



PROMOTE PREVENT SUPPORT

Mental Health Strategy
and Impact Framework

SPORTS INJURY AND MENTAL HEALTH

Why Podium's work is needed

Never has it been more important for young people of all backgrounds to experience the mental health benefits that regular sport and physical activity can bring. In the UK, one in six young people has a mental health problem, with more than 90,000 being referred to a mental health service in England in March 2022 alone¹ – **the equivalent of a full Wembley Stadium of children struggling in one month.**

Sport's potential to promote mental wellbeing, as well as its positive impact on physical health outcomes, has put long-term participation at the heart of the UK's public health strategy. A positive experience of sport that helps young people stay safely engaged and active through adolescence – when enduring health habits are formed – quite simply improves life chances. That is why physical injury and sport-related factors that cause mental distress and halt participation can have a profound impact on people's lives.

Adolescent sports injuries are surprisingly common. Young people are particularly vulnerable to injury due to their changing bodies and willingness to take risk; defining features of this life stage. Nearly half of all sport-related Accident and Emergency visits involve under 19s.² Young people describe loneliness, fear and loss of self-esteem and self-confidence following injury.

General sport-related factors, such as intense training and competition, the threat of deselection and unrealistic standards, can increase the risk of mental distress.

Negative coaching cultures that fail to prioritise young people's needs or safeguard against physical injury and mental problems can lead to lasting harm, as highlighted in the recent Whyte Review of British Gymnastics.

Body and mind are closely connected. Mental health and resilience in sport, and symptoms of distress, such as anxiety and low mood, are intimately linked with injury, recovery and long-term participation.

Injuries that lead to missing out on physical activity, social connections, a team place or time in the classroom can have a profound impact on wellbeing. At the same time, there is evidence that mental health symptoms, such as anxiety, are risk factors for physical injury too.

More research is needed to unpick these complex relationships and test new methods of support. Either way, if we promote mental health awareness in sport and prevent symptoms from developing – before or after injury – we can support safe healthy participation and recovery when things go wrong.

The following pages outline our strategy and framework for change, focused on a clear impact ambition:

More young people experience mentally healthy sport, supporting an increase in long-term, injury-free participation.

¹NHS Digital, 2022

²Kirkwood, G. et al. (2019). Results on sports-related injuries in children from NHS emergency care dataset Oxfordshire pilot: an ecological study. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 113(3) 109–118

YOUNG PEOPLE ON SPORTS INJURY

“People know me as this girl that does rugby...it's the only thing I'm properly good at and without that...it was very difficult.”

KAYA, YEAR 11*

*Names have been changed.



SPORTS INJURY AND MENTAL HEALTH

Podium Analytics is an NGO and charity with a vision of a safer world of sport and a clear mission to reduce the incidence and impact of injury in sport. We do this by tackling the individual, environmental, organisational and societal causes and consequences of injury in youth sports: one of which is mental health.

For a safer world of sport

We focus on young people because adolescence is a period of physical and emotional change and vulnerability. Effective solutions are built on accurate data and robust evidence, so research underpins all our work. With the Podium Institute at the University of Oxford and our partners in sport, we will measure the incidence of sports injuries and investigate the complex and interlinked factors that cause them.

Understanding the relationship between mental states and injury will provide a solid, evidence-based foundation for our impact strategy.

We will use research and insights from our own and our partners' work on mental health to develop and deliver programmes to reduce injury risk and promote successful recovery and return to sport.

The research challenge: can mental states predict sports injury?

Understanding why injury happens during sport is notoriously difficult.

Part of the complexity is understanding the factors that can cause a propensity for injury, and identifying which can be modified to reduce the risk of a sport-related injury event.

For many years, the approach to understanding injury has focused on the physical determinants, without taking into account the individual cognitive, social and emotional risk factors for injury and delayed or incomplete recovery. However, this link is key – and this is why all Podium's research recognises that sport-related injury is a lived human experience, and not an isolated physical event.

