

Case Study

Preston United

Men's Swimming Club, Islamic Faith



Who are Preston United?

Established in 2002

Preston United was originally formed to support children from the local Muslim community into sport, offering football and over time a youth programme. This expanded to include football for parents and most recently a male swimming group formed of predominantly Muslim men, in response to demand from the community themselves.

A group of 30 men from the community regularly attend the Friday evening swimming session at the local leisure centre, which offers a safe space to (re) learn how to swim and get active again in a male only environment. Demand is high and increasing as friends and family of swimmers learn about the opportunity.

The long term vision is to train men from the community as lifeguards and swimming teachers in order to be more self-sustaining.

Key features about the organisation

- Safe space
- Respect
- Brotherhood
- Community



Meet Omar, Founder

The Organiser's Story

Omar was born and raised in Preston and is proud to call it home. He's a family man and well-respected locally. He has a deep passion for supporting others and since 1997 he has dedicated most of his life to work in the community and establishing Preston United.

Omar founded Preston United in 2002 after recognising the positive impact sport could have on young Muslim people living in Preston – keeping people active and using sport as a vehicle to engage with the community.

Constantly meeting the needs of the immediate community, Preston United began answering the direct requests from parents of children participating in the youth club, and so a safe, male only swimming session was born – a relaxed space for people to feel confident, learn to swim and improve their health.

Importantly he wants to retain existing members to help them on their journey and expand the number of sessions per week in order to serve more of the community. Longer term, he is looking for home-grown talent to facilitate the sessions in order for them to become self-sustaining.

"When you go abroad, you see young Muslim men, men who just do not get in the pool or into the sea because they're worried they're not good in the water. We've got this asset right in the heart of the community now. They're together supporting one another. It's brotherhood. It's unity, it's about supporting each other."



Meet Lookman, Lead Participant

A Participant's Story

Lookman lives in Preston with his wife and two children. When Lookman is not working his day job as an Operations Manager he enjoys spending time with his family and travelling abroad together where possible.

He's a Manchester Utd fan and his boys enjoy playing football – something Lookman has been actively supporting. Through this, Lookman has built a relationship with Omar and Preston United and some of the other fathers.

Whilst on a recent holiday, Lookman's children were urging him to swim with them and he was confronted with the fact he didn't feel comfortable or confident in doing so.

Learning that this was a male only group, respectful of his faith and organised by someone who he trusts in the community, Lookman felt confident to attend his first session.

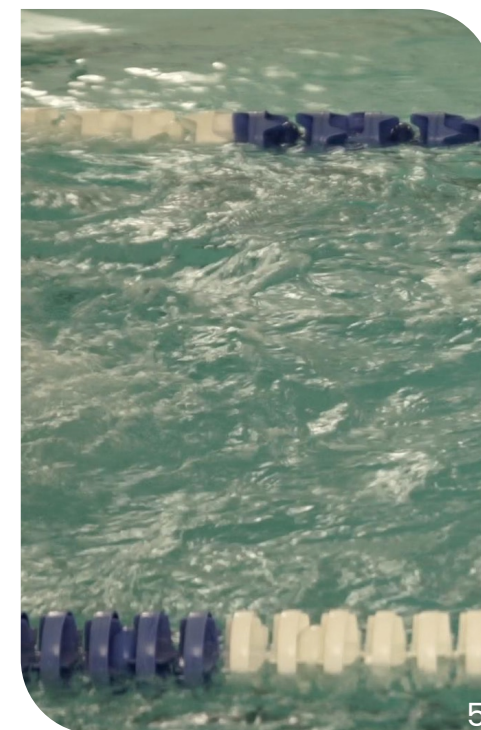
Since then, Lookman has grown in confidence in the water, developing his technique and overall fitness – but he also enjoys the reward of meeting and speaking to new men from the community, chatting with Omar and feeling part of the club.

"I've never been able to swim. The kids, both kids, have gone through training and they've always told me, swim, swim. And I went, it's not for me, and being 43 now, last year we were on holiday, they were pressurising me to swim and they helped me a little bit, but I just didn't want to get involved. I didn't want to look like a fool, basically, in a general swimming pool."



