

Positive Wellbeing: The key to success in sport and life

With the Olympics currently taking place in Tokyo and the many news articles surrounding athletes' mental health; I thought this was the perfect opportunity to highlight some of the excellent work done by both individuals and organisations to alleviate some of the concerns over mental and physical wellbeing for individuals with an autism diagnosis.

A Scot has won the World's Strongest Man competition after beating four-time winner Brian Shaw to the crown. Tom Stoltman, 27, claimed the title for the first time in June 2021. He is the first Scotsman to ever win the title¹. In this commentary, I intend to discuss how his autism diagnosis and the challenges that presented, helped him reach the pinnacle of his sport and made him stronger both physically and mentally.

Tom is from the town of Invergordon in the eastern highlands and has been training as a strongman for almost a decade. Recently, he demonstrated his strength in another way: opening up about his autism diagnosis and spreading awareness within the strongman community and to his 213,000 Instagram followers. Diagnosed as a child, Tom says autism helps him thrive as a professional athlete. In a recent Instagram post, he calls it his "superpower." For me this openness demonstrates excellent self-awareness and strong mental wellbeing.

An early childhood diagnosis has helped Tom to better understand his condition and, in many ways, the routines that are often associated with autism diagnosis can help him: "Think about strongman — eat, sleep, train, every day, repeat"². However, in my opinion this self-awareness didn't come naturally, it was through Tom's positive mental attitude and openness about the physical and mental challenges associated with his diagnosis, that professionals better understood how the autistic brain processes information. This may have helped him feel more confident to talk and thus less anxious; improving his overall wellbeing.

Moreover, Tom feels more strongly about how his autism has helped him to develop as an athlete. He deals exceptionally well with the physical and mental challenges of the sport, often having to overcome his autistic traits; such as difficulty in communicating with others. Perhaps we could all learn to take a leaf from his book.

I believe Tom's willingness to give back to the community is excellent, often using the gym to train challenging students from his local school to improve both physically and mentally; which gives youngsters a healthy attitude, helping them develop self-confidence and improve their sense of inclusion within the community.

For too long now autistic individuals have been the target of negative comments and suggestions that we won't amount to anything, or that we won't be able to live full, engaging, and worthwhile lives. This does great damage to our self-confidence and sense of self-worth, often leading to depression and poor mental wellbeing.

¹ Macfarlane, J. (2021, June 22nd). Tom Stoltman: who is Scot who won World's Strongest Man 2021, what height is he, and who's his brother Luke? Retrieved from The Scotsman:

<https://www.scotsman.com/sport/other-sport/tom-stoltman-who-is-scot-who-won-worlds-strongest-man-2021-what-height-is-he-and-whos-his-brother-luke-3280678>

² Lockridge, R. (2021, April 28). Strongman Tom Stoltman Speaks About 2021 WSM Prep and Autism Spectrum Disorder. Retrieved from BarBend: <https://barbend.com/tom-stoltman-interview/>

In my opinion sport can be used as a vehicle for change and awareness raising. Tom suggests surrounding yourself with positive people and here are some examples that I feel bring autistic wellbeing into the public discourse, ensuring inclusivity for autistic individuals and thus better wellbeing for those concerned.

ⁱTeam United in East Lothian, is helping many young people with an autism diagnosis overcome social challenges through the medium of sport and exercise. I think this is an excellent service that gives youngsters the opportunity to build their confidence and communication skills in a supported and engaging environment. For me, this organisation does an excellent job alleviating some of the mental health concerns parents have regarding their child's integration with their social peers. The organisation's Celebrations of Achievement structure also enables youngsters to gain that all important self-confidence; a key tenet of wellbeing in the individual. All this excellent work is being done by staff that are not only trained in the chosen activity, but are also trained in autism awareness and are thus able to support the youngsters at a pace and level at which they are comfortable.

It is not just Team United bringing autistic wellbeing into public discourse, Strathmore Rugby Clubⁱⁱ has also set up a rugby ready programme for primary aged youngsters who have or are undergoing an autism diagnosis. These sessions are an excellent way of helping youngsters to develop social skills and feel included in their community. The fact that they also welcome siblings of the youngsters helps them feel safe and included while having that familiar support network to rely on. I believe that Strathmore really has their finger on the pulse when it comes to understanding autistic youngsters' physical and mental wellbeing.

Let me explain: all the staff are fully trained not only in coaching rugby but also in autism awareness and the idea that an individual's physical and mental wellbeing should always be paramount. It is excellent that they send out story boxes of what to expect at training, helping to eliminate the anxiety of the unknown, which is so common among individuals with autism. The use of picture communication cards will reduce sensory overload and sensory breakout areas at the end of the training fields enables youngsters to feel confident that they have a place to de-stress if they do become overloaded. These are just some examples of what they offer to ensure that positive wellbeing is paramount in all that they do.

In conclusion, many autistic individuals such as Tom Stoltman didn't have the easiest time growing up as a young person with autism. However, unlike many others Tom didn't succumb to the feelings of anxiety and/or depression. No, he used his autistic focus to beat back that anxiety, not only to reach the pinnacle of his chosen sport but also to open up on his diagnosis, and the challenges he faced in overcoming his fears but also to raise awareness of autism and to give back to the community that supported him well as he grew up. I also think that the work of organisations such as Team United and Strathmore Rugby Club in bringing autistic wellbeing into the public focus is highly commendable.

Breaking down perceived and real barriers to physical and mental wellbeing for autistic individuals is close to my heart and these people are doing just that. In my opinion not only strongmen in sport but also strongmen in life and definitely role models. Some may even go as far as to call them superheroes for autism.

ⁱ <https://www.activeeastlothian.co.uk/news/team-united-2314>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.scottishrugby.org/news/strathmore-rfc-trust-brings-autism-friendly-rugby-to-scotland>