

# FOOTBALL MATCHER

## Adapting and innovating through COVID-19

### Video:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8P\\_0-5UMD1Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8P_0-5UMD1Y)

### Transcript:

Hello, I'm Phil Day and I'm one of the founders of FootballMatcher. We're a young startup with the aim to get more people active through playing football. Today, we are grateful to have been invited by the House of Sport to discuss how we have adapted and innovated through this pandemic.

### Overview

Here's a quick overview of what I will talk about today. As it's our first time speaking, I'll give you a quick intro in who we are and what our website can do. I'll then describe how we adapted our messaging to bring out the newfound relevance of certain existing features to reduce the risk of transmission and help people connect with new local playing opportunities. Following that, we'll explain how we have tried to help improve the safety and reduce the admin burden of NHS track and trace requirements at Sport Venues. Finally, we explore how we could alleviate some of the new barriers that have arisen from COVID-19 through mandatory risk assessments and compulsory block bookings.

### Intro

So who are we, we are a football-loving social network that has made finding and organising games effortless.

We match players together by their location, how far they are prepared to travel, and when they are available to play. Players can also state what type of game they would like to be part of, such as, whether it's a casual kickaround or a competitive match. We've also made organising effortless by taking care of sending game invites, managing player numbers and collecting pitch hire costs (which also ensures an organiser is never out of pocket!). Games practically organise themselves!

Initially we're focussing on those regular community games, kickarounds as these activities typically are more inclusive than football at team and club level. They are often played just for fun or to get fit where any ability, age or sex can have a chance of playing.

We strongly believe by reducing the burden of organising and through our sophisticated player matching, we can encourage more people into playing by increasing the number and diversity of playing opportunities based on skill level, location, gender, which fit conveniently into existing player's schedules.

For those who are interested finding out more, we put together a explainer video here

<https://gofm.io/fmdemo>

## **Our 2020 Story**

We launched our BETA app in December 2019 at probably the worst possible time! We did not anticipate the scale and impact the COVID crisis was going to have on the normal life and on our business. Luckily we had tasted enough growth in those 3 months after launching, we knew we were on to something!

Whilst sorting our finances to weather the storm, we started to imagine how we could be part of the solution to the COVID crisis. Initially, we had plans to internationalize our app, targeting the countries that had no lockdown or started easing restrictions before the UK. However due to a reduced development capability this proved infeasible, despite being already multicurrency ready.

We then turned our attention to how we could leverage some of the existing features and make them more relevant in what was emerging in the daily government briefings of the post lockdown normal. So rather than focus on a lot more software development, we decided to work on our messaging to bring out the value and relevance of our current product offering in the new normal for team sport. We spun up a blog, redesigned our landing page, enhanced our SEO and prepped some written and video content ready to post on social media posts once the government gave football the green light. Here are the features we thought were most relevant.

### **Helping Those Disconnected**

As we know COVID-19 has made people more isolated and inactive through continually working from home or being newly unemployed. With the majority of pitches still closed and players being disconnected from old games near work, discovering a new game has become increasingly difficult. Leveraging our platforms ability to match players together and to run games that don't require an organiser, we kicked off various ultra-local Facebook campaigns to help people find a local alternative. In addition to the physical benefits, these types of games provide a natural way to build local community and friendship which can also improve mental health. With our WhatsApp integration, social connections can be fostered whilst remaining safe.

As we have the ability to start games without requiring organisers, we also believe we can be part of the solution to help the Venues recover from the devastating financial impact by filling their unused slots and starting new games.

### **Reducing Risk Transmission:**

In an effort to help convey how our APP could reduce both the risk of transmission and player anxiety around safety, we spent the time to emphasize these existing features on the landing page:

- **Cashless Payments:** Through the pandemic, the UK has become ever increasingly cashless. Our capability of collecting pitch hire costs or subs on behalf of the organiser from the players has become a lot more relevant. An organiser would be able to force players to pay and before they play online, removing any risk of transmission through chasing players for money at the pitchside.

- **Limit Player Numbers:** During April, as governmental strategies started to emerge to ease lockdown, the consensus was to slowly increase the size of the bubble people are allowed to have contact with. We expected kickarounds with the same pool of players in a specific location will be the first type of game to be allowed, followed by smaller competitive fixtures. When the FA, gave the green light for Football training to resume, our APP was well placed to help organisers of training sessions to enforce the initial limit of 6 players. In response, we're really emphasis this ability to control player numbers on our Landing Page.

