

INQUIRY REPORT

Evidence from Dagenham Dragons

Dagenham Dragons

1. Introduction

An interesting submission was received by the APPG in response to its Call for Evidence. This submission was sent by an individual called Jack Kendall, who is a reformed drug addict who has launched the community-based Dagenham Dragons basketball team.

Jack Kendall's story is a personal one. He was born in Dagenham and had a difficult childhood and school. He was a 'troublesome bully' for whom only sport mattered. However, he did have a supportive family.

He started playing rugby, but his father had to take him to Kent to play as there was no rugby in Dagenham. He played underage rugby for England and ended up playing with London Irish.

Due to his personality and the rugby environment, he overdid things - drinking; then steroids; then cocaine and he became 'caught up in the lifestyle'.

Jack ended up addicted to drink and to drugs. He stole even from his family, and he became so bad that he attempted suicide twice. He found himself in hospital and his whole life was in a downward spiral.

Jack then realised his addictive personality was destroying him and all those around him, including his wife and children. So to turn it around, he started a basketball club on his estate. At the first sessions, thirty youngsters turned up. All tough, difficult types - they tended not to go to school, but needed someone to reach out to.

Basketball gives them a purpose, an outlet, and hopefully eventually basketball will broaden their horizons. However, it will always be a struggle because funds are so difficult. It is always a problem to pay for hire of a hall and for various fees, but basketball and the Dagenham Dragons club are important to their lives.

2. Letter written by Jack Kendall

With apologies for the spelling and grammar, a letter written by Jack Kendall is reproduced below exactly as received, followed by copies of two publications highlighting the story.

Dear Sirs/Madam,

My name is Jack Kendall, I have been suffering with addiction, depression, ADHD, and Bipolar, I was not recognized with these conditions until last year. I grew up in Essex/East London, I went to school in Dagenham, i was always a big lad, i never took well to school, my parents and teachers saw me as a clown, the class joker, and mis behaved, it was even said i was a bully, I can promise from the bottom of my heart, and on my childrens lives, i was never none of the above, My mother and father was worried, as any parent would be for a "no hoper" growing up on the rough estates of barking and dagenham, so they encourage me to play sport, all that there was to play at that time was, football or cricket, and a little rugby, i tried them all, but took to rugby, i had found a savior, but i wanted to do it every day, all or nothing, just as anything i done, if i liked it, i done it to the max, and made everyone do it also, i never got no help with it in school, I went on to win 4 U18 england caps, and a pro contract with a team called london irish, after finishing with blackheath, i won a full academic award to study at st mary's uni in twickenham, i was 18 at this time, where i was show the way of "drink", guess what, i loved it, but i loved it so much, i could not stop, so to help me train, i took to steroids, which i also loved, then cocain to help me drink more, so them more steroids to block out the "coke" then i never got the same hit on coke, i mixed my cocain with speed, crack, and then smoked brown (heroin) to bring me to earth, all while playing, as you can imagine, my pro contract did not last any longer than 8 months, i was thrown out, my parents and family was so upset, i was back in dagenham, and doing drugs, something i said i would never be, it just crept up on me, i never thought i would be that "scum" and all the teachers and people i went to school with, said "there he is, the bully, mis behaved person, druggie" this went on for ten

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years, i began to learn how to hide this, very very well, and became a great liar, there was a few months here and there i would not touch anything, but always knew i would go back to this, in that time, i married, and had two amazingly blessed children, i fell in and out with drugs, my wife and kid was never enough to stop me (and i do not expect anybody without this disease to understand) I stole from my kids, sold all there nice things for drugs, i stole from my family, my dying nan, my in laws, broke into house's to feed this addiction, but still my family stuck by me (i am one of the lucky ones), in september i attempted suicide twice, once by jumping in the river thames and cutting my throat, and the second time by laying in the road, on the a13, i had become a soulless, dead man walking, and i did not want to hurt or tarnish my family any longer, i knew i was doing wrong, but i could not stop, while in hospital, i saw an old friend, he was a good basketball player, he always used to think, why is he playing that sport !! a sport we don't dare play around here, (i had always loved watching basketball, but there was no where to play it in dagenham, and if there was, i was not aware of), he asked me if i would like to shoot some "hoops" in the hospital yard, i jumped at it, a sport that i liked, and an old friend that still wanted to talk to me, and didn't mind being seen with me, then.....there, my life savior, my familys life savior, from that day, i have lived and breathed basketball, "why did i not play this when i was younger ???" "a sport that is played over the park by normal, street kids, the lads from the estate, these lads chose to play ball rather than sell drugs or take drugs",