Why is it so challenging?

1. DEFINITION

Identifying mental states or symptoms that could have a causal link to sports injury and defining them so they are easy for young people to understand is challenging.

2. CAUSALITY

Measuring whether mental states predict possible future injuries is more complex and time-consuming than measuring mental states once injuries have taken place.

3. MECHANISM

Measuring the extent to which cognitive, social or emotional factors, rather than physical or environmental factors, explain injury incidence is complex.

Podium's Research Strategy Advisory Board, including experts from sport governance, sports medicine and sport and exercise psychology, are guiding our programme of work.

YOUNG PEOPLE ON SPORTS INJURY

“I felt really lost and I didn't know what to do with myself.”

JAKUB, YEAR 10*

*Names have been changed.

THE CHANGES WE WANT TO BRING ABOUT

To deliver our impact ambition, we aim to deliver four changes across four key focus areas.

1

Young people take care of their mental health in relation to sports injury risk and recovery

Sport is a force for good, but sometimes life – and sport – can feel overwhelming. The strain of juggling school, social life and training can lead to drop-out in grassroots sport. Life transitions such as changing schools or joining an elite sport pathway can be stressful. The impulsivity that characterises adolescent behaviour is a key risk factor for injury, which can itself lead to mental health problems.

Negative perfectionism and anxiety in sport are just some of the added mental risk factors.

THE CHANGE WE WANT TO BRING ABOUT

is that young people make better sense of these feelings, explore their sporting limits safely, and can take care of their own mental health and wellbeing in relation to injury risk and recovery.

2

Teachers, coaches and parents manage mental risk factors for injury and support mentally healthy recovery

Healthy sporting environments – where teachers, coaches and parents prioritise and support young people's goals – foster skills, resilience and life-long sport enjoyment. However, factors such as poor performance, competition for selection and frequent travel can cause individual distress and become significant risk factors for injury.

When individual problems emerge, trusted adults can lack the necessary skills and confidence to notice, start a conversation and signpost help.

THE CHANGE WE WANT TO BRING ABOUT

is that trusted adults manage individual and environmentally-driven mental risk factors for injury and support mentally healthy recovery.

3

Sports bodies mitigate mental risk factors for injury, and support recovery with evidence-based protocols

The wellbeing benefits delivered by organised sport and the network of teachers and coaches that work with young people are more important than ever when youth mental health is in crisis and services are overstretched.

Keeping sport safe – mentally and physically – supports public health, but there are gaps in applied evidence and training. Wider partnerships are needed to understand and deliver 'what works'.

THE CHANGE WE WANT TO BRING ABOUT

is that sports bodies, working with government organisations, service providers and NGOs in the mental health and education sectors, mitigate mental risk factors for injury, and support mentally healthy recovery with evidence-based regulations and protocols.

4

Sport culture at all levels supports the links between physical injury, mental health and long-term participation

Sport participation is characterised by inequalities of sex, ethnicity and socioeconomic status. The unwritten rules of some sports or sporting environments, which encourage young people to accept pain, play while injured and hide vulnerabilities, can introduce stress, lead to physical injury and act as powerful barriers to taking part. Culture, within all sports and across all sectors, is driven by policy, sponsorship, media, adult players and the public who watch and follow.

THE CHANGE WE WANT TO BRING ABOUT

is that sport's culture understands and promotes the link between physical injury and mental wellbeing in youth sport, supporting safe, long-term participation for all.

HOW WE'LL DELIVER

To achieve these, we have developed a programme of activities with measurable outputs, which we will refine over time and deliver in collaboration with partners in sport, health, education and government.

Scope the sport, injury and mental health landscape

There are already excellent programmes promoting youth sport, and outstanding work on youth mental health, all of which are built on a solid evidence base. Much less is known about what happens where youth sport injury and mental health intersect. Our first priority is to scope current practice, understand more about young people's views and review evidence from research. We are reviewing the initiatives of National Governing Bodies of sport to support grassroots youth mental health and injury risk and resilience. Focus groups are revealing what young people think and feel about this topic. The Podium Institute has started work on a systematic review of relationships between mental health symptoms and youth sports injuries. All these outputs will be published in early 2023.

