

## Sporting Routes: Audio Series Transcript

### Intro

Hi, this is Kirsty Gallaher. With research revealing Britain is becoming a nation of armchair sports fans, I've teamed up with the rail industry to encourage people to take a trip, to watch, learn about and discover new sporting passions by train - so they don't miss out on the wellbeing benefits of experiencing sports in the real world.

In our audio series, Sporting Routes, we've uncovered fascinating stories about our favourite sports, revealed the best places to experience them and try them for ourselves, as well as how to get there by train. I've spoken to athletes - past and present like darts sensation Luke Littler and 400m legend Derek Redmond - to help inspire people to get out there and enjoy the world of sport first hand, in person.

That's because, when it comes to sport, Nothing Beats Being There. Visit [nationalrail.co.uk/sportingroutes](https://nationalrail.co.uk/sportingroutes) to discover our full audio series and plan your next journey to watch, learn about and discover new sporting passions by train.

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### Episode 1

#### Cricket

Hello, I'm Kirsty Gallacher and this is Sporting Routes. The audio series where we explore some of Britain's most inspiring sporting locations and the role that rail has played in helping put them on the map.

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You can plan your own journey of sporting discovery by train with National Rail today. Because, when it comes to sport, nothing beats being there.

In this episode, we're going to be bowling full toss into the world of cricket.

Born right here in Britain in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the game of cricket quickly grew into an international sport, loved by nations across the globe. Whether they're talking about it, watching it or playing it, 2.5 billion fans are absolutely bonkers about the game.

You might ask how so many people can fall in love with one sport. Well, it's kind of a case of; when you know you know.

There's something quite magical about the sound of leather hitting the willow. The marvel of a days-long competition that organically changes shape with each twist and turn. A sport where a lazy afternoon in the stands can be peppered with absolute, edge-of-the-seat thrills. There really is nothing quite like it.

From grassroots cricket clubs all the way up to our most spectacular stadiums, each one is connected by our wide-reaching rail network. It's almost like they were born to exist alongside one another. Let's take a whistle-stop tour of Great Britain and get a closer look at one of our most beloved sports.

Britain is the official and spiritual home of cricket, but if you want to pin it down to a specific location, that has to be Lords in St. Johns Wood, London.

Right around the corner from Marylebone station is Dorset Square or the former site of The Old Lords Cricket Ground, established by Thomas Lord in 1787. Although now a garden square, the avid cricket fan can hunt down the commemorative plaque showing where the original ground was laid out.

Following its closure in 1810, Thomas Lord then established a new cricket ground just a 20-minute walk north along the boundary of Regent's Park. This was the birth of the world-renowned Lord's Cricket Ground which is still the beating heart of the sport to this very day.

The ground is open all year, meaning you can hop on a train and visit whenever you like. Either join the roar of the crowd at one of the stadium's many thrilling one-day, county or international games. Or in the off-season, take a tour of this historical gem, and check out the gorgeous museum housing an unrivalled collection of cricket memorabilia.

I've actually been to the museum, and I can tell you, it's amazing, like stepping back in time. Totally worth making the trip to Lords for.

As the sport grew, so did its number of clubs and leagues. But in a time before the motor engine, the train was an essential part of connecting these clubs to one another. With players and spectators alike, using the rail network to travel to games, the length and breadth of the country.

Stories from this era describe how teams would often play cards and sing songs en route, fostering camaraderie and team spirit. The journeys became an integral part of the team's routine and helped build the strong bonds that forged their successes.

Some of these clubs from cricket's early years still play on today. Over 150 years after they were established, both Durham and Yorkshire are among the many county cricket clubs to draw massive crowds.

Both clubs are under 20 minutes' walk from their respective rail stations, meaning fans can continue the amazing tradition of going to matches on the train.

Players have been known to hop on a train in the modern-day game as well.

For example, during the 2013 Ashes series, some of the England team, including James Anderson and Joe Root, took the train from London to their next game in Manchester. The team chose this method of travel to arrive relaxed and mentally strong for their upcoming matches.

And this brings us to our next stop, the cricket-mad city of Manchester. If you hop on a tram or bus from Manchester Piccadilly station, you can be at the hallowed grounds of Old Trafford in just over 20 minutes.

And no, it's not that Old Trafford. In fact, the Old Trafford Cricket Ground was founded over 50 years before football's theatre of dreams. So, if any stadium deserves the Old Trafford moniker, you could argue that it's the city's home of cricket. But let's not get into any disputes, after all this is a game for gentle-men and women.

Manchester has been at the centre of some of cricket's most historic moments. Such as Aussie legend Shane Warne's Ball of the Century. Where, with his first-ever ball in the Ashes tournament, under huge pressure, he smashed down the England wicket with amazing speed and spin. The ground was also host to Indian superstar, Sachin Tendulkar's maiden 100 runs. He went on to become one of the game's greatest-ever batsmen.

But, looking forward, in the more modern era, Old Trafford is fast becoming a hub for the growing phenomenon that is women's cricket. And joining us today is one of Manchester's home heroes, Lancashire legend and England pace bowler Kate Cross.

[Kirsty] Hi, Crossy. Thank you so much for joining us today.

[Kate] No problem. Thank you so much for having me Kirsty.

[Kirsty] You're from quite a sporty family with plenty of involvement in both cricket and football. You must have watched more than your fair share of live sport, haven't you?

[Kate] Yeah, I have. And I actually consider myself pretty lucky that I was born into a family whose lives seemed to revolve around sport because that's ultimately where my life has gone.

But yeah, I mean, I love sport. I've always loved sport, but I think there's some real special memories, some core memories in there from actually going and watching live sport.

And obviously with that, you have to travel to the live venues and stuff. So, for me, I've got a lot of memories that involve train journeys as well.

I always think that if you got the train to a sporting venue, then you genuinely seem to be travelling with fans, or rivals in some cases, but you kind of have that anticipation from the beginning, from the time that you step into that train station, then you generally get in the buzz and the atmosphere, even though you're not necessarily at the venue yet.

I also have done a lot of travelling on the train because of cricket. It's not fair to ask Mum and Dad to be ferrying me around the country. A lot of my training is down in Loughborough and to do that I had to jump on the train and actually meet one of the other girls down in Stoke.

So, I guess the sport for me is synonymous with train journeys because that's ultimately why I've been able to do what I've done for so long. But yeah, I think the live sport part of my life is something that I would really try and encourage as many people to go for as well, because some of the best, most emotional days that I've lived have been because of sport.

