

Here we are in the era of fighting for the acceptance of Black lives to matter; not thrive, prosper, flourish or bloom, just matter. The state of existence is still a conversation, still an argument to be made, a debate to be had. This is why it becomes essential for all those on the perceived margins to take up space in areas outside of struggle and victimisation. Taking up space becomes essential due to the lack of representation of Muslims, of Black people, of women, of people of any intersection of the above and all the other people who are frequently overlooked within particular sports, outdoor activities and spaces of well being. It is a tool for resisting, existing and thriving. This becomes more than a pursuit of the individual, but an endeavour where the efforts of each individual go some way to the re-humanisation of the whole. This is not to say we are not human, nor is the individual tasked with ‘saving the nation,’ yet when the sight of a Black Muslim woman on a bike, on a cycle path, in cycling gear is an oddity to the extent that people are emboldened to, express “you don’t belong, thriving is not afforded to you,” This is the dehumanisation that we need to resist.



MUNEERA WILLIAMS

Muneera Williams @Blackmuslimwomenbike on instagram and some other women who are resisting and shifting perspectives Shazfit, Olly B, Asra Run Club, Zainab Alema, Asma Elbadawi, and @Abiir187 on Instagram.

**SPORTS PERFORMANCE
ACADEMY: AMBITIONS AND
CURRENT WORK**

BY AL-AMEEN AMODU

As a teenager, I worked as a sports coach in schools and local communities in south and east London whilst playing football semi-professionally. I loved sports and appreciated the structure it gave my life. My experience using sports as a way to engage young people and create community especially during lockdown demonstrated how vital it is for bringing people together, creating a sense of belonging, and supporting the aspirations of youth.

Sport and health were not primary topics in my community however. Whilst growing up and attending the Old Kent Road mosque, I noticed that sports, leisure and health was seldom addressed. There weren't regular events for people to partake in exercise nor was it a topic I ever heard addressed in a sermon. Even though the communities are changing, and the congregations are more aware of health issues and the importance of dedicated leisure time, there is much more work that needs to be done.

I've also noticed that the older generations from Muslim communities are not aware of the career prospects within the sports and leisure industry. This is what informs their decision to encourage their children away from this industry and solely focussed on the traditional STEM and humanities routes.

My passion for sports along with identifying a missing dimension of health in my community led me to start thinking about creating SPA. Sports Performance Academy (SPA) was born out of a passion for teaching, coaching and mentoring people whilst helping them improve in various aspects of life. The fulfilment I felt in helping others achieve their goals was incomparable.

Initially, I felt inexperienced and lacked credibility within the sport industry to start a new venture that has not been carried out before in this space. I had not seen or encountered another Black person, who was carrying out similar work to the scale I imagined in this field. The need to prove myself first as a Black professional weighed heavily on my mind as well as other obligations that I had.

These are similar challenges faced by many Black youth living throughout the UK, which are well known and documented. Black people as well as people from ethnic minorities are not afforded the same opportunities as their white counterparts within the UK. A report by the National Coaching Foundation (2018), describes the contrasting experiences of Black and Ethnic Minority (BAME) and white sports coaches. The report states that BAME individuals turn to coaching as a way to stay involved in sport and physical activities. Often their involvement is limited to local clubs and does not manifest into a professional career. In comparison, a white coach turns to coaching as a natural progression of their career as a professional sportsperson and often has the opportunity to continue coaching in a professional capacity. Additionally, BAME coaches cited lack of pay and progression in the profession as a major challenge despite being significantly more likely than white coaches to have formal qualifications at levels 3 & 4.

Though the odds were not in my favour, we managed to get some activities going.