"So they've lived for 45 years, and some of them have never been in a swimming lesson, never jumped into the deep end. Never jumped into the shallow end. So a lot of them, these big, confident men, and as soon as they were in the pool, they're sort of relying on others for their support."

"[Omar's] always there. You can have a chat with him about anything. I've had chats with him from various bits from my diabetes, my high blood pressure... So actually, you know, it's offering more than swimming lessons."



How does Preston United successfully support the community to be active?



All male leadership and 'workforce'

All male leadership and workforce in order to meet the needs of the community.

Well respected pillars of the community that offer guidance and advice beyond swimming.

Flexible no pressure approach from those who run the sessions.

Leadership are open and community driven, members are encouraged to have their say and feedback to help better the organisation.

Striving to have a workforce that's come from within the community in order to make the organisation self sufficient.

Creating a sense of 'brotherhood'

Inclusive and safe space for men of Islamic faith.

Respectful of one another's needs and requirements, particularly around their faith.

Judgement free zone with no expectation on ability, allowing everyone to develop at their own pace.

United approach, where everyone is in it together – supporting one another in everything they do.

Leveraging the power of existing connections

Using the existing Preston United name and leveraging the trust that already exists between potential members and the organisation.

Word of mouth is one of the most common ways they attract new members, particularly through community spaces including Mosques.

WhatsApp as a way to communicate with members – to share tips / advice for those more apprehensive.

Adaptable sessions to meet everyone's needs

Weekly sessions:

Friday 21:00-22:00 – in order to meet the needs of the group – around call to prayer and evening shift work.

The session itself:

- Catch up with other members
- Opportunity to talk with Founder on anything inc. issues in broader life
- Semi-structured session where coaching is optional – if you ask, you receive
- One lane roped off for more experienced swimmers in the group
- All floats provided

Session closes in time for men to use the on-site Prayer Room for evening prayers.

Preston United: The journey so far...

Original inspiration

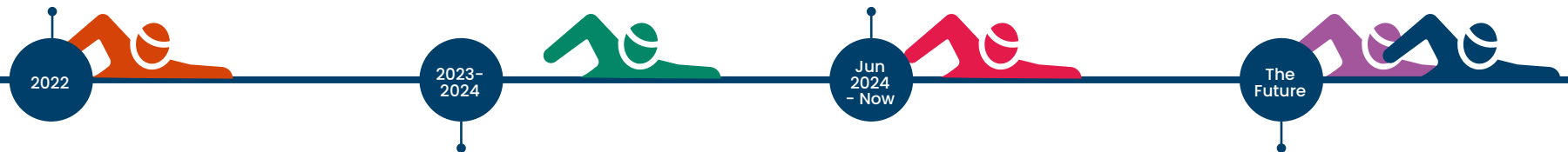
Fathers taking their children to Preston United Youth Club began talking about their own fitness, expressing a mutual desire to learn to swim as there was currently no comfortable space for Muslim men to do this. This idea was taken to organisation's Founder.

Early days

Majority of spaces were filled, making the sessions feel like a success.

Leveraging the Founder's trust within the community was important to help encourage commitment and build confidence that the sessions would be worthwhile.

Using WhatsApp to maintain dialogue after the session kept enthusiasm high.



Build & get the word out

Working closely with the Leisure Centre for 18 months to get things in place; including all male staff at the sessions, a regular slot to attend and an affordable price for the members

Using existing Preston United network to get the word out to potential members.

Partnership with Leisure Centre to ensure trained male workforce were able to facilitate the sessions.

Growing

Positive stories spread via word of mouth within the community; school gates, the Mosque and among friends/family. This led to growing numbers of members on the WhatsApp group, all of which were trying to secure one of the 30 spots at the sessions

Limited by how much they can grow due to a cap on numbers in the pool per session.

Need new income streams and more funding to upskill new coaches.

What does Preston United provide to the community?



The emotional

- An opportunity to connect with other men from the community.
- Feel safe & supported in the water at all times, in a sport where many expect you to already be of a certain standard.
- Build self confidence in social situations.
- Receive mentoring from respected community figures and also build on existing social skills.



The functional

- Learn the skills to swim confidently.
- Improve health within the community.
- Respectful of each others needs - male only, dress code, call to prayer, evening shift work.