[Kirsty] Completely. It can be such an emotional day. For those who haven't experienced a live cricket match before, what can they expect?

[Kate] I think from cricket, you almost can't expect anything to be honest. Because honestly, there's been times where I think I've seen everything and then I go to a cricket game and I see something that's never happened before.

So, it's hard to say exactly what to expect. But I think the things that you basically guaranteed are a lot of colour, a lot of fun, a lot of music. We have a lot of live music now at cricket games.

We're trying to create an atmosphere that caters for everyone. So, you know, whether you're the oldest cricket fan in the world or the youngest, newest cricket fan in the world, we're trying to find something that you will enjoy.

So, a lot of food, lots of drinks, lots of activities that kids can get involved in. And obviously if you are a cricket fan then there's a cricket game going on as well. So they're really good days out these days, you know, again, trying to cater for families who've got lots of kids and you don't want it to be too expensive.

So that definitely feels like there's something for everyone now, a game of cricket.

[Kirsty] I know it can be an incredibly fun day out, but are there any other benefits, would you say, to engaging in live sport?

[Kate] The natural answer to that is if you play in the sport, then you get the physical as well as the mental positives from being involved.

And I guess the mental health side of it is something that I've really tapped into, and I've found that playing sport, not necessarily cricket, even if it's just going out for a run. I found all that really beneficial for myself and for my headspace.

So obviously I know not everyone gets to play the sports that they want to, but actually I think I've found that the days I've been able to switch off and go and watch sport as a fan, you still kind of get those benefits.

And I think there's an element of seeing athletes out there doing what they love and what they've tried so hard for. I think there's an element of almost that physical and mental positivity kind of crossing over.

So, you kind of have to ride the emotional waves of sport sometimes. And I think that can take you to places that not many other things can take you to.

So, I think there's so many benefits to be had. And also, even if you're just having a day out with your friends or family, you know, you're getting that social interaction as well.

And like I mentioned earlier, you've got a lot of people in one venue who are all there for the same reason, sometimes trying to just have a bit of an escape from normal life and getting away from troubles or hardships or whatever it might be.

So, I think sport is so special in that regard because it can just kind of whisk you away from whatever is going on in your head on that day.

[Kirsty] Absolutely. The future of cricket is looking so bright, it's brilliant. What would you say to anyone who wants to get into the sport?

[Kate] I think for me what I'm learning quite quickly is that not everyone gets into sport in necessarily a traditional way.

I got into it because I had a family member who loved the game and needed a bowler in the back garden, so that had to be me.

But I think what I'm learning now is that there's so many different ways that people can play sport. You don't have to have all the equipment, you don't have to have memberships to clubs or venues, etc. You don't have to pay money to go and see the live game.

I think there's different ways that you can involve yourself now, and whether that's going to fan parks or, you know, whatever it might be. There'll be ways that you can get involved in sport and I think cricket is definitely trying to do that in its own unique way.

There's prosecco cricket, there's ace programmes and there's just so many different ways - there's tape ball cricket, street cricket, there's just so many different ways that you can play our game.

And I think that's probably where I'd again try and encourage people to, if you do think you might enjoy the sport, is to just go and give it a go. And I mean the railways are making cricket a lot more accessible, which is brilliant for us as athletes within the sport because you want people to find it easy to get involved.

And obviously with that, there's so many places around the country that do play cricket and have it at their cricket clubs or however you're going to get into the sport. So, I think having a really easily accessible way of getting there and an affordable way of getting there, then is really important.

So, I think the fact that the railways now are making it a lot easier for people to travel, then, you know, that's going to make people want to get more involved in sport as well because it's one less thing to worry about.

[Kirsty] Absolutely. I'm sure you've inspired many people out there to give it a try. Kate, as always, thank you so much. It's been a pleasure.

[Kate] No, thank you so much for having me. It's been great.

As Kate said there are so many new formats and, with a growing professional base too, cricket is moving with a changing times and the evolving desires of its fans. Faster and shorter versions of the games have been ushered in such as T20 and One Day Internationals, but most recently The Hundred.

Appealing to younger audiences, and making cricket even more accessible, The Hundred sees world-famous players from eight city-based teams compete over five weeks every summer.

The one-day format gives spectators a chance to watch a full match in just a day trip. And what's more, the intercity structure of the league means that you can travel to every game of the season just by train. Birmingham, London, Manchester, Leeds, Southampton, Nottingham and Cardiff all have mainline stations within walking distance of their home cricket grounds. Meaning you can now experience more cricketing action than ever before.

Some of the bigger grounds like Edgbaston in Birmingham even turn into fan parks for a variety of international games. Allowing fans to watch matches hosted abroad on giant screens with a massive crowd. The passion of the fans at events like this can be almost as uplifting as being at the match in person.

And how could we cover cricket, without looking into how you can play it yourself? There are countless clubs springing up across the country and cricket centres are open to the public nationwide.

Like at Gloucestershire County Cricket Club in Bristol. Within the stadium, just 20 minutes from Montpellier station, is the Bristol Cricket Centre. Where you can try your hand at the sport in their professional-grade net lanes.

Amateur clubs like Coventry & Warwickshire are great ways for both young and adult players to develop their cricketing skills.

Then for very young players, clubs like Peterborough Town Cricket Club start training budding cricket stars of the future from around 8 years old. Their ground is just over a 30-minute stroll from the mainline station.

If you're eager to play in the off-season or colder months, you should head to Sloggers in Stoke-on-Trent. Less than 20-minutes from Longton station is a state-of-the-art virtual cricket simulator. A great place for cricket enthusiasts to practise their game even in the depths of winter.

So next time you're looking to scratch that cricket itch, just remember beyond the TV remote lies a whole world of sporting greatness to get involved in. Why not hop on a train and experience it for yourself?

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## **Episode 2**

### **Snooker**

Hello, I'm Kirsty Gallacher and this is Sporting Routes. The audio series where we explore some of Britain's most inspiring sporting locations and the role that rail has played in helping put them on the map.

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In this episode, we'll be taking a look at a game that is equal parts precision and pressure. SHHH quiet please, as we take a step into the thrilling world of snooker.

Invented by British Army officer Neville Chamberlain in the 1870s, snooker was adapted from a game called Black Pool. Then after years of being played in army barracks and working men's clubs, in 1927, the first World Championship was held in Birmingham.

Camkin's Hall, where the inaugural tournament took place, has now been demolished, but John Bright Street, where it originally stood, still remains. Moments from Birmingham New Street station, die-hard snooker fans can walk the same route as the early pioneers of the sport did, all those years ago.

