



Tom Clarke-Forrest

# A sporting chance

**JON GRIFFIN meets the founder of a charity which, through the medium of sport, has given hope and meaning to thousands of young people.**

It has been nearly 20 years since Sport 4 Life was founded in a tiny office in inner-city Birmingham, helping 25,000 young people over two decades to cope with a host of problems ranging from the soul-destroying impact of unemployment to mental health issues.

From those humble beginnings the Birmingham-based charity has established itself as an enduring force for social good – with more than 20 staff now running a £1.6 million revenue enterprise helping find new purpose and meaning to transform the lives of thousands of 11 to 29-year-olds.

In an increasingly overcrowded voluntary fundraising sector, Sport 4 Life has survived and prospered to grow into one of the leading sports charities in the region, with its tentacles now spreading into partnerships with national allies in London and the north west.

That's quite an achievement in a volatile sector continually buffeted by the harsh realities of an uncertain economic backdrop – but none of it would have been possible without the vision and determination of founder Tom Clarke-Forrest.

Back in July 2006, Birmingham-born Clarke-Forrest, aided and abetted by his elder brother and GP father, set in motion plans for a sport-based charity which could help transform the lives of youngsters battling against the odds in deprived inner-city areas of urban Birmingham.

Nearly 20 years later the myriad of problems facing hundreds of thousands of those youngsters remain, as Clarke-Forrest and his chair of trustees and director Mike Gahir point out in a stark introduction to Sport 4 Life's Impact Report 2025.

They say: "Sadly, many young people still face significant challenges in education. Attendance and attainment are falling, while exclusions are on the rise.

"After leaving school, the picture doesn't improve. Youth unemployment remains stubbornly high, three times greater than the rate for all working-age adults, and

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economic inactivity follows a similar trend. Even those in work often face insecure or low-paid jobs, with two million 18 to 24-year-olds underemployed."

But whilst that message is undoubtedly stark, Sport 4 Life founder and CEO Clarke-Forrest and his team can point to genuine progress in changing the lives of thousands of young people in the most deprived areas of the city.

The report adds: "Despite a challenging economic, political and funding landscape, we've had the privilege of supporting almost 4,000 young people this year. Through positive role models, hands-on learning and tailored programmes, they've seen real progress in their life skills, mental health and education."

It's been a long, hard – and at times bumpy – road for Clarke-Forrest and Sport 4 Life over the last two decades as the CEO reflects from his comfortable office in Digbeth's Custard Factory, itself an appropriate shining beacon for urban renewal and societal transformation.

"I am really proud," he says. "There have been lots of ups and downs and challenges, and huge amounts of learning personally and professionally. But fundamentally it has been an absolute

privilege to work with the young people that we do, a privilege to work with an amazing team.

"There have been a few sleepless nights over the years but overall it has been incredibly enjoyable. We have worked with around 25,000 young people over the years, and thousands of them have gone into full-time work."

And key to that mission to turn despair into hope for those often underprivileged young people has been the Birmingham charity's very own USP – its platform of sport.

As Clarke-Forrest, a self-confessed sports fanatic who still plays Monday night seven-a-side football at 40, explains: "Of course I am incredibly biased when I say this, but I don't know of a better platform from which you can drive through key life skills changes with young people.

"Sport can teach you about winning, losing, sacrifice, teamwork, leadership and respect in a way little else can. It has been a massive part of my life. It helps me switch off sometimes from the day job.

"Obviously the physical health benefits are huge but equally, if not more so, there are the wellbeing benefits that participating in and watching sport gives me."

Clarke-Forrest's passion for sport – he remains a keen follower of West Bromwich Albion, a love passed on from his father – was key to the foundation of Sport 4 Life back in 2006.

"I was a big sports fan for as long as I can remember. I had a huge passion for sport, both participating and watching. I am one of three boys and I think my parents chucked me out in the garden as much as they could. I just always remember playing sport.

"Football was the main one. I played at a decent level for some teams near West Brom, including one that was linked to the West Brom Academy called Sandwell Rangers.

"Being part of a team really gave me key life skills and transferable skills. I was quite

a shy kid growing up, so on the pitch or the tennis court, it really felt like a leveller."

Uncertain where his future career ambitions lay, the shy youngster from Birmingham took himself off after leaving school for a gap year to join a voluntary youth programme in the poverty-stricken favelas of Brazil. The South American adventure would prove a turning point in his life.

"Interestingly, in some ways that was probably my first exposure to sport for social good – and also deprivation and lower socio-economic groups. We were living in Sao Paulo and working with a lot of young people there, some of whom were from the favelas.

"That probably to a degree sowed the seed for me of power of sport as a tool for social good. We used to go to mud pitches in a favela where you could turn up with a football and just get flocked by young people – it was a universal language.

"Not speaking the language fluently, in sport there was a leveller and an engagement tool and it certainly gave me some ideas that then came to fruition later on."