OUTPUTS:

- Sport bodies understand the nature and extent of injury-related mental health provision in grassroots youth sport.
- Podium and stakeholders understand young people's experiences of sport, injury and mental health.
- Podium understands the relationship between injury and the mental states in young people, underpinning future research.

ASSUMPTION:

- Effective stakeholder engagement.

Publish digital resources for young people

Young people struggling with their feelings often look for help online, but much sports advice is currently poor or written with elite or adult athletes, or coaches, in mind. Through our digital resource hub, we will provide young people with engaging information about tackling the physical, social and emotional challenges that shape their experiences of sport, injury, recovery and mental wellbeing. We will offer advice on how to look after physical and mental health for sports injury, how to identify impending problems, and what to do if you are concerned about yourself or a teammate. Resources will be developed with the help of youth advisors and informed by youth focus groups to provide materials that young people can positively engage with.

OUTPUT:

- Young people engage with online materials and learn how to take care of their mental health in relation to sports injury.

ASSUMPTIONS:

- Mental health experts, educators and youth advisors support the development of resources.
- Young people engage with the digital resource hub.



HOW WE'LL DELIVER

Develop training for teachers, coaches and parents on managing mental risk factors for injury and recovery

Most adults in the sport community want to do their best for the young people they look after. Working with specialist partners, we will develop evidence-based resources to help teachers, coaches and parents maintain positive sporting environments where mental risk factors for injury are managed effectively. We will produce a protocol to guide coaches on talking about injury, mental health and wellbeing so they can support young people's healthy behaviours and head off individual problems.

OUTPUTS:

- Teachers, coaches and parents receive sport-specific training in:
 - creating mentally healthy environments in sport and at home;
 - managing key sport stressors such as injury and deselection.
- Teachers and coaches receive training in injury-related mental health awareness, identifying emerging problems and signposting to early intervention.

ASSUMPTIONS:

- Mental health experts, educators and youth advisors support the development of resources.
- Sports bodies collaborate with design and dissemination.

Design sport-wide mental health screening tools

With regular screening, coaches can monitor sport stressors and emerging mental health problems that can lead to injury. We will take these capabilities a step further by developing groundbreaking approaches with technology, including computer vision, to accurately detect individual psychological risk factors for injury and to promote health recovery during real-time competition and training. This is a long-term project, with interim outputs and assumptions, led by the Podium Institute at the University of Oxford.

INTERIM OUTPUTS:

- Publication of review into relationship between mental states and injury in sport.
- Development of methods of measuring mental states during sport competition and training.
- Sports test and adopt methods of measuring mental states and protecting mental health.
- Evidence gathered on best practice methods for mental health protection.

OUTPUT:

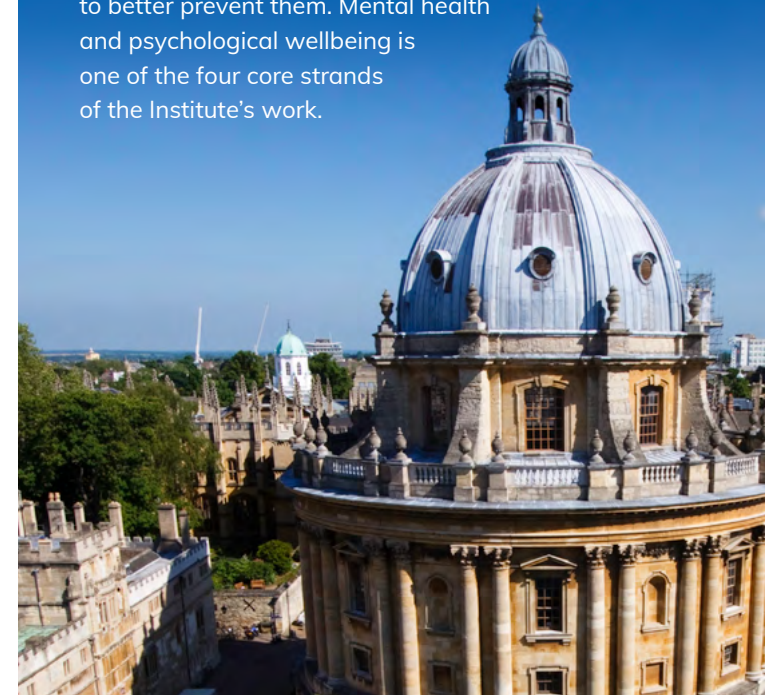
- Sports bodies adopt evidence-based practices for protecting mental health in relation to injury.