Over the coming decades, snooker continued to gain popularity, which in part was fuelled by our British railways. Players and clubs would travel by train to tournaments held across the country. As the sport grew, so did the rail network, allowing snooker to reach both rural and urban areas alike, helping foster the first national snooker circuit.

A famous story from this time involved player John Pulman leaving his cue on the train, when travelling from his home in Dorset to compete at the British Boys Championship in London. He ended up borrowing another player's cue at the tournament, which he went on to win. Pulman then used that same cue for the rest of his successful career, which included winning the world championship a whopping eight times.

Snooker didn't really hit its pace until the 1960s. But when it did, it continued to grow into one of the most-watched sports in the world. It was even televised while many sets in Britain were still black and white. BBC commentator Ted Lowe once famously joked "For those of you watching in black and white, the pink is next to the green". This adored quote has long been referenced to illustrate our country's unashamed love of the game.

But the modern home of snooker is not in the Midlands, where it first grew in popularity. The sport's home today is just over an hour north by train, in Sheffield. The Crucible Theatre, named after the city's rich steelmaking heritage, is a short seven-minute stroll from the mainline station.

The venue has been host to some of world snooker's most amazing moments. potting every ball in five minutes and 20 seconds. Steven Hendry won a record-breaking seventh world championship. And it was the venue for the legendary classic 'Black Ball Final'. Which was the longest snooker match ever held, played between Denis Taylor and Steve Davis – who I might add is an avid railway enthusiast.

But why is The Crucible so special? Some say it's the intimate nature of the venue, with the crowd being so close to the players and the table. Others think it's the sheer weight of the history that's been forged there. Those heady, magic moments of skill and impossible accuracy that have wowed audiences for years. But whatever it is, you really won't know until you've been there yourself.

And if that rich British snooker heritage is piquing your interest, then it's time to head due west to Liverpool. Nestled in the Merseyside metropolis, just around the corner from Liverpool Lime Street station, is the Snooker Heritage Collection.

One of the largest collections of billiard and snooker memorabilia in the whole world. With just a quick eight-minute walk you can travel back through time and see some real gems of the sport's past. And who better to tell us more about the museum than the custodian himself, Peter Clare.

[Kirsty] Hi, Peter. Thank you for joining us.

[Peter] Hi. Thank you for inviting me to participate.

[Kirsty] Now, this is quite a remarkable place. How did it all get started?

[Peter] It was my father who started it. We took over Thurstons in London in about the mid-1960s and in the factory yard he noticed, to stop the pigeons getting into the factory, there were three balls nailed across a window which you realised were the wooden bed from a table created in 1820, and that's really what started it. He was a very tidy man, but then that stopped him throwing away some items that he found of interest down in Thurstons.

[Kirsty] Brilliant. So, your father built this collection? Did you travel with him to collect all the pieces?

[Peter] Yes. We travelled a fair bit down to London, to the London office, which was in Camden Town. And so, I would be leaving Lime Street Station on one of the early trains in the morning and enjoying the relaxed trip, having a full English breakfast and then getting off at Euston station, finding my way around to get to the underground and then on the Northern Line up to Camden Station to get to the office. As most of the items are relatively small, fortunately, people would bring them into the office there and saved us having to travel too far.

[Kirsty] Where do your visitors normally travel from, Peter?

[Peter] We have people coming in from all over the world, and I think a lot of the time they take the opportunity to not only visit the collection, but also to see this great city of Liverpool.

Obviously with our two football teams, there's quite a following overseas as well, and I think most of them sort of fly into probably Heathrow and then get the train up from Euston Station and take an opportunity to have a few days in Liverpool. Others will come across from Manchester and we've got a wonderful service on the railways from both those cities.

[Kirsty] For anyone who hasn't been yet, what is the easiest way to experience the collection?

[Peter] The easiest way is to come in by train because we are very close to Lime Street station, about a seven-minute walk away. So, if you're local, sort of inland, near to Lancashire you can come in on the train from Wigan etc. and if you're from South Liverpool, the railway comes into Central station, you can get up there to Lime Street Station and if you're coming from the Southport direction, the same. So, we're very handy to the station. I can almost see it from the office.

[Kirsty] Are there any other sites you'd recommend people visit while they're in Liverpool?

[Peter] From a purely tourist point of view, we have some wonderful sites. You've got the Three Graces down on the front. You've also got the Albert Dock and the Maritime Museum. Our two cathedrals, which are certainly worth visits and are connected by Hope Street, of all things. But



if you're interested in Snooker, then a visit to George Scott's Snooker club, which is not all up to far from our building here is well worth a visit. George Scott himself, sadly now is no longer with us but he was a top amateur player on Merseyside and has set up a very, very good snooker club here on Merseyside, and the tables are well looked after and it's a great place to go and play snooker.

[Kirsty] Yeah. And finally, you must have been to your fair share of snooker games. For anyone who hasn't seen it played live, what can they expect?

[Peter] I suppose like going to any sporting event, the atmosphere makes the event. So, when you see some of the top amateur players playing they are, all right, not as good as professionals, but they still play at a very high level and to see the sheer cue-manship, I wish I was able to play some of the shots that they can do, and the people watching are enthralled by good play.

[Kirsty] Peter, thank you so much for speaking with us.

[Peter] My pleasure. And thank you for asking me to participate.

Now if you're keen to take in the skills of British snooker stars of the present and prospects for the future, the UK Championships is a tournament you just can't miss. Held at the Barbican Centre in York every winter, this event is a chance to see some of our country's greatest players. Often with opportunities to actually meet them and even snag an autograph.

Take a short stroll along the river from York Mainline Station and you'll be at the venue in just over 20 minutes. Often seen as a proving ground for the stars of tomorrow, the competition saw a 17-year-old Ronnie O'Sullivan win the tournament at the start of his meteoric climb to international success. So, watching a game here could easily turn into a piece of snooker history.

If all this talk of winning championships is getting you excited to play a game for yourself, there are countless snooker clubs throughout the country. One of note is the Northern Snooker Centre in Leeds. Located in the city centre, a 20-minute walk from the station, it is often listed as one of people's favourite clubs in the country. They have a whopping 27 tables to play on and are open to members of the public all year round.

Or if you're looking to get geared up like the pros then try a visit to Parris Cues in Forest Hill, London. Seconds from the station, the shop is famous for making cues for professional players for over 30 years. You can even try them out in the showroom. A real snooker mecca for players of all levels.