After six months in Brazil, he returned to the UK to study sport, exercise science and physiology at Leeds University before hitting on his idea for a wholly new charity venture in his home city.

"It was family orientated when the Sport 4 Life story first started. It was a bit of an idea that myself, my dad and my elder brother had. As an inner-city GP with a practice in Ladywood, my dad had acute awareness of some of the challenges in that ward."

Twenty years on, Clarke-Forrest recalls a eureka moment in the birth of Sport 4 Life. "We were looking at one facility initially in Ladywood before we got anything going and we saw a young kid by himself in one of the parks just kicking a drinks can around.



Clarke-Forrest, centre in blue top, says working with the young people and his team is an "absolute privilege"

"He had no equipment, he didn't even have a football. It was a bit of a penny-drop moment. We thought if we don't do this, who is going to do it?"

With his GP father as a founding trustee, Clarke-Forrest launched Sport 4 Life in the summer of 2006. "The focus was on participation – let's get as many inner-city young kids, starting in Ladywood, just focusing on that ward initially.

"It was mainly football, but also other different sports, holiday camps, that kind of thing. I didn't really understand social values, social good or real impact initially. It was just about participation."

That early focus on sport for sport's sake in deprived areas saw Sport 4 Life expand from Ladywood into Acocks Green, Druids Heath and Somerville following grant assistance from the Football Foundation. Clarke-Forrest delivered some of the early coaching sessions for youngsters but

realised his own focus needed to change.

"I wanted to create an environment where I could employ others to do that work. I was very hands-on but realised there were some brilliant people who could engage young people."

As the charity grew, the emphasis on sport for sport's sake shifted to sport for social good following a survey of 500 inner-city Birmingham youngsters, as Clarke-Forrest recalls.

"They said quite unequivocally that they were facing a lot more challenges than we were providing solutions for. Educational attainment was a big issue, as were youth unemployment, mental health challenges, crime and antisocial behaviour... we were just scratching the surface really."

Around 2010, the charity subsequently pivoted to introduce other non-sports activities as part of its package for young people, including delivering qualifications

and informal mentoring to instil leadership skills.

Sport 4 Life had moved on from an inner-city vehicle providing football kickabouts for disaffected youth to a path towards employability, which remains its primary aim 15 years later. And as time went on, the charity recruited more staff as part of its organic growth.

As Clarke-Forrest stresses: "Employability is our main raison d'être. We know that it is inextricably linked with other social challenges that young people face – mental health and wellbeing, for example.

"If you're out of work you are more likely to be facing issues with mental health, crime, antisocial behaviour and so on."

The charity set up home in Digbeth in 2020 and has gradually developed into a regional organisation, working with partners beyond its Birmingham heartland to further improve the lives of many young people.

"There are over 20 full-time staff based here – a mixture of operational staff, those working directly with young people, and that includes mentors, sports coaches, qualification tutors, but also back-office roles in our functions team, marketing, business development, income generation, that kind of thing."

The contrast with the early days for a charity which last year alone delivered more than 3,700 hours of sport, training and mentoring support is stark.

"In 2006 we had two staff and no money," says Clarke-Forrest. "Now we have 20 full-time staff, over £1.5 million revenue working with 4,000 young people each year. That is significant organic growth."

That growth has taken place against an increasingly precarious landscape for charitable organisations throughout the UK.

"Finances are the main challenge. It is a tough funding landscape at the moment. We used to deliver heavily on a contract called the National Citizen Service which the



Addressing the audience at the WM Leadership Awards

Government unfortunately ended in April this year, and that has had a knock-on effect.

"In addition to that, there is a very competitive landscape, a bit of a saturated market in terms of the number of charities."

Nevertheless, Clarke-Forrest believes Sport 4 Life can continue to play an influential role in helping transform lives.

"We have faced many challenges over the last 20 years so it is our responsibility to come up with new ways to innovate and to reach young people, and ensure that we are sustainable."

And he stresses that Sport 4 Life's sustainability over two decades is still supported by the power of sport as a catalyst for more meaningful lives – and hopefully a job.

"Even if sport isn't the destination, they may get into retail or customer services or construction. Sport may still have played

a role in their building key life skills, improving their mental wellbeing on that journey into employment, and increased employability."

Clarke-Forrest is reluctant to commit himself on the future for Sport 4 Life in an ever-changing landscape for the charitable sector. "Post-pandemic I find it difficult to answer longer-term questions like that because we just don't know what is around the corner. The pandemic taught us that any plans we might have long-term can quickly go out the window.

"I have hope that we can continue to support more young people. I think the work we are doing with other organisations in addition to directly with young people is really exciting.

"If we can continue that growth – because the need is still there – that would certainly make me very happy."



An education course in progress



Clarke-Forrest was one of the baton carriers for the 2022 Commonwealth Games



Through the charity, sport has transformed the lives of thousands Birmingham children