i am now 7 months clean, the longest 11 years, i take my programe day by day, but i will never resort to going back to the devil, i now resort to a ball and a basket, I currently play for dagenham dragons, a club i started, based in dagenham, where i encourage all types of people, addicts, active or clean, because if for one day i can keep them from doing drugs, its a life saved, people who share my conditions, sexually abused people, and non confidence people, we currently have around 30 people in the club, youth and senior who all support the club, some of them share my conditions, some dont, its a wide open club, we encourage everybody,

This sport needs to be seen as a lifesaver, it's just as widespread on the council estates as football, and should be as big as football, but these kids etc, do not know where to go, it is not advertised, and it is not supported, we (basketball) have some amazing athletes, who are more than worthy of doing tv adverts as david beckham does running through gardens in his pants, why is this amazing sport that takes so many kids off the street over looked,

I would be more than happy to fight this case, i has saved lives all over the world, and keeping youths and adults from prison, and further harming themselves.....

kindest regards

*Jack Kendall
Dagenham Dragons*

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3. Reformed Drug Addict Launches Community Basketball Team Dagenham Dragons

The following article written by Mark Shales, appeared in the Barking and Dagenham Post on 26th January 2014:

“After a decade of substance addiction, Jack Kendall’s sporting dreams seemed well and truly over. An under-18 rugby player with a promising international career, he’d grown up sharing a pitch with the likes of future England star James Haskell. But his life slowly began to fall apart when he became involved in drugs as a teenager. A daily cocktail of steroids, cocaine and speed, even leading to a suicide attempt, well and truly put the brakes on Jack’s plans.

“Ten years on, Jack has been clean for four months - and the 30-year-old, of Bradwell Avenue, has again found purpose in sport. But this time he hopes he can use his experiences to stop others falling prey to the addictions that shut down his teenage ambitions. That’s why he’s launched community basketball team the Dagenham Dragons. Training weekly at Barking and Dagenham College, the side is open to players of all abilities.

“Jack hopes his example can act as a potential life-line to others. “I was taking anything and everything and I ended up losing it all,” he said. “I had no one I could turn to for help. I see kids on the street now and I just want to get the message out there that they don’t have to go down the same path. I think drug addiction is often dealt with wrongly and people can find themselves pushed into a corner, but through basketball I just want people to know someone’s there.”

“After impressing at a regional level, Jack represented his country as a youth player before signing a professional contract with London Irish. But despite his promising future, Jack slowly spiralled into drug addiction - and sport was off the table.

“After finally getting clean, he was desperate to get back into sport, choosing basketball because of its accessibility. Designed to aid recovering addicts, those struggling with self-confidence or anyone just looking for a return to sport, he insists the club will cater for everyone. “I’m nothing special but I love to play and that’s what we’re all about,” he explained. “We welcome people of all abilities. We’ve had interest from a number of people already and through word of mouth we’re going from strength to strength.”

“Currently funded by Jack and his wife, the Dragons will enter an Essex league next year and already have tournaments lined up in Bristol and Manchester. And as the project grows, he hopes further interest from individuals and potential funding from local businesses will enable the squad to switch to twice-weekly training.”



Ex drug addict and England Rugby player Jack Kendall



Ex drug addict and England Rugby player Jack Kendall

Jack Kendall (from basketball player)

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4. Drug Addiction Nearly Killed Him. Now Jack Kendall Is Using Basketball To Help Others

The following account of an interview with Jack Kendall, written by Iain Roberts, appeared on the Basketball Mag website on 21st January 2014:

“He played Rugby for England before addiction wrecked his life. Now Jack Kendall is using basketball to save others from drugs.

“November 2013 on a run-down council estate in Dagenham, East London. 29 year old Jack Kendall has seen teenagers hanging around on the local outdoor basketball court. He knows they’re selling drugs, but he sees them shooting hoops too. And they’re good. Very good. These lads have barely turned up at school so they’ve not been spotted, but there’s so much raw talent.

“Jack hires a court and asks them to come along and give it a go. 18 of them do. Less than three months later, Jack’s got regular Sunday training sessions with up to 25 lads and the big decision is whether to put them in the London Metropolitan Basketball League for a year or go straight for the nationals.