A great way for children and teenagers to forge new friendships and learn a new discipline is to join one of the many WPBSA-affiliated youth clubs promoting the game. A couple of examples are the Bournemouth and District Constitutional Club, and the Breakers Snooker Club in Leicester, both roughly 20 minutes' walk from their stations.

Looking forward, the sport continues to go from strength to strength. From the construction of a new World Championship snooker venue, massively expanding The Crucible's capacity, to the rapidly growing firebrand that is women's snooker.

A greater reach and inclusivity will only bring more fans to the table. And with the expansive scope of our national rail network, fans and players now have access to more games and tournaments than ever before.

Hopefully, you're now feeling much closer to the thrills of the green baize. Great Britain is host to some of the world's best snooker, and home to the sport's rich heritage. What a gift, that we can just hop on a train and experience the passion and the glory of this fascinating game.

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### **Episode 3**

#### **Rugby**

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In this episode, we're going to be charging head-first into the world of rugby.

Now, let me paint you a picture. You're back at school, you're playing football, then suddenly one of the players picks up the ball with his hands and runs for the line. Half the players are just confused, but the other half thinks it looks like a fun game. And that, believe it or not, is how rugby was born.

In 1823, at Rugby School, in Rugby, Warwickshire - yes that is where it gets its name - a 16-year-old William Webb Ellis would go down in history as the inventor of the game. His legacy lives on even today with the Rugby World Cup trophy being named after him.

The game steadily grew over the next few years, with the rules being adapted and codified, and eventually, the RFU or Rugby Football Union was founded in 1871. But people still take the pilgrimage to the site of the game's humble beginnings. Just a short 20-minute walk from the mainline station is Rugby School.

Here you can take a guided walking tour and check out 'The Close', the playing field where the game began, and visit the school museum. The museum houses some of the most amazing and fascinating pieces of rugby history, anywhere in the world. Such as early kit and equipment and even art inspired by those early days. A definite must for both die-hard rugby fans and people wanting to learn more about the dawn of the sport.

And the growth of rugby was mirrored by the development of the British rail network. Passenger services really came into their own at the same time that rugby clubs began to pop up all over the country. Giving teams the opportunity to compete with clubs-based hundreds of miles away.

Stories over the years, of both players and fans alike taking the train, have become synonymous with the sport's history. Such as the Scotland team's famed journeys on sleeper trains where they'd mix with fans, giving many of them memories of a lifetime, by meeting their heroes.

But at the turn of the 20th century, the game had grown to such rampant popularity, that its venues needed to expand too. It's now time to take a trip to Twickenham Stadium in London.

Built in 1909, the home to the English rugby team is the largest dedicated Rugby Union Stadium in the whole world. With 82,000 seats, matchdays are really something special. Fans can walk en masse from the train station in just 10 minutes.

The singing, chanting and banter between supporters is almost as big a draw as the game itself. Then when you finally get to your seat, the atmosphere is famed as a literal cauldron of excitement. With the stadium host to multiple World Cup finals and six-nations clashes, if you're there on match day, you've got a pretty good chance of seeing history in the making.

I go quite often to Twickenham, by train, with my own children and I have to say, they love it. There's so much excitement when we get off at that station and start that walk up towards the stadium, all the way to our seats. It's fun and it's very, very loud. And when the match starts, we all get to cheer at the top of our lungs. We all talk about it for weeks afterwards. It's probably one of our favourite family days out.

But even on non-match days, fans can still flock to the stadium to take tours of this special venue. The tour covers some of the most restricted and exclusive areas of Twickenham usually reserved for royalty, dignitaries, or the players themselves. Including the Royal Box, the Players' Tunnel and even down on the pitch side.

England Rugby occasionally hosts open training sessions or events here. So if you're lucky enough, then you could get to watch the biggest stars in rugby, put through their paces, right in front of you.

And if you're still hankering for more rugby after that, then pay a visit to the stadium's award-winning World Rugby Museum. It is the definitive home for everything and anything about rugby. Housing some of the world's most prestigious rugby memorabilia including silverware from years gone by and a variety of legendary player's international caps and kits.

But let's not forget that Rugby Union isn't the only version of the game. Its speedier sibling Rugby League was established in 1895. A breakaway group from the RFU, the Northern Rugby Football Union, began to adapt the game to make it flow more quickly, with fewer stoppages and more play. This grew into the mammoth sport of Rugby League we know today.

Now, let's take a visit up north to the city of Leeds. The home to one of British Rugby League's most successful teams, the Leeds Rhinos. With 11 Championships, 14 Challenge Cups and 3 World Challenge titles under their belts, watching a game at the Headingley stadium will

undoubtedly prove to be a thrilling experience. And just five minutes away from the Burley Park train station, there are very few excuses not to go and soak in the roar on match day.

On the international stage, the Rugby League World Cup, most recently hosted in England in 2022, has become a model for inclusion and diversity in sport. The men's, women's, and men's wheelchair tournaments are all run alongside each other. St James' Park, Newcastle hosted the joint opening ceremony. And the finals were held at a variety of venues in Manchester all within 26 minutes reach of the Piccadilly mainline station.

And all these tournaments have been hosted at a variety of rugby fan zones across the country. City, town and village squares often construct giant screens showing the bigger matches, so fans across the country can share the excitement with a crowd - even when not at the stadium itself. East Side City Park in Birmingham, just a few minutes' walk from Moor Street station is a firm favourite among rugby fans during the summer months.

And in a country where we near enough worship the sport of rugby, you can find memorials and statues of some of our most legendary players dotted around many of our cities.

One of the most famous is of Russian-born England player Alexander Obolensky in Ipswich's Cromwell Square, just a 10-minute walk from the station. When travelling to Twickenham by train for England matches in the 1930s, Obolensky used to get off two stops early and run the rest of the way to the stadium as his warm-up.

Then heading west to Cardiff, there is a statue of Welsh legend Gareth Edwards in the St David's Shopping Centre, just a seven-minute walk from Cardiff station. He even has a train named in his honour.

And in 2024 in Edinburgh, three statues of Scottish rugby stars Donna Kennedy, Lisa Thomson and Francesca McGhie were displayed on Castle Street. Just round the corner from the station, the statues were erected to honour their commitment to women's rugby ahead of their Six-Nations campaign.

Now, the feel-good vibes of watching rugby have stirred the passions of many a fan over the years. With so much of the game to love and so many different competitions to fall in love with, it can be hard to know where to start. With this in mind, we thought it would be a good idea to chat with a man, who in 2023 was crowned England's greatest rugby fan - Paul Appleby.