ASSUMPTIONS:

- Technology development is successful.
- Sport is willing to adopt new technology and/or methodology.
- Research gives clear indication of best practice.

INNOVATIONS DRIVING CHANGE

The Podium Analytics Institute for Youth Sports Medicine and Technology at the University of Oxford, launched in 2021, brings together world-leading academics from biomedical engineering, experimental psychology, sports medicine and data science to develop innovative approaches to tackling the causes and consequences of youth sports injury. With an initial 10-year research funding commitment of £40 million from Podium and the University of Oxford, researchers will develop new measures and conduct long-term studies to improve our understanding of the factors leading to injury, and how to better prevent them. Mental health and psychological wellbeing is one of the four core strands of the Institute's work.



HOW WE'LL DELIVER

Test sport-specific mental health awareness and prevention interventions

Working with National Governing Bodies of sport and the Podium Institute, we will develop and test interventions to improve resilience in sport and injury to better support mental wellbeing and protect mental health. These will be guided by the needs of sport, but there is likely to be a focus on more effective communication between coaches and young people, particularly on injury causes and recovery.

OUTPUTS:

- Coaches are trained to identify injury-specific stressors and prevent emerging problems.
- Evidence base supporting best practice for injury-related mental health awareness, prevention and early intervention across all sports is strengthened.

ASSUMPTIONS:

- Engagement and funding from National Governing Bodies of sport.
- Interventions show positive effects.

Only 19% of adults* know where to access information on mental health and sports injury, according to Podium research

(*2,259 adults, 51% female, UK representative sample)

Measure sport-wide mental health problems and wellbeing in sport

Too little is known about the nature, causes and prevalence of mental health problems in youth sport, their relationship with injury, and levels of overall wellbeing. Podium will develop a regular survey to track population-level injury, mental health and drop-out in sport, and analyse the data to understand population patterns and trends. We will share the results and recommendations with sport, policymakers and the public. This is an ambitious, long-term project, supported by Podium's data collection capabilities and partners in research and sport.

OUTPUT:

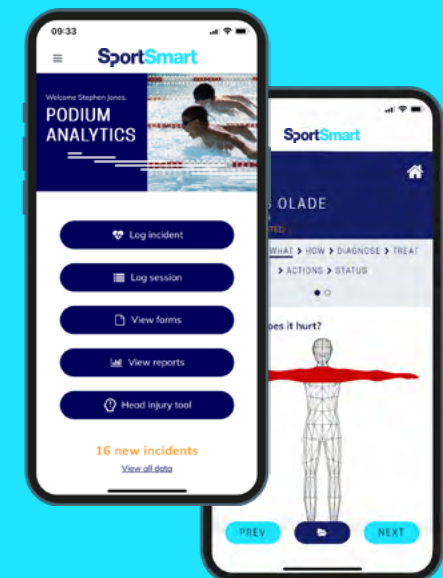
- Sport, policymakers and the public become more aware of the challenges and opportunities of improving mental health and wellbeing in sport, and of its importance to injury risk and resilience.