“Jack Kendall is a recovering drug addict. Alcohol, steroids, cocaine, crack...you name it. He’s passionate about helping others to avoid his path, which came within an inch of destroying not only his own life but the lives of everyone he loves.

“In 1993, ten year old Jack, born and bred in Dagenham, gives rugby a try. He’s not that good, but he works hard and he gets better. Jack joins Blackheath Rugby Club, and then plays for his county - London and South East - before being selected to play for England under-16s and then under-18s.

“Now it’s the early two thousands. Jack’s signed for London Irish and starts studying Psychology at St. Mary’s University College in Twickenham. He doesn’t turn up for lectures very often. ‘If I knew then what I know now, I’d have worked a lot harder.’ Jack says.

“Instead, Jack drinks. Heavily. ‘The club advised players not to drink too much, but when you’ve got young lads together, you get a drinking culture’. The other players drank on Saturday nights after the game. Jack drank on the Saturdays, and the Sundays, and the Mondays.

“After that came steroids, partly to counteract the tiredness from all the booze, and partly to improve himself physically. ‘Fitness, bulk, strength...If you look hard enough, there’s a steroid for anything you want,’ Jack comments. Then came cocaine. ‘The first time I tried it, it felt amazing.’ Every day. Drink, cocaine, steroids. Jack failed drugs tests and soon found himself kicked out of London Irish and university. Crack addiction followed, but he had still a way to fall before he hit rock bottom.

“2006 and Jack has a chance to turn his life around. He meets his future wife and when she becomes pregnant, Jack’s Catholic upbringing and family kick into action and she and Jack are quickly married. He stops the drugs, thinking he’d got it sorted, but within a couple of months he’s using again.

“‘An active addict hides it very well. You become very good at manipulating and lying. Some people must have known - perhaps they turned a blind eye,’ he explains. He drifted through jobs, never holding one for long. Because of his addiction, he and his wife lost their house. He lost his friends. He even sold his own kids’ toys to pay for drugs.

“Throughout this his wife worked hard to keep things together - and it’s a tribute to her work that the family - now with two young children - has survived.

“In 2012 Jack twice attempted suicide and went into a mental institution. He finally admitted that he was an addict - that he had the disease. ‘I hurt everyone, and I’d soon have been dead,’ Jack confesses.

“He started attending Cocaine Anonymous meetings, and accepted that he was never going to recover unless he personally chose to do it. But the CA meetings seemed to be missing something. ‘People would tell their stories and say they’d been clean for a year. That’s great, but I realised I wanted to be playing sport, not listening to the same old stories week after week.’

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“That’s when Jack started thinking about the young people hanging around on his estate, selling drugs and shooting hoops. Locally there didn’t seem much sport that the kids he came across on the estate could get involved with. ‘Everything in Barking and Dagenham seems money-orientated.’

“Why basketball? Why not rugby? ‘Basketball’s a great game, I’ve always loved it,” Jack explains. ‘Rugby turned its back on me, but basketball’s been a lifesaver. And rugby’s a very middle-class game - it’s just not right for the kids on my estate. For basketball you just need five players, a hoop and a court.’

“Jack’s praise for hoops isn’t unreserved though. ‘There are too many chiefs in basketball, and some people don’t want to know you unless you’ve got lots of basketball history.’ An ex rugby-playing recovering drug addict might not have been the easiest sell, though. Jack also feels that basketball can be too insular. ‘Some people give the impression they want to keep basketball for themselves and they don’t want others coming in, but it could really benefit from mixing with other sports.’

“Practicing what he preaches, Jack has secured kit sponsorship from Billericay Football Club. Local basketball clubs have come up trumps too: London Lions have donated game tickets whilst Essex Leopards have offered friendly games and joint coaching sessions.

“In less than three months, the club has gone from nothing to potential national league entrants. Jack wants to do more. At the moment all the players are aged 16-29, but he wants to set up a separate night for youths - and he really wants to get those with convictions, addictions, suffering abuse or just bored to come along. ‘I was branded scum’, says Jack. ‘Without the support of my family, I would have believed that.’

“Jack is a recovering addict - he’ll never be completely cured. But as he works to rebuild his life, perhaps some of the young people growing up in Dagenham today will find their future shaped not by drugs and crime, but by basketball.”