[Kirsty] Paul, welcome.

[Paul] Thank you, Kirsty. It's a pleasure to be here.

[Kirsty] So being awarded the title of England's biggest rugby fan, it must have involved a lifetime of watching and playing in matches. Is that right?

[Paul] Yes. As a child it was always one of those family traditions on a Saturday going out to watch sport, whether it be rugby or football, or whatever, it was really just about getting out and about with the family.

[Kirsty] Is it fair to say that's where your rugby obsession began?

[Paul] It was, but then it took off when I first moved to Suffolk. I was teaching sport within the school and the main sport was rugby in the autumn term, and so that's all we played. And then the school was given some tickets to a rugby final, so it was myself and a couple of colleagues who went down to Twickenham, and the only way to get there, to really savour all the atmosphere, was by train.

[Kirsty] Yeah. Watching rugby is often a generational affair, with entire families falling in love with the game. As a father, how important do you think it is to share the experience of live games with our children?

[Paul] It's important to share those experiences with my daughter and my family. We always have a family trip out to Twickenham each year for either a six Nations game or an autumn international.

My daughters love the trip, from leaving the house, getting to the station, getting on the train and meeting those new people because there's always families on the train. Some youngsters who are experiencing Twickenham for the first time and talking about how they're getting there. My daughter, especially, when we get to Twickenham, enjoys the Yorkshire pudding stand with the pork and the gravy.

But it's the atmosphere of getting there, getting to the train and going from Twickenham Station. It's about a half a mile, three quarter mile walk and there's a lot of interactive things to do for the children, from throwing balls through hoops to trying to score conversions within there.

And again, it's just that bonding, talking to fans, looking at it, it's one of the things my daughters always enjoy. It's that experience of attending the games, the friendly atmosphere. We always make it a ritual now there's myself and my two daughters, or my wife sometimes comes along as well as she does enjoy the rugby, and we make it a nice day out.

[Kirsty] Absolutely. It's such a great day out. I remember taking my boys to Twickenham by train for the first time, and you're right, the atmosphere is electric. It's so exciting.

As part of your win, you received Twickenham tickets for every England match next year. Wow. You've obviously been to Twickenham many, many times. Tell us what it's like to be surrounded by so many other fans in that moment.

[Paul] Sometimes you are surrounded by opposition fans and it's not like other sports with the rivalry. This is very friendly rivalry, talking to them, sharing drinks, sharing experiences right up until the start, and then obviously watching the game, the atmosphere, the singing, which then vibrates onto the stadium and onto the players to try and lift them as well.

It's about getting out and about rather than you always have the armchair supporters, but there is nothing like being out there and experiencing all these games live.

Looking at the camaraderie and the mental well-being of going out and enjoying a game and being able to sit there along with other people, talking about their experiences and how they would do it and what else they would do. Also, where else they've been, because then it could sort of make you want to go and try those other experiences as well.

[Kirsty] Completely. We're a massive rugby family ourselves and I agree nothing beats being there in person. Paul, thank you so much for your time. I'm sure you've inspired lots more people to take in a game and you carry on enjoying it, won't you?

[Paul] Thank you very much, Kirsty. It's always a pleasure to talk to you.

So, Paul is obviously a big advocate of the game, and would encourage anyone to get involved with the sport. It can make you feel good both physically and mentally, especially if you happen to be supporting or playing for the winning side.

If you feel like giving it a go yourself or joining a club, there are hundreds of grassroots experiences located across the country. Bigger clubs, such as Leicester Tigers, Bath Rugby and Gloucester Rugby, all run introductory sessions and training camps to encourage more people to get involved in the sport. All of their training grounds are within a 20-minute walk from their respective train stations.

This means you can now watch and play more games than ever before, boosting both your health and happiness. And for the smaller players, clubs like Cambridge Rugby Club, run mini and youth rugby training sessions, allowing kids to get involved at any age.

Whether you're looking to take in a game, learn more about its history or you want to get stuck in yourself, why not hop on a train to make your next trip? Just don't forget your gumshield.

And remember, when it comes to sport, nothing beats being there. Visit [nationalrail.co.uk/sportingroutes](http://nationalrail.co.uk/sportingroutes) to discover the rest of our audio series and plan your next journey to watch, learn about and discover new sporting passions by train.

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## **Episode 4**

### **Horseracing**

Hello, I'm Kirsty Gallacher and this is Sporting Routes. The audio series where we explore some of Britain's most inspiring sporting locations and the role that rail has played in helping put them on the map.

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In this episode, we'll be taking a look at one of the oldest sports in the world and getting the inside track on horse racing.

People and horses have been teaming up for millennia. There's something majestic about the union of rider and steed that people are drawn to. Ancient Greece, Egypt, and the Romans, all

had a penchant for horse racing. The thunder of hooves, the cheer of the crowd, it's just infectious.

The sport is as popular today as it's ever been, and Great Britain is host to some of the sport's most hallowed racecourses. As with many sports in our country, the railways have played a unique part in their growing popularity.

As the era of the British railways dawned, so did the demand for long-distance travel to sporting venues across the land. Dedicated train stations, like the one at Epsom Downs, were built next to racetracks, allowing them to service tens of thousands of spectators.

Horse racing began to find its modern shape back in the 18th century. In 1750, the sport's rules were codified by The Jockey Club in Newmarket. Although many prestigious racecourses already existed across Britain, Newmarket became known as the home of horse racing and still is today.

Just a 20-minute walk from the train station stands Newmarket Racecourse, the two-track site that was established over 350 years ago. It's the host to two of the five British classics, in the 1000 and 2000 Guineas races. And it can host over 40,000 spectators across its multiple stands.

The town is also home to the Jockey Club Rooms, the original venue of the sport's modern-day founding. Although it has been an exclusive private members club for most of its history, the group now runs guided tours for the public.

Inside are exhibits from the rich history of the club and the sport itself. So, if you feel like walking the same halls as Royals and Prime Ministers alike, then this is a must. It's just a few moments' walk from Newmarket mainline station.

While you're there, why not trot a few metres up the road to the National Horse Racing Museum? Dedicated to the heritage of the sport, the museum is home to some of the world's most important and fascinating artefacts from racecourses, horses and jockeys from years gone by.

One of the most popular exhibits is a selection of cards that were sent to celebrate the 30th birthday of the nation's most beloved thoroughbred, Red Rum. The horse was so popular that people campaigned for him to become Sports Personality of the Year in 1977. Although this didn't happen as the competitors need to be human, to the nation's joy the horse featured on the show as a guest of honour.

