

It's sport, but with a prize bigger than a mere trophy



Schoolchildren in some of the toughest parts of the inner city are tackling complex and deep-rooted problems with help from a team of inspirational coaches, **Matthew Syed** reports

Nathan was your average delinquent. Impossible to control in class, feared on the local estates, and aggressive.

When one boy annoyed him in class in Year 8, Nathan, then 12, stabbed him in the arm with a pencil. "He was getting on my nerves and that is the way I thought you were supposed to react," he says.

Khaled had different issues. Regularly beaten by his stepfather, he was listless at school. Fatima was struggling to juggle her school work with caring for her young brother after her father walked out, while Adam found it difficult even to get into school. He had fallen in with a gang that pressured him to bunk off so that he could run errands.

You only have to spend a few hours with the youngsters helped by Greenhouse, chosen by *The Times* for this year's Christmas Appeal, to get a sense of the diversity of inner-city youth. These aspiring adults have a multiplicity of challenges, anxieties, hopes and moral sensitivities. Some are in danger of ending up in a life in crime. Others are in with a shot of further education. Most have the potential for either. But what decides which road they take?

Greenhouse seeks to "change young lives through sport". That is the slogan, at least, but it gives little insight into the extraordinary work that this organisation is doing in some of the nation's

The Alan Cristea Gallery

A group of supporters led by the Alan Cristea Gallery in London will match the first £100,000 of donations made to Greenhouse through *The Times* Christmas Appeal.

toughest neighbourhoods: the deep impact they have had on thousands of young people; the lives that have been turned around; the skill of the coaches who are trained to understand the complexities of contemporary youth experience.

Sport is, in many ways, a red herring. Michael de Giorgio, who heads the charity (after a career in finance, he retired ten years ago to devote himself unpaid to Greenhouse), chaired a report for the Centre for Social Justice this year in which he poured scorn on the idea of sport as a panacea for all our social ills. He pointed out that cramming kids into a hall and getting them to whack a shuttlecock did nothing for social outcomes. Sport would only make a difference, he said, if it were harnessed in the right way. And that means inspirational social workers masquerading as sports coaches.

These are the men and women that Greenhouse has sent into the toughest schools in London. They work 48 weeks a year, 40 hours a week, providing pre-school, curriculum, after-school and holiday sports programmes with a difference. The youngsters play sport, but learn about life. "If a youngster re-engages with school, that is a triumph," Mr de Giorgio said. "Sport is not my driving passion. It is merely a tool to change lives."

Predrag Krmeta, a former international basketball player from Bosnia, is now coach at Nathan's school in Bermondsey. "He is more like a mentor than a teacher," Nathan says. "We



Basketball is just one of the sports that the Greenhouse coaches turn into a life-changing experience



Duke pays tribute to 'empowering, remarkable' charity

The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge today give their backing to Greenhouse and praise *The Times* for selecting the charity for this year's Christmas Appeal.

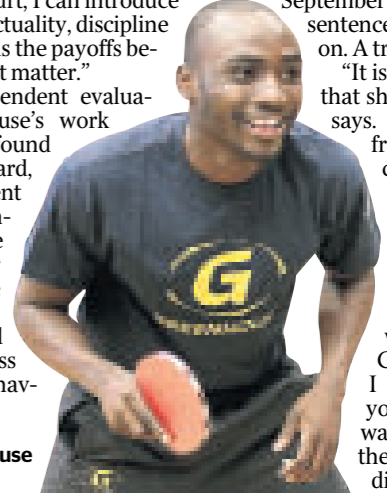
Earlier this year, the couple picked Greenhouse as one of 26 charities for their wedding list, so that guests and well-wishers could donate to the charities rather than send the Duke and Duchess

gifts. The couple were applauded at the time for championing a range of challenging and often unpopular causes such as disengaged teenagers and young offenders. More than £1 million was distributed between the 26 charities after the wedding.

In a statement to *The Times* to mark the

start of our appeal, the Duke said: "Greenhouse is an outstanding charity. Through sport and the performing arts, it empowers vulnerable children and young

people to improve self-confidence, raise aspiration and realise their true potential. Its results are remarkable. "Greenhouse's intensive programmes, not to mention their inspirational coaches, make a huge difference to some of London's most disadvantaged youth. We are thrilled that *The Times* has now also chosen to highlight this charity's great work."



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have spent the past few years working on technique and developing a brilliant school basketball team. But he has also taught us about our lives beyond the court. Without him, and without basketball, my life would be completely different. I would have been expelled for a start."

Nathan no longer pokes holes in his classmates with pencils. Under Krmeta's guidance, he has reached international level in basketball and has won plaudits for his work ethic. He is about to embark on A levels in biology, chemistry, business studies and psychology. "I want to go on a basketball scholarship to university in America," he says. "I can't wait."

Chaatouf, a 12-year-old boy on the judo programme at a school in Wandsworth, has enjoyed a similar transformation. He is coached by Winston Gordon, who is a member of the British team. "I train before school and at weekends and I have competed at international level," Chaatouf says. "But it has also had a brilliant impact on my school work. It makes us feel like we can achieve outside of judo, too."

Sport is a powerful vehicle for change not just because so many youngsters care about it, but because it provides a wonderful environment for disguised learning. "They do not see me as a teacher, so I can connect in a unique way," Krmeta says. "They call me 'Coach' and confide in me. While they are on the court, I can introduce lessons about punctuality, discipline and dedication. It is the payoffs beyond the court that matter."

A recent independent evaluation of Greenhouse's work bears this out. It found that, across the board, teenagers who went through the Greenhouse programme improved their school attendance and timekeeping. Teachers said their effort in class increased and behaviour improved. And they outperformed their peers in English and maths.

This year problems in the inner cities spilt over into riots that shocked the nation. Greenhouse operates in the areas most affected by the looting — Hackney, Haringey and Wandsworth. The charity cannot say for certain that none of its teenagers was involved, but it can say that the young people carried on turning up for training and matches that terrible week.

It is in organisations such as Greenhouse that we may hope for an antidote to gang life and the culture around it that disfigures so many sink estates.

Greenhouse has grown quickly and now operates in 48 schools with 60 full-time coaches specialising in a range of activities including basketball, table tennis, football and dance. But the organisation is not about statistics; it is about changed lives.

Take Wahab Adam and Charlie Beck, who used to attend Geoffrey Chaucer School in Southwark. Wahab became involved in the Greenhouse table tennis programme when he was 12, found new purpose in his life and went on to do a B.Tech in sports science. He is now a full-time coach on a table tennis programme at George Green School on the Isle of Dogs, helping a new generation.

Sadly, his classmate, Charlie, took a different path. Short of money and lacking hope, he walked into the Staples shop in Old Kent Road with a replica automatic weapon and raided the till. He was convicted at the Old Bailey in September of armed robbery and sentenced to ten years in prison. A tragic waste.

"It is incredible the choices that shape your life," Wahab says. "I have seen many friends make bad choices, not because they are bad people, but because they had the wrong role models and got in with the wrong crowd. The reason that I wanted to work for Greenhouse is because I can identify with young people. I don't want to see people taking the path that Charlie did."

Choices: Adam Wahab, a Greenhouse table tennis coach

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