ASSUMPTIONS:

- Ability to collect data directly from young people.
- Schools, clubs and young people engage with the survey.
- Effective collaboration with partners and stakeholders to design the survey.
- Stakeholders are aware of the survey and analysis.

INNOVATIONS DRIVING CHANGE

SportSmart is a free-to-use digital platform that enables teachers, coaches and sports medics to log and monitor injury data during training and competition as well as understand the weekly sporting load of young people. The platform, protected by the highest levels of security, supports communication between schools, clubs, staff and parents, providing greater oversight and understanding of the injury profiles and welfare of young athletes. As well as providing insight back to teachers and coaches through interactive dashboards and reports, the data is anonymised and shared with the Podium Institute to support pioneering research into youth sports injury.



HOW WE'LL DELIVER

Create a youth advocacy group

Podium is committed to putting young voices at the heart of our work. These are the young people with lived experience of sport, injury and mental health challenges problems. We want to share what they think and feel about sport, the reasons they struggle and the ways they thrive, and communicate their ideas with a wider audience. To achieve this, we will establish an advocacy group of young people who will share their perspectives, with us and through workshops, reports and media activity, about what is important to them and what needs to change.

OUTPUT:

- Sport, policymakers and the public become more aware and supportive of mentally healthy sport and its relationship with physical injury and recovery.

ASSUMPTIONS:

- Young people have capacity to engage with Podium.
- National Governing Bodies of sport, policymakers and media engage with communications.

Engage with stakeholders in sport, education and mental health

Podium will listen to stakeholders who work with young people to understand the barriers and facilitators to protecting injury-related mental health in sport. We will learn how sport, health and education intersect, and how they can work together to support population-wide mental healthcare. We will understand how sport stressors and injury risk are barriers to participation among women, minoritised ethnic groups young people from disadvantaged home environments and in disability sports.

OUTPUT:

- Workshops, reports and other media raising awareness and support for mentally healthy sport and its relationship with physical injury and recovery.

ASSUMPTIONS:

- Stakeholders are open to engagement.
- Raised awareness leads to changes in attitudes, norms and behaviour in sport.

INNOVATIONS DRIVING CHANGE

Due to launch in early 2023, the **SportSmart Resource Hub** will be an important touchpoint for informing, engaging and inspiring teachers and coaches to think and act differently when it comes to youth sport issues and solutions, and will provide easy-to-digest, practical, educational content and tools in an interactive and accessible interface.

The hub is initially focused on supporting sports teachers and coaches in better understanding and improving general injury prevention, with the first topics covering growth spurt, risk in sport, head injury and mental health. It will also provide a vital channel for Podium to share research findings and interventions directly to the grassroots.