And how could we utter the name Red Rum and not take a visit to Aintree in Liverpool, the home to the Grand National. Red Rum won a record-breaking three Grand Nationals in 1973, 74 and 77. And for a race that is seen as one of the sport's most ultimate tests, this is no small feat.

Aintree is arguably the most famous race venue in the UK. Standing directly opposite Aintree train station, it can host up to 75,000 people.

When you come out of the train station, right outside is the original Victorian red-brick entrance, a real piece of history. You then walk alongside this to the new entrance, see the massive modern stands and hear the hum of the crowd inside.

The course includes many technical and difficult jumps, making it one of the most thrilling venues in Britain. The most famous jump is known as Becher's Brook.

This was originally known as The Brook, but at the first official Grand National in 1839, Captain Martin Becher fell from his horse Conrad. He landed in the brook and stayed there for safety while the other horses jumped over him. He is reported to have said afterwards 'How dreadful water tastes without the benefit of whisky'.

Beyond Captain Becher, many other jockeys have had their names etched into horse racing history, with a couple of the most recent being AP McCoy who rode a record 4358 winners in his career. And Hayley Turner who became the first female jockey to ride 100 flat races in a single year.

With so many races and so many courses to visit in our country, you can access the roar of race day by train from pretty much anywhere in Britain. Ascot - the Royal family's favourite race day - Cheltenham, Epsom, Newcastle, York and Colchester, they all host some of the season's biggest races, and each venue is fully serviced by transport links, giving you even more opportunities to just hop on a train and take in the thrills of a race.

With many courses offering food, drink and live music alongside the racing, a whole new generation of race fans are being drawn to these elaborate day-long events.

One of the most popular experiences for spectators is Ladies Day. Ladies' Days were introduced at racecourses in the early nineteenth century as a way of helping to raise their social prestige. Organisers encouraged women attending the races to dress up in high fashion with a huge focus on headwear.

These Ladies' Days remain a popular feature of race meetings today, with both men and women dressing up in their smartest and most stylish outfits to take in the thrills of the track.

Horse racing is one of the most watched, long-standing and beloved sports in our country. But don't just take our word for it. Today we're joined by bonafide sporting heritage expert and sport historian Martin Polley.

[Kirsty] Thanks for joining us, Martin.

[Martin] Hi, Kirsty. Thanks for having me on this episode.

[Kirsty] There's a long history of racecourses having their own train stations. How much do you think the development of the rail network has helped to grow spectatorship of the sport?

[Martin] The development of the railways in 19th century Britain had a monumental impact on horse racing. Absolutely revolutionary. I think it's impossible to exaggerate how significant the railways were for turning the regional sport all across the country into a genuinely national sport. And I think the first thing is because the trains could obviously move spectators from towns and cities into the countries' many racecourses. So, the first impact was really in moving the spectators around. But of course, there's another impact. The railways meant that owners no longer had to walk their racehorses from one meeting to another. They could now take the train. And many companies provided special carriages divided into horse boxes, and jockeys, of course, could also take the train. And this meant that there were more race meetings. So truly a revolutionary impact. Without the railways, the sport could simply not have nationalised as it did.



[Kirsty] What is your favourite historical horse racing venue and why?

[Martin] I think my favourite venue really has to be Epsom, which holds a special place for me as it was the first racecourse I attended. I went to the Derby there with my brother in the late 1970s when I was about 13. We took the train from London and walked onto the Epsom Common where you can see the race for free in those days.

And even though we couldn't really see that much, we really got a sense of this amazing, wonderful atmosphere.

[Kirsty] If you're interested in participating in the sport, how does one even go about becoming a jockey?

[Martin] Becoming a jockey just like becoming a professional in any sport involves a huge commitment, usually from a very early age. But there are an increasing number of ways into the profession. A great early way is through events organised by the Pony Racing Authority, which puts on events for kids between the ages of seven and 15, and they have events all around the country, and some special ones at big racecourses like Cheltenham, Ascot and Goodwood, so young riders can get a real taste of sports' elite venues. I think one of the most exciting new developments in this area has come through the Riding a Dream Academy set up by Khadijah Mellah. Now, Khadijah was the first British Muslim woman to win a race in the UK, the Magnolia Cup at Goodwood in 2019, and she, with some great charitable funding, has set up the writing of Dream Academy to help people from underrepresented backgrounds get into the sport of riding.

[Kirsty] So tell us, where did more established jockeys typically train?

[Martin] Jockeys train at various location based obviously racing stables all over the country. There's a huge concentration at Newmarket and going out into the countryside around the town will allow you to see the horses racing and the jockeys practising.

[Kirsty] Are there any up-and-coming jockeys that you think we should be sort of keeping an eye out for?

[Martin] There are so many up-and-coming talents in the sport of horse racing, both on the flat and in steeplechase, and so I've just picked out two. First up I've gone for Bradley Harris from Andrew Balding stable. Andrew, of course, is the brother of the famous broadcaster Clare Balding, based at Kings Clare in Berkshire, and he's done incredibly well in Steeplechase recently. And then based at Chipping Norton in Oxfordshire, there's Lilly Pinchin from the Cotswolds who has recovered from a really awful injury early in her career to win 24 races last season.

[Kirsty] Yeah. Martin, you have quite the mental databank of horse racing knowledge. Thank you so much for joining us.

[Martin] Thanks, Kirsty. It's been a pleasure.

Moving on from sports history, to look into its future, horse racing continues to grow in popularity. The demand has increased so much, that in the late 2000s, we actually started building new racecourses to meet the demand.

One of those venues is Chelmsford Racetrack, the first British course built since 1927. The Chelmsford venue features a 10,000-capacity grandstand and boasts state-of-the-art race facilities.

With so many opportunities to watch a race, it's never been easier to catch the horse racing bug. Although it might be thrilling to watch the Grand National or Gold Cup from home, it pales in comparison to soaking in the excitement and the tension of race day - or visiting venues' rich in sporting history and heritage.

Because when it comes to sport, nothing beats being there. Visit [nationalrail.co.uk/sportingroutes](http://nationalrail.co.uk/sportingroutes) to discover the rest of our audio series, and plan your next journey to watch, learn about and discover new sporting passions by train.

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## **Episode 5**

### **Tennis**

Hello, I'm Kirsty Gallacher and this is Sporting Routes. The audio series where we explore some of Britain's most inspiring sporting locations and the role that rail has played in helping put them on the map.

