes are going to be here for a long period of time. As we know, we've got a revenue report coming out in around June time around workplace health, right. And workplace health is obviously, as you guys

will appreciate, there's been a huge displacement of people. That's a real opportunity for our sector, and I know particular my members, in understanding what that looks like from an employer employee perspective. And the employee is the one here who may well be in a hybrid situation, split between an office and home. And actually, how are you maintaining their physical and mental wellbeing?

It's a lot more nuanced situation than it was historically when they were always coming into the office, and they had a package of support or whatever. And I think, you know, there's an opportunity for innovation technology, digital, to be part of that support solution for employers to support their employees. And that provides a really interesting and fertile, innovative environment for either entrepreneurs or operators to work together to find what will ultimately be long term solutions for organisations of all sizes, and all scales really.

32:20

**Milly:** You mentioned workplace wellbeing there, and that being a really fertile ground for this type of innovative way of working using innovations, partnerships. What other gaps are aware of that kind of could be that fertile ground as well?

32:32

**Huw:** I think you look at especially some of the more entrenched areas of inequalities, and I think that's going to be really important for decision makers, government, arm's-length agencies. You're coming out of a crisis, which has shone a light on health inequalities, which run like fault lines through communities in this country.

Our sector is not the panacea in that, but we can contribute to that. Some of the big pressure points are people who are plus 55, 60 years old, you're looking at people who have long term health conditions, you're looking at a disparity in communities which are ethnically diverse, you're looking at gender, or looking at disability, these are all areas where I want my members to be on the journey over the next decade where they are growing their proposition, their offer, their service to those communities. And going back to the point I made, success is when my members' facilities reflect the communities in which they operate in. And that has to be for all. And yes, that will require an evolution of their offer, proposition, culture, development, which is good.

And we should be about change, we should always be moving forward. And innovation technology will have to be at the heart and be integral to those conversations if they're going to succeed. And I think we are getting to a position where you've gone from the extremes of lockdown and thinking that the physical was all over in terms of space, to being a lot more of a better equilibrium. But it is an equilibrium, it is going to be around a balance between the physical space and what you get from being in a physical space, through social interactions, social community connectivity, professionalism of service, where you require it, and also the digital proposition as well.

And that is a reconciliation that is now there with our sector and it's now just a question of the how and how our members get to that point where they have a maturity of offer proposition that supports that customer need, which they will. This brings into the conversation, the innovation, the entrepreneurs, which is exciting for the sector to be able to

embrace ideas, but they have to do it from a position of maturity from their own side as well, you know.

34:33

**Alex:** I was thinking as you were talking about some of those brick and mortar type organisations that all of a sudden thought, actually yeah, my in person offer will continue right. Like, you know, the traditional means to get people active will continue to play a pivotal role in keeping people active and getting more people active, right, but actually, the last two years make you think that people aren't going to be around that much, they might not be able to come and visit me that much, because they used to work in a physical space in town, but now they're not coming into town anymore.

So, then all of a sudden, there's this integration of a digital offer or digital products as part of that. So, I was trying to see as to whether that came up you know in your thinking, and whether you'd see that also as that fertile environment to co design, co create, call launch services ultimately, to support people and put people at the heart of what they need.

35:34

**Huw:** Completely. And I think when we had the lockdown, you'll see these stories from the likes of Peloton saying it's like the end of history, we have one. And it's been a very different position since then, you know, and that's not to disparage Peloton at all, but it was just people liked the physical, like they liked the fact that they want to go and visit for whatever reason it is, escapism, the social interaction, the different environment, the quality of the training, the quality of the classes, stuff you can't do in your own space, right. And that's really important, that will always be, but it has to be, there will now be a situation where that will be complemented by a need for agility, which a digital proposition provides.

Now, that's now a journey that the sector is going on in a much more strategic way than probably it was previously in a much more ad hoc way. And it has to be at the heart of some of those conversations, when you are looking at supporting people and taking pressure off the NHS, for example. We're having some conversations with the NHS around the app, right. And how you look at the app, which is what we've now all got on our phones, right. And there's a real opportunity to give some consideration to how this can be a tool for preventative measures, as opposed to just being something where you load your lateral flow tests on.

And it could be a really useful pushout for people. Imagine how many people we have in the country, it must be 30 to 40 million people, right? What an opportunity to use that to support, guide, advise, signpost people to options around their physical health and their physical and mental health. That is something which I know they're wrestling with and something we want to support them in unpicking, in terms of what that could look like.

So that's a classic example. You know, we've got this, by the very nature of the crisis we've been in, things accelerated the speed of light. Now, can we take stock and think well, actually, how can we use this for good, and innovation, which everybody has on their phone probably, can now be used to signpost, support, advise or nudge on issues of health wellbeing prevention. What an opportunity that is, right?