We also are working on the following features to reduce the risk of transmission further:

- **Bib-less side selection:** Remove the need for bib sharing and pitchside team selection discussions by allowing the organiser to assign each side a clothing colour before the game.
- **COVID-19 safety rules:** Develop new game rules which will reduce the risk of contact ( no throw-ins, no handshakes etc. ) Also, allow the organiser to add venue-specific guidance to ensure that the game is COVID secure. (i.e no lockers, change at home)

### **Aiding NHS Track N Trace**

An area we did seek to improve through our own innovations was helping both organisers and sports venues deal with the administrative burden of NHS Track and Trace whilst improving the safety of everyone involved.

Having personally organised a few games post lockdown, we have seen sports facilities collecting contact details either via pen and paper or requiring the lead booker to send the details over email beforehand.

In our experience, these player game lists are often incomplete due to the organiser not having full contact details for the players due to the weak social ties often present in these groups. Additionally, if it's a paper-based system, players forget to sign the sheet before or after the game and create more physical touchpoints for transmission. Finally, but arguably most worryingly, we've seen staff forced to spend a prolonged time close to the players while they try to capture these details.

Additionally, the current contact tracing app from NHS isn't suitable for team sport as many players don't have their mobiles available at pitch side either due to risk of being stolen or being damaged by rain. This limits the usefulness if only a few players were able to check-in.

In response to these challenges, FootballMatcher has released a feature to address these issues above by allowing the organiser to send via email ( or print out) a list of each participant's full name, mobile and email address, ensuring the game's track and trace details are complete. We realised our app already had half the solution with players names and emails addresses for participants of each game, therefore decided to enhance the contact details obtained when a player confirms.

Using FootballMatcher, the sports centres and organisers will be able to comply with the NHS track and trace requirements effortlessly. This feature also removes the need for the group to gather around a paper form and share a pen to fill out their contact details. As a result, it will improve the safety of not only the players but the staff at the sports centre.

### **How Does it Work**

1. Players can join a new group with just their name and email address. No app download required. Every week, the game invites are sent out via email or Whatsapp. The player can RSVP for a game just by clicking a button (or a link in WhatsApp). Yes, it's that simple!
2. If the group has track and trace enabled, the player will be asked, on their first time confirming, to review their name and provide their mobile number.
3. Just before the game, the organiser will be able to send the full game participation list to the Sports Center via email or to themselves so they can print it out and hand in themselves.
4. At any point, the player can remove their details from their profile page or opt-out of being included.

### **Future Innovations In Evaluation:**

Since August, we have been trying to start new inclusive community Kickarounds in London to get people active! Unfortunately, in addition to finding the majority of the sports venues are still closed, some of the ones that are open have introduced further friction to starting a new game. Here are some new problems & solutions we're evaluating:

- **Split pitch block booking costs across players**

Some venues have started to no longer accept ad-hoc bookings and insist for an upfront payment for a block booking. As these groups aren't established, this puts a huge financial risk on the organiser to be able to start new game.

To solve this issue, we've been experimenting with using PayPal's Group Pools which allows a group to contribute to a financial goal. Using this, we did manage to validate the willingness for a set of random players connected via living in the same location, to contribute to a block booking.

When we started FootballMatcher, we wanted to reduce the financial barrier to playing by making games more affordable. We did this by developing our own bespoke payment system which was capable of offering variable pricing. This allowed the cost of pitch hire to be split across the number of players who confirm. The more player accepts, the cheaper the game gets. By offering more player slots than typically for the pitch size (i.e. running 8 a side on a 7 a side pitch), we could bring down the cost of football down for everyone.

If this block booking problem is as common as we think it is, we can adapt our variable payment system for one off cost such as these. This will enable everyone in the pool of players to chip into the block booking costs, bringing both the cost and risk down as more players contribute.

- **Digitising venue risk assessments with smart contracts**

Also we found, some venues have insisted the organiser sign a contract and comprehensive risk assessment before a group can book a pitch to play. We're exploring whether it's possible for FootballMatcher to take on this burden and reduce this friction by digitising this process. We believe by leveraging existing & integratable smart contracts solutions, we can facilitate the organiser to sign the venue's forms digitally via our website.

### **Ending Remarks**

That's all from me, hopefully, that gives you a good taste of how we attempted to adapt and innovate through the crisis. Thank you again for giving FootballMatcher the chance to speak today. For anyone interesting to hear about more us, please visit our website and blog at <http://footballmatcher.io/>