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In this episode, we've got courtside seats to a game that's our country's most beloved racket sport. That's right, it's tennis.

Racket sports are thousands of years old. We've always loved to watch and play them, and we probably always will. There's something magical about watching a tennis match at a large court. The hush of the crowd before a big point, the lightning speed and athleticism of the players, a puff of line chalk as the ball hits its mark, and then the roar of hundreds of frenzied fans, suddenly allowed to release their excitement. The energy is palpable.

The modern sport we know as tennis was pioneered in 1859 by Major Harry Gem and Augurio Perera in Edgbaston in Perera's back garden. The game was adapted and codified over the coming years, but the lawn of his house in Birmingham is where it all began. The house still stands, and it sports a blue plaque commemorating the birth of tennis. You can walk there from Five Ways train station in under 20 minutes and check it out.

The sport became so popular, so quickly that it was only a few years before the world's first official tournament was held. In 1877, at Worple Road in Wimbledon, a five-day men's-only tournament took place.

Hosted by the All-England Croquet and Lawn Tennis Club, the event was a roaring success and grew into what is known as the world's oldest and most prestigious tennis tournament today. The Wimbledon Championships.

By 1922 the competition had grown so large, the grounds had expanded right up to the train line and the tournament was moved to a larger location on Church Road, where Wimbledon is still held today.

The tournament is one of international tennis' big four annual competitions, known as the Grand Slams and is held up as Britain's shining jewel in its tennis crown.

The stadium is just over 20 minutes' walk from the station and is an absolute must for hardcore fans and newbies alike. It boasts some of the best men's and women's tennis of the entire season.

Whether you're going to sit courtside or watch the action on a giant screen in one of the fan zones, such as Murray's Mount. For two weeks in July every year, this sleepy suburb becomes the beating heart of the tennis world.

You can visit the complex all year round, as it is also host to the biggest tennis museum on earth. Its unrivalled collection of tennis artefacts and memorabilia covers the modern era of tennis, as well as its centuries of evolution. A variety of historical equipment, tennis kits and trophies are all on show. Some exhibitions are almost 500 years old!

Now we can't mention Wimbledon without touching on our national obsession with British Champions. Until the tournament was won in 2013 by Sir Andy Murray - who's apparently a serial train user by the way - we had to wait over 60 years for a British winner of the men's title.

The previous winner was Fred Perry, whose career was the stuff of legend. He was the first person in history to win the career grand slam, which is where a player wins all four grand slam titles. Perry came from humble beginnings in Stockport in the north of England.

The family home in which he was born still stands. And for those of you who are blue plaque spotters, the house on Carrington Road is just under a 30-minute stroll from Stockport Mainline Station.

Now I've got to admit, I'm a big tennis fan myself. My mum has always been a keen player and I got the bug pretty early. I've been to Wimbledon a lot and it doesn't matter how many times I go; I've always been amazed at just how fast the serves are and just how hard the players hit the ball. I can say from experience, that just being there lets you actually see how phenomenal these elite competitors really are. It is just breathtaking.

Now it's all well and good, us trying to inspire some tennis-focused train adventures. But we thought it might be a good idea to chat to someone who walks the walk as well as talking the talk. We have with us, former player and coach as well as the founder and editor of Tennishead magazine, Tim Farthing.

[Kirsty] Hi, Tim. Thank you so much for joining us.

[Tim] Nice to meet you, Kirsty. Thanks for having me.

[Kirsty] Now, you might just be Tim, our most tailor-made guest ever. You've been a player, a coach, a sports journalist, and you take the train to tennis matches. Can you tell us about how your love affair with the game started?

[Tim] So it started when I was four years old. I would go to my local tennis club with my parents and watch them playing, and that encouraged me to get involved.

So, I still play tennis all the time myself, my family play, my daughter now plays a lot, so I travel with my daughter to play tennis. But also, as well as playing, I've developed a love for watching the top players and fortunately had quite a few opportunities to watch them play at different tournaments around the world and in the UK.

[Kirsty] You've been to a lot of matches over the years. Are there any standout days that you remember?

[Tim] I think a couple of specific memories I have are from Wimbledon. Firstly, the most recent Wimbledon. Myself and my wife were fortunate enough to get tickets for court one, and we always take the train when we go to Wimbledon because it makes the journey a lot easier, but also it creates this kind of shared enjoyment because everyone else on the train is doing the same thing.

So, in fact, you end up having conversations with random strangers on the train about who you're going to go and watch and see. And then also when you get to Wimbledon and you get off the train, you're obviously surrounded by thousands of other people who've got the train to go to Wimbledon. So, there's a real buzz around the train station and then walking up to Wimbledon itself. The tennis that day was fantastic.

And then the second experience I can remember most is when I was lucky enough to get tickets to the final of Wimbledon, which was the Nadal v Berdych final. I decided to take my mum with me, my mum's a huge tennis fan, but also a Wimbledon fan and a Nadal fan, and she hadn't seen Nadal play live. So, we took the train because it was just so convenient and also such a nice experience to be able to sit with my mum on the train up to Wimbledon, go and watch the tennis, see Nadal win and then come back home again.

[Kirsty] Now, for those who haven't been. What's it like watching tennis with other supporters, would you say?

[Tim] Yeah, I think tennis as a live sport is very enjoyable, because you're actually very close to the action. I think with other sports, you can't necessarily get as close because a tennis court is actually quite small, and the seats are right down.

A lot of the seats are right down close to the court, especially at Wimbledon, where they're not huge stadiums. So firstly, you get to really understand the skill, the power and just the sound of the tennis ball being hit by a professional.

The other thing that I really enjoy, because I'm a keen tennis player myself, is the ability to choose what you watch. So, on television, most of the time they follow the ball, and they follow the whole rally, whereas when you're live at a tennis match, I normally just watch one player, I don't watch the ball.

So, I can see what the player does when they're not hitting the ball, I can see that movement after the shot, which for me, being a keen tennis player, really helps my understanding of how good these professionals are at moving on a tennis court.

[Kirsty] It's not always easy to get tickets to some of the bigger matches, Tim, which is why fan parks are great for helping you still get that buzz of being at a live sport event and being able to mingle with likeminded people. Are there any sort of non-grand slam tournaments that people should check out?

[Tim] So I really enjoy going to Eastbourne. Eastbourne is a pre-Wimbledon grass court event and it's the most intimate tennis event that you'll find.