37:30

**Alex:** I suppose with that, being mindful of a listener, I suppose the caveat within that is some people may think, yeah, but tech is just for young people or not everyone is tech savvy. And I suppose we just need to counteract that with actually no, not every young person is online, and not every older person is not tech aware, and actually, when you look at the older person demographic, they might not be the beneficiary of tech, but actually, their siblings or children or that network of support around that individual might be the one that sort of benefits from that.

And yeah, and the last point on that, coming around the NHS and the app, yeah, almost 8 billion pounds, the cost of inactivity on the UK economy, a billion of that is on prevention, which is a separate conversation, then around actually that's a hugely disproportionate spend when thinking about you know what you mentioned about, there's lots of evidence that shows that physical activity can stop stuff in the future.

38:31

**Huw:** Yeah. And this is about how do you stop people using the NHS in the rate they do, right. And obviously, the institution we all love and cherish was stretched to a breaking point in the last couple of years. But some of the fundamental fault lines that it does have, especially around the ageing society, and it's not a healthy society that is ageing, is not going to go away. Unless there is a cultural shift from treatment to prevention. Ultimately, it's not really for the NHS to do that. The NHS probably should just be focusing on treatment.

It's for us as a sector to play a bigger role in prevention, if we are allowed to, if we give us the power and the wings to do that, then we'll fly, right? And that's what will happen if there is - going back to the earlier point I made - political will; if you want to make the change in prevention, which is not going to happen overnight. Of course, if it's a generational change in our society, then it will happen, it will happen you just need to commit to it. And that comes from the top. And you'll have willing accomplices in our sector to be absolute foot soldiers for that agenda, but you just need to want it. That's the change which we seek really.

39:36

**Alex:** Alright, I just want to then finish off before we move into the quickfire round. Again, I'm guilty as, I suppose, Milly and I had a chat that these episodes, I'm loving them because just sitting with an individual like you and having the opportunity to hear all of that, it's like I'm getting first-hand learning just here, right?

So, to a younger Huw, or to again, maybe a budding leader, or a leader within the sector that is listening. Anything that you over 20 years have learned and would almost go, bear in mind this, or be prepared for this or embrace this bit. So, what is that message to someone that is starting out a few years ago?

40:19

**Huw:** Yeah so, these might sound slightly strange. But don't get locked down on 'I need to achieve this by a certain time', people change at different rates. When I got four GCSEs, you know, it was told that I wasn't bright enough to do A levels before that. But revenge is really good motivator for me. So like, I took that on and wasn't very good academically, and then you just kind of go through the gears, right, and you then get a good work ethic through a

couple of years out before uni, and then you kind of change a little bit and people change at different levels. And then just don't put too much pressure on, 'I need to achieve this by 25, 30, 40', whatever, it just, if you work hard and you're receptive to the opportunities that come your way, then embrace them and you need to put your hand in the fire, you need to make yourself uncomfortable.

Public speaking, you know, you've probably heard me speak far too many times, but instinctively I'm quite a shy person. So, I had to put my hand in the fire to do that. And it's still sometimes you twinge when my comms head phones up and says, the Today programme wants you at 7:15, I'm going, what. You literally freeze and think about that, and then you have to take a deep breath and then go forward.

I think it's really healthy to have a healthy sense of the absurd. Just go with it, man, just like see where it takes you. I mean, always think about trying to explore the opportunities that come your way. I've been very fortunate in my career to have had some very interesting, diverse experiences, work with some brilliant people, you learn off those guys, you always think about what you're taking with you even if you're not doing it consciously. You just immerse yourself in environments and see how leadership works from that. And then you'll pick up your own style as well and don't try to interpret someone, you've got to be authentic, that's going to come from your own personality. You know, If you try and pretend to be something you're not, people see straight through that. I'm assuming that's you know, my what team see anyway, but hopefully see, you know, a relatively calm, relaxed, individual, and hopefully that permeates through my organisation.

But I think those are the things you've just got to be really authentic about yourself, put your hand in the fire, don't put too much pressure on yourself and just enjoy it. And if you're not enjoying work, then you're in the wrong thing, man. If you're not enjoying what you're doing, if you don't enjoy the people you're working with then change. Change your job change the trajectory just go right and see where you do find it.

42:38

**Alex:** Here we are now going to move to the end part of this episode, and it is our quick fire round question. 60 seconds on a topic of your choice which was...

42:50

**Huw:** Test matches at the Oval in the 1990s which was pretty niche.

42:54

**Milly:** No pressure to get them all right then.

42:57

**Huw:** Pretty niche.

42:58

**Alex:** Alright sixty seconds will start when I start the first question. Which England cricketer scored 1097 test runs at the Kia Oval between 1978 and 1994?

