

Food fight

The post-match tea is more important than ever

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After a prep school hockey match last winter, my eight-year-old niece had no recollection of the score at all. But her blow-by-blow account of the tea that followed was forensic in detail.

She's not alone. Even at sporting powerhouse Millfield Prep, headmistress Shirley Shayler says it's a common story; food reigns supreme. Sausages and chips revive aching muscles and grazed knees, just as they did when Mrs Shayler started coaching hockey at Millfield 31 years ago. Now, however, social distancing has added a touch of uncertainty as the new term dawns. 'It is likely most independent schools will not present matches for at least the first half of this coming term,' says Kevin Doble, headmaster of Shrewsbury House School and chair of the cross association sports committee for the Independent Schools Council. Matches and tea, it seems, are on hold.

Alastair Speers, headmaster at Sandroyd, talks about the great match tea 'knees-under' with the same enthusiasm as an Enid Blyton bestseller. In normal times, the fires inside Rushmore House at the Wiltshire prep school are lit, and children nestle alongside the opposition and test their small talk. It's the kind of set-up where the post-lacrosse jammy buns of *In the Fifth at Malory Towers* wouldn't be out of place. 'We probably view the tea as being as important as the match itself,' says Mr Speers. 'What we're trying to do with competitive fixtures is expose children to the experience of failure as well as success. If you've been thrashed by a team 8-0 and then you have to sit next to them and host them in your school, it's a great opportunity to get children to realise that the reason we play sport is because it's fun. And so, we are itching to start our inter-school matches when safe to do so.'

One Downe House old girl, now working in insurance in Hong Kong, is still nostalgic for her prep school match teas at the Dragon School. 'You got sausages, chips and beans and you could still have dinner two hours later,' she says. 'Post-match chat was a good ice breaker for awkward preadolescents and a chance to show off how many colours badges you had on your skirt.' For many looking back at their school days, there is a rose-tinted wholesomeness to those post-match teas. Whether you were a sporting hero or a shivering wreck on the subs bench

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for the under-9 Cs was largely irrelevant in comparison to the calibre of the food.

When it comes to the parents' tea, something of an arms race was under way before Covid disrupted proceedings. Bryanston headmaster Mark Mortimer says: 'Schools are much better at engaging parents, seeing how important it is to look after them when they're there and making them feel part of the school. It's not just about parking, standing on the touchline and going home.' The result? A slither of stale fruit cake no longer cuts it. 'Schools do get quite competitive with one another about how well they host,' says Mr Mortimer. As a marketing tool, these affairs are far more subtle than any open day and perfect for giving parents an informal glimpse into the running of the school. 'The match tea provision for spectators is a hugely important feature of the independent schools' offering,' says Kevin Doble of Shrewsbury House. 'Without spectators, there would be no spectators' match tea; some schools are even discussing whether future fixtures should be held behind closed doors.'

The disappointment of a poor match tea is a familiar hazard. But before the pandemic hit, spreads were emerging that wouldn't have been out of place at a wedding reception. 'When I was at school you could prop your teaspoon up in your tea,' says Mr Speers. Chefs at Sandroyd now 'pull out all the stops' with an array of teas, salmon or beef and horseradish sandwiches, scones and brownies. Savvy Bradfield College parents time their arrival to coincide with the petits fours and at Marlborough langoustine have been spotted on the salad bar. Those brave enough to endure the touchline winds at Fettes College in Edinburgh are rewarded with the 'cake cart' delivering coffee, soup and cakes to frost-bitten parents — as well as the welcome addition of Scottish tablet. And at Hazlegrove prep school in Somerset, head chef Simon Van Loo is accompanied by a pastry chef and a sandwich artist, sourcing ingredients from local farms.

There are of course cracks in the happiest of sporting careers even an abundant tea can't paper over. For one Tudor Hall old girl, it was the humiliation of having to walk around in a swimming costume aged 12 at a gala hosted at Eton. No amount of smoked salmon could compensate for the adolescent agony of that.