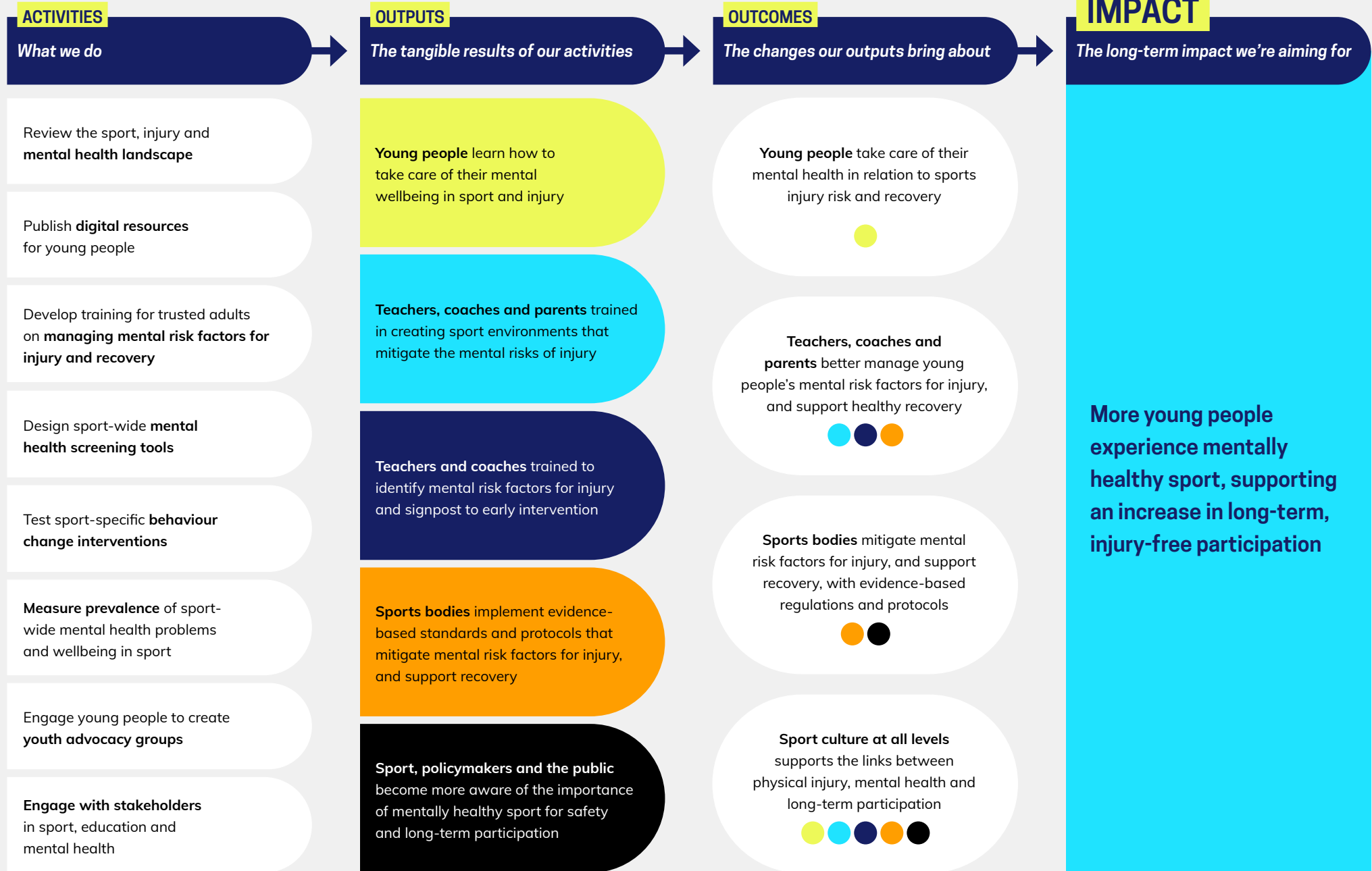
YOUNG PEOPLE ON SPORTS INJURY

“I was in bed. I couldn’t speak to anyone all day because they were at school, so I was sat there on my own. You miss out when you’re injured.”

TOM, YEAR 10*

*Names have been changed.

IMPACT FRAMEWORK





LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Podium has set ambitious goals to solve an important problem. Success will have far-reaching consequences for young people's physical and mental health, now and in the future.

We have developed our Mental Health Strategy and impact framework through an iterative and collaborative process that has involved partners from Sport, Education, Research and Mental Health, and has been informed by young people's insights and guided by our Board of Trustees.

This is an evolving journey and we are just getting started: **engage with us, collaborate with us, challenge and inspire us.**

To discuss any aspect of this strategy or to provide feedback, please email Catherine Wheatley, Podium's Mental Health and Wellbeing Programme Manager at catherine.wheatley@podiumanalytics.org

We would like to thank the many organisations and individuals who have advised us, including Gregor Henderson, Podium's Strategic Advisor; Centre for Mental Health and the members of the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition; Youth Sport Trust, Sporting Chance and representatives from numerous Sport Governing Bodies.

**THANK
YOU**

