

If you're like me and have spent a good chunk of your life in muddy pitch-side changing rooms, chances are you've seen lads playing through pain – often against better judgement. Pain was something to be swallowed, strapped up, and hidden away because football culture doesn't really do "show weakness". But if there's one thing I've learned from 11 years as a physio assistant and a lifelong lower-league fan, it's that ignoring pain doesn't make it vanish. In fact, it can mess you up long term.

In this post, I'm going to break down what **graded exercise** means for people dealing with *chronic pain*, especially how it can tackle ongoing joint pain from imperfect healing, cumulative loading, and central sensitisation. I'll also touch on football's stigma around reporting pain, why "just rest it" is terrible advice, and how pacing, progressive loading, and active rehab can be game-changers.

Football Culture, Pain, and the Stigma of Reporting It

In football, grit and toughness are prized above all else. If you haul yourself off the bench limping, expect a few raised eyebrows. "Man up" is thrown around like confetti. And the fear of being seen as weak means many avoid reporting injuries or pain early on.

This culture can set players up for long-term trouble. Instead of dealing with painful niggles timely, these issues get buried until they turn into persistent pain or joint problems like osteoarthritis. That old knee pain you shrug off one day could be setting the stage for a condition that lingers for years.

What changed in the last 6 weeks? is my go-to question. If you've recently ramped up activity, tackled a niggle the wrong way, or ignored creeping pain, these things add up. The problem isn't just the pain itself but how the body responds over time—especially if you keep loading a damaged area without proper rehab.

The Long-Term Outcomes: Osteoarthritis and Persistent Pain

We often think of pain as the body's warning system to stop hurtful actions. But with chronic pain, the system goes haywire. Conditions like osteoarthritis are common for ex-footballers who've played through pain but never got proper treatment. Joints become stiff, cartilage wears <https://www.pieandbovril.com/general/from-the-terraces-to-the-physio-room-how-football-deals-with-chronic-pain> away, and the lingering ache becomes the norm.

Persistent pain is a bit of a beast: it's pain that keeps going after the initial injury should have healed. Why? Because of a mix of factors including incomplete healing and changes within the nervous system. Trust me, this isn't about being a "soft player" – it's a real biological process.

Mechanisms Behind Chronic Pain

- **Imperfect healing:** After an injury, tissues may not fully repair, leaving joints less stable or muscles weaker.
- **Cumulative loading:** Repeated stress on the same joint or tendon without adequate rest adds up, causing microdamage.
- **Central sensitisation:** This is where the nervous system becomes extra sensitive, turning up the volume on pain signals even when the original injury is minor or healed.

Understanding these helps make sense of why "just rest it" often doesn't cut it. If you stop moving completely, muscles weaken, joints stiffen, and central sensitisation can even get worse. Instead, we need to find a way to move that's helpful and not harmful. This is where **graded exercise** steps in.

What Is Graded Exercise?

Graded exercise, also called graded activity or a *graded activity plan*, is a methodical and progressive approach to moving and strengthening your body bit by bit. Instead of all-or-nothing bursts or complete rest, you gradually increase activity levels at a pace your body can handle.

It's not about pushing through pain aggressively, nor is it ignoring pain altogether. Instead, graded exercise focuses on:

- **Pacing chronic pain:** Learning how to identify safe activity levels to avoid flare-ups.
- **Progressive loading of joints:** Slowly reintroducing stress to tissues to strengthen them without causing harm.
- **Building resilience:** Enhancing muscles and joint stability over time to reduce long-term pain.

This method can be particularly useful for managing persistent pain from sports injuries. It's an active rehab process where you take ownership of your recovery instead of just "waiting for pain to go".

Why Does Graded Exercise Work? The Science of Progressive Loading

Think of your joints and muscles as a bank account. Every time you move, you "withdraw" mechanical stress; when you rest, you "deposit" recovery. Playing football or any sport without adequate rehab can lead to overdrawing: loading damaged tissues before they're ready.