**Huw:** Graham Gooch.

**Alex:** Yeah. Which Indian batsman had the top individual test score against England at The Oval in 1990?

43:21

**Huw:** In 1990, Ravi Shastri.

43:23

**Alex:** Yes. What number of runs did Ravi Shastri score at The Oval that year?

**Huw:** 250.

**Alex:** 187. Who did England play on the 19th of August 1999 at The Oval?

**Huw:** New Zealand.

**Alex:** Yep. The Oval was the first English ground to host what?

**Huw:** The FA Cup.

**Alex:** A test match.

**Huw:** It is the FA Cup as well though.

**Alex:** Which England batsman was the world's leading test run scorer in the 1990s?

43:51

**Huw:** Alec Stewart.

43:52

**Alex:** Who made South Africa history by taking nine for 57 at The Oval in 1994?

**Huw:** Devon Malcolm.

**Alex:** What position did the late Joey Benjamin play at his only test appearance at The Oval in 1994?

44:04

**Huw:** Number 11?

**Alex:** Bowler

**Huw:** Bowler yeah.

44:07

**Alex:** That's it, well played! Good stuff! You did good. Well, the end of the series leaderboard will be revealed at the end of this series, so you've got to stay in suspense for a little bit longer.



**Huw:** The tension's unbearable. Is there a prize for second?

**Alex:** No.

44:24

**Huw:** No. Winner takes all.

44:25

**Alex:** The winner takes it all.

**Huw:** Well played.

44:28

**Milly:** But it's about taking part isn't it?

44:31

**Huw:** It's the taking part that counts, but I enjoyed that. Thank you.

44:33

**Milly:** Thanks so much for coming on, great to have you on the podcast.

**Huw:** Thank you.

**Milly:** Alex.

**Alex:** Milly.

**Milly:** What an episode today so much to take away from us conversation there. I think a couple of things that struck me. Firstly, Huw ended with you know, his advice to aspiring leaders in the sector or anybody in the sector. A big part of that was about being yourself and being authentic, and actually, that really came across when we were talking about the pandemic and his first thing was it was about my people and how to support them through it, and I think that shone through everything that he was saying. His passion for the people within the sector, whether that's his members, his employees, or ultimately service users is really, really clear.

A lot of interesting things we could take away there, and one of the things that we touched on a little bit was how Huw thinks that tech and innovation is critical to our progress within the sector. But it's complimentary, it's not taking over, we're not getting rid of the human aspect, the physical spaces, it's about how we weave it into the bricks and mortar, how we weave it into delivery by humans to create this environment, whether to work side by side.

45:40

**Alex:** The human aspect came really strongly. I particularly liked, ultimately what he mentioned, that his reason for working in the sector was a marriage of, a love affair with sport and politics. And he also talked about why wouldn't you want to work in this sector? This is about transforming millions of people's lives for the better. So that human aspect and



really caring about what he does, and the people he works with, and the environment, for the people that he supports, came across really loud and clear.

The other things that I really picked up was the coming around is an underrated sector. But then the role of leaders like him, getting the elbows out. And that is obviously making a case for the improvement of a sector now and for air time and attention for our sector now. At the same time, those are quite possibly critical moments that are going to help the sector in years to come. The point is, the importance of leaders in whatever shape or form and whatever stage and not underestimating the impact that you might be creating at that moment in time and what that might lead to in the future.

And the last piece was that inequalities run like a fault line, or like fault lines. And it's something that we see at Sport Tech Hub, that entrepreneurs come to us, they have an audience in mind, which tend to skew to be the people that are already active. That makes sense. Ultimately, if you're an entrepreneur, you're trying to grow a business, and you are going to go for the people that are going to be able to use your product, pay for your product, give you some engagement immediately off the bat, that is understandable.

I think what is important to consider is, and a lot of the work that we do with other entrepreneurs at Sport Tech Hub is just trying to give them that empathy level to those audiences, whether they are disabled people, people from an ethnically diverse community, low socio-economic levels that could hugely be benefiting from your tech. But it might be quite hard to go and monetize immediately.

So, I think that the last point in that is the role the sector could play. Let's help entrepreneurs get that traction now. Because then that might give us the breathing time to build the empathy levels and the products being able to resonate better with the audiences that ultimately we want them to engage further down the line.

48:31

**Milly:** Yeah, completely. And again, coming back to we're not going to build anything without the people involved. So, let's give ourselves the time to build that empathy with ultimately the users whoever that may be.

I think we'd be doing Huw a disservice if we didn't mention the political will being a big part of what we need to do now as a sector. He talks about how our data and evidence has come on leaps and bounds, and particularly since 2012. And now there's a big piece we need to do about our stories and how we tell them in order to help the government see that there is, it can be a transformative sector. We talked a little bit about prevention. And that's another topic entirely, which I'm sure we could talk with Huw for hours about, but that's something that came across really strongly.

I really hope that you all enjoyed that as much as we did so much to take away there. So do be sure to subscribe, download, share and leave a comment on your preferred platform.

Tune into our next episode to hear from another brilliant leader within the sector talking all things sport, tech and leadership.