In doing so, we at SPA have encountered many young people who feel disenfranchised and do not see a place for themselves within the 'normal path' to employment. For example, some

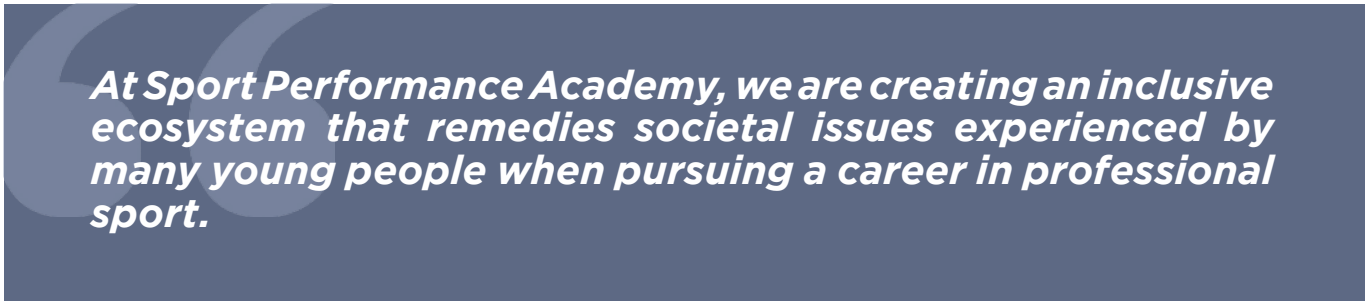
attendees of our weekend football sessions have expressed their apprehension towards leaving school to attend further education, yet not knowing how they will proceed onto full time employment within sport. We feel we can help here by offering them alternative opportunities in fields such as coaching.

At Sport Performance Academy, we are creating an inclusive ecosystem that remedies societal issues experienced by many young people when pursuing a career in professional sport. SPA has two goals, one, to support young people's career aspirations in sports. Two, to provide employment opportunities in the sports industry. The second stream focuses on the specialist sports and exercise sessions provided to members of the communities.

A part of what I do is to generate opportunities to stay active while creating connections. Lockdown has had an especially adverse effect on youth and our communities. So during lockdown we created an online exercise class, with over 30 individuals regularly joining in with their families. The sessions have continued to date and continue to grow. Several testimonies were received from participants, expressing their happiness and perceived success from attending the sessions. It has been a pleasure to accompany these individuals on their journey of self-improvement. The class initially began with a group of friends, who attended the same mosque, exercising together and attendance started to increase due to recommendations by word of mouth. At the height of lockdown, the class was attended by Muslims, non-Muslims and people from various ethnic backgrounds and residing throughout the UK.

Also during lockdown, I frequented a local park to train, which I extended to a friend in keeping with government advice. Over time, locals have approached us to join our training session. These sessions have grown now to have over 20 regular participants, from mixed backgrounds, ethnicities, ages, genders and religions regularly training together.

As the sessions would end at sunset, the Muslim participants would offer *maghrib*⁵¹ prayers within the park. Unbeknown to me, one of the participants was Muslim. Over time, upon seeing the group of Muslims praying, he was encouraged to join the group in prayer. This young participant, in particular is relatively new to the UK, does not have many friends here and is adjusting to life within the UK. However, he possesses an unquestionable love for sport and the youthful exuberance that comes along with young age. I have seen first-hand how football has allowed him to gel within a group, feel comfortable and develop personally. His communication skills have improved, as well as self-awareness, politeness and respect. It has



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⁵¹ Evening prayer at the time of sunset

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been interesting to witness how his attention has been focussed on playing sports, working within a team all within a safe space. These sessions have kept him focussed and away from the other trials faced by inner city youth.

In widening the possible pathways for young people, we have observed how significant role models are. In the UK it appears that the only role models available for Black youth are footballers, musicians and entertainers. Whilst in and of itself that may not necessarily be a bad thing, an effort should be made to expose the wider industry and show other potential career paths. For example, in football there are a multitude of careers related to the industry, from coaching, broadcasting to logistics. This information should be made more accessible to all.

Our pathway to achieving our goals has taken numerous revisions to our strategy. We have been able to build a community. Along the way, we have consistently reached out with the aim to be more inclusive. I believe the true challenge will be in making Sports Performance Academy accessible to wider society - not just Muslims but Londoners as a whole.

We have much to achieve, particularly in building relationships with institutions like colleges, councils, and NGBs. We want to correct the lack of representation of Black British people but also to expand the number of possibilities and aspirations for young people.



AL-AMEEN AMODU

Al-Ameen Amodu is a FA qualified football coach who has a passion for self development and helping others make the most of their talents. He has played football to a semi professional standard and trains in mixed martial arts. Professionally, Al-Ameen is a Business Analyst and mentors young people.

SECTION 4

LOOKING AHEAD: STRONGER CONNECTIONS