Graded exercise carefully engineers this process as a long-term investment:

1. **Start low:** Activity begins at a level that doesn't worsen pain.
2. **Track progress:** Keep a close eye on symptoms and function.
3. **Incremental increase:** Slowly add load or duration week by week to build tolerance.
4. **Focus on strengthening:** Target weak muscles that support your joints.
5. **Consistency:** Regular movement helps calm central sensitisation and improves healing.

By doing this, you retrain your body to handle stress safely, improving joint health, muscle function, and nervous system response. For someone with chronic knee pain, say from an old ACL injury, this might mean gradually

moving from walking without pain, to jogging, and eventually controlled football drills.

Putting Graded Exercise into Practice

If you're wondering how to actually get started, here's a simple pathway to approach graded exercise for chronic joint pain:

1. **Assess baseline:** Know your current capability. Can you walk 5 minutes without pain? 10 sit-to-stands? Use this as your starting point.
2. **Set achievable goals:** Maybe it's to walk 20 minutes over four weeks, or perform three sets of 10 heel raises daily.
3. **Choose appropriate activities:** Low-impact and joint-friendly options, e.g., swimming, cycling, or resisted exercises focused on the affected area.
4. **Keep a log:** Track pain levels before, during, and after activity to guide progress.
5. **Adjust intensity:** If pain spikes significantly up to 24 hours later, scale back; if symptoms stay manageable, increase load slightly.
6. **Include strength work:** Target muscles supporting the problematic joint (e.g. quads and hamstrings for knees).

Physios or trained practitioners often provide tailored plans. For example, many private clinics now offer medical cannabis pathways for managing chronic pain alongside graded exercise, aimed at reducing reliance on opioids or just resting. The UK Anti-Doping (UKAD) website offers detailed guidance for athletes wondering about legality and protocols around such treatments.

Common Misconceptions and Pitfalls

Let me call out some myths that annoy me, having seen too many mates suffer because of them:

- **“Just rest it” is always best:** Complete inactivity usually leads to stiffness, weakness, and more pain over time. You need movement, but the right kind and dose.
- **“Playing injured shows toughness”:** No, it usually means you're risking worse damage and longer recovery.
- **Pain always equals damage:** Pain can be protective, but in many chronic cases, heightened nerve sensitivity or muscle weakness play a bigger role.
- **Graded exercise hurts, so it's bad:** Some discomfort is normal during rehab, but severe or worsening pain signals something's off.

The Takeaway: Be Active, Be Patient, Be Smart

Chronic pain doesn't vanish overnight. There's no quick fix magic pill or enchanting ankle tape for this one. But embracing graded exercise and pacing your activity puts you in the driver's seat. It respects the tough football culture's love of “doing stuff” while flipping the script to work smarter, not just harder.

If you're facing persistent pain from years of football wear-and-tear or an old injury you never sorted properly, remember:

- Understand what has changed recently — load, rest, movement?
- Don't be afraid to report pain early — it's not a weakness, it's awareness.
- Use a graded activity plan: start low, go slow, build up gradually.

- Focus on strengthening supporting muscles and improving joint control.
- Consider professional advice—physios and clinics now offer more options including medical cannabis pathways if appropriate and legal.

Over time, this approach reduces pain, improves function, and gets you back doing the stuff you love—whether that’s kicking a ball or just walking up the stairs without winces.



Useful Links and Resources

Resource Description Link UK Anti-Doping (UKAD) - Medical Cannabis Guidance Official guidance on medical cannabis use for athletes, including legality and protocols. ukad.org.uk/medical-cannabis Private Clinic Pathways for Medical Cannabis Some UK clinics offer specialist pathways incorporating medical cannabis alongside graded rehab for chronic pain management. Check local clinics with specialist pain or sports medicine services. Pacing and Graded Activity Plans Look for physio-approved guides or apps to help track pacing and progressive loading. Your local physio clinic or trusted NHS websites

Stay strong out there and remember: you’re not alone in this. And if you want my two pennies on strapping or how to tweak a rehab plan for stubborn knees, drop me a line anytime.