



## **PRESS RELEASE**

**Monday, August 17, 2020**

# **‘MOVEMBER AHEAD OF THE GAME’: THE PROGRAM GIVING YOUNG ATHLETES THE TOOLS TO PUT MIND OVER MATTER**

PROMISING young rugby league star Jack Howarth (18), is one of the first athletes in the country to take part in [Movember Ahead of the Game](#), a new program that better equips adolescent boys to deal with mental health challenges – both on and off the field.

The sports-based mental fitness and resilience training program teaches athletes, parents and coaches how to spot the signs of poor mental health, how to talk about mental health and how and when to seek help.

Developed in Australia by University of Wollongong researchers, the evidence-based program is now being rolled out in countries around the world, thanks to a \$6 million investment from men’s health charity [Movember](#).

While the Aussie-led program has attracted global attention - including pilots with grassroots rugby union clubs in the UK, hockey clubs in Toronto, and a partnership with the Rugby League World Cup 2021 - this is the first time Movember Ahead of the Game has been available on home soil.

Over the past four months, Movember has worked with youth suicide prevention organisation [ALIVE](#) to adapt the face to face program into a new COVID-safe format, delivering it locally in partnership with Queensland Rugby League. The online-only training is being delivered to 25 grassroots rugby clubs, including the 14 teams taking part in the Auswide Bank Mal Meninga Cup.

Jack Howarth, who was set to play for the Easts Tigers in the Cup, said it was disappointing to not be able to play the season out.

“What I really struggled with going into lockdown was maintaining motivation, because everything became pretty repetitive,” he said.

“I couldn’t go out and do skills with the boys, it just became fitness and it was a pretty difficult time. Ahead of the Game was a good way to check up on everyone and get players and coaches to interact and talk about what they’re going through, because not everyone seeks help.”

# **CHANGING THE FACE OF MEN’S HEALTH**



In locked-down Melbourne, Movember are also funding the delivery of online mental health literacy sessions to five under-15 Next Generation Academy footy teams through St Kilda Football Club comprising 125 players, 15 coaches and 200 parents. These sessions are co-delivered with Movember's partners ALIVE and the newly trained St Kilda community team.

ALIVE founder and CEO Tamsyn Rose said it had been an incredibly tough season, with her team noticing a dramatic spike in young athletes' depression and anxiety levels.

"For the young men in the Auswide Bank Mal Meninga Cup, everything that they worked so hard for was taken away because of the restrictions," she said. "For these young men to re-engage with each other through Movember Ahead of the Game is incredibly valuable.

"This will help them foster the best possible mindset, during these challenges, so they can learn from them and get set for the best kind of return to play."

Previous research has shown taking part in organised sport during adolescence is associated with a 10-20 per cent reduction in risk for mental health problems, compared with teens who drop out of sports.<sup>1</sup>

Owen Brigstock-Barron, Movember program lead - mental health and suicide prevention, said that involving the whole community around young athletes in mental health training created a supportive environment both on the field, and at home.

"It means these challenges are no longer something they have to deal with alone," he said. "While delivering training with coaches and parents, I've personally witnessed those 'penny drop' moments where participants have realised that their players, and sons, may have been displaying signs or symptoms of a mental health problem - they just weren't equipped to identify it at the time."

David Maiden, QRL Statewide Competitions Manager, said: "It's essential that we broaden the base with those essential first responders - the coaches. In having this program delivered to coaches, we are creating that understanding, recognition, awareness, identification and prevention of mental health issues.

"It's such a vital skill for our coaches to have, so for us it was a no-brainer to jump on board this program."

### **About Ahead of the Game**

Movember Ahead of the Game is a two-hour training course that can be adapted to all sporting codes and includes both face-to-face workshops\* and online training.

Initial results from a University of Wollongong study, showed the program resulted in a marked increase in wellbeing and resilience among teens. More than 350 boys aged 12-18 took part in the program as a part of the study across soccer, rugby league and swimming. To find out more



visit: [aheadofthegame.org.au](http://aheadofthegame.org.au) / or [alive.org.au](http://alive.org.au)

*\*dependent on local COVID-19 restrictions*

Crisis support can be found at Lifeline: 13 11 14 | [lifeline.org.au](http://lifeline.org.au), or Kids Helpline: 1800 55 1800 | [kidshelpline.com.au](http://kidshelpline.com.au)

ENDS

**ADDITIONAL EXPERTS/INTERVIEWEES:**

- Matthew Bowen, Ex-NRL & Mal Meninga Cup Coach – Townsville Blackhawks
- Mal Meninga, Head Coach of the Kangaroos
- Stewart Vella, Senior Lecturer, School of Psychology, University of Wollongong

Sam Mills, PR & Communications Manager, Movember: 0411241475/[sam.mills@movember.com](mailto:sam.mills@movember.com)

**About Movember**

Movember is the leading global men's health charity. The charity raises funds to deliver innovative, breakthrough research and support programs that enable men to live happier, healthier and longer lives. Committed to disrupting the status quo, millions have joined the movement, helping fund over 1,250 projects focusing on prostate cancer, testicular cancer and suicide prevention.

In addition to tackling key health issues faced by men, Movember is working to encourage men to stay healthy in all areas of their life, with a focus on men staying socially connected and becoming more open to discussing their health and significant moments in their lives.

The charity's vision is to have an everlasting impact on the face of men's health. To donate or learn more, please visit [Movember.com](http://Movember.com)

<sup>1</sup> (Vella et al., 2016). It is also associated with a 35 per cent reduction in suicidal thoughts among boys (Vella et al., 2016; Brown et al., 2007) and 39 per cent fewer suicide attempts among boys who participate in team sport (Brown et al., 2007).