When you're there, it's not a huge site, there's not huge stadium courts, so you're really close to the action. In fact, the players are often wandering around with the spectators as they go from court to court. So, you can get really up close.

[Kirsty] You still play a bit of tennis yourself, don't you? So how does playing it impact your physical and your mental wellbeing, would you say?

[Tim] So I think that for me, coming off a tennis court after I've played, whether I've won or lost, I feel relaxed, and that really helps. I think, you know, we've all got busy lives and we're all constantly thinking about loads of stuff, whether it's family, finances, whatever.

So, when I'm playing tennis, I actually can't think about anything else. I have to concentrate so much on hitting the tennis ball, that even though you'd think you'd come off the tennis court and be exhausted, I actually come off feeling more relaxed than when I started.

[Kirsty] Yeah, I could use that sort of switch off sometimes. Tim, thank you so much for speaking with us.

[Tim] It's been a pleasure. I hope you get out there and watch some tennis and hit some balls.

Tennis is one of our country's most popular sports - and as Tim said, there are so many physical and mental health benefits to experiencing it for yourself in the real world. Thankfully there is always investment going into growing participation at all levels of tennis. The Lawn Tennis Association is opening a variety of tennis hubs across Britain, with an aim of bringing tennis into less advantaged, urban areas.

They are also funding the rejuvenation of community and council tennis courts across the country. From Glasgow and Edinburgh all the way down to Brighton and Redruth in Cornwall, funding is being pumped into courts everywhere. This means wherever you are, you can try the game out for yourself.

An intercity club that has captured headlines of late is Bromley Tennis Centre in London. Just a 20-minute stroll from Orpington mainline station, the centre is a host to many competitions and youth development schemes.

A young Emma Raducanu competed in and won, one of her first tournaments in Bromley. She's grown to be one of British Tennis' most promising stars, winning the US Open Grand Slam when

she was just 18 years old. The club is fully inclusive, and anyone can book courts or take up tennis lessons, regardless of age or ability.

And full tennis isn't the only way to enjoy the sport. A number of variations - with different rules - have been gaining a following over the last few years, namely Pickleball and Padel Tennis. Both are played on smaller courts with smaller rackets or paddles.

New clubs are being founded all the time, due to the sport's faster pace and more sociable set-up. A former railway building in Leeds is currently being converted into a brand new padel tennis facility.

The Roundhouse is just a 20-minute walk from Leeds overground station and will have 10 courts, giving people in the city even more chance to get involved in racket sports.

So, get out there, watch it, play it, learn about it. Tennis is an unashamed powerhouse of international Sport.

Whether you're taking in the culture of a museum, the excitement of a fan park or the roar of a crowd on match day, you'll know, when it comes to sport, nothing beats being there. Visit [nationalrail.co.uk/sportingroutes](http://nationalrail.co.uk/sportingroutes) to discover the rest of our audio series and plan your next journey to watch, learn about and discover new sporting passions by train.

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## **Episode 6**

### **Athletics**

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In this episode, we'll be taking a look at a sport with roots that are literally prehistoric. The multi-disciplinary competition that is athletics.

The great thing about humans is that we're so mobile. We're always running, jumping or throwing something, somewhere in the world. And we've always been keen to challenge one another to find out who's the best.

This simple desire is how the sport of athletics was born. Competitors at the top of their game looking to better their opponents by being stronger or faster than them. A crowd thirsty to see records broken, champions dethroned, and new ones crowned. There is something almost gladiatorial about it.

Throughout the 1800s many countries across the world began to develop and codify a variety of athletic sports. Britain was no exception. Athletics competitions were held regularly at Sandhurst military academy, Royal Shrewsbury School and Oxford College. A growing rail network fostered greater participation and grew the activity into the mammoth spectator sport we know today.

The biggest competition in Athletics is undoubtedly the Olympic Games. Originating in Greece, the ancient version of the Olympics dates back to 776 BC. However, the modern format of the games was first held in 1896. It's long been a badge of honour for a country to have hosted the tournament. And Britain has been proud to have put on the Summer Olympics three times.

In 1908, 1948 and most recently in 2012, London was the host city for the games. The first event was held at the purpose-built White City Stadium. This remains Britain's most successful competition to date when looking at medal standings. Fans travelled by train from all over the country to watch our athletes top the medals table.

Rail has also played a part in the competition itself. Special services were put on for runners competing in the Olympic marathon. Trains were laid on from Paddington to get racers and their support teams to the start line at Windsor Castle. The waiting room at Windsor station was even turned into a dressing room for the runners on race day.

Although the White City Stadium no longer stands, part of it was memorialised in paving stones. Just a 20-minute walk from Shepherds Bush train station, anyone can run, hop, skip or jump across the original finish line of this historic site.

Britain's most recent hosting of the Summer Olympic and Summer Paralympic Games was in 2012. Over 800 events were split over the two tournaments. Competitions were held across a variety of locations in London with the main stadium being built in Stratford.

The Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park was constructed to house the stadium, as well as the Athlete's Village. The Stratford International railway station is just a moment's walk from the park itself.

During the events, high-speed Javelin trains shuttled people from Kings Cross Station to the park in just seven minutes. A number of these trains were named after legendary British sports stars such as Lord Sebastian Coe and Dame Kelly Holmes.

The London Games went on to forge new British Olympic and Paralympic heroes whose legacy will go down in sporting history. Two of the most historic days in both the Paralympic and Olympic competitions became known as Thriller Thursday and Super Saturday respectively. On these days, records were broken, and Team GB won again and again and again. The achievements have been heralded as some of UK sport's most incredible moments.

In the shining floodlights and roar of the stadium, Paralympians David Weir and Sarah Storey won four gold medals each. Dame Jessica Ennis-Hill took Olympic gold in the heptathlon. And legendary runner Sir Mo Farrah went on to win gold in both the 5000 and 10000-meter races.

The legacy of the games was carefully designed to encourage a whole new generation of sports lovers to get involved, creating a happier and healthier population. And it couldn't have been more successful.

You can still visit the park today. As well as hosting international athletic events such as the Diamond League, the public can run, cycle, swim and participate in a variety of other sports at the park's world-class facilities. There's also plenty to do outside the sports world with the UK's tallest and fastest tunnel slide as well as a bar, event space and open-air cinema.

And if legacy is something you're interested in then a visit to Stoke Mandeville Stadium in Aylesbury might be the right trip for you. Within a 30-minute walk of the mainline station, the stadium is widely acknowledged as the birthplace of the Paralympic movement.

The site is also home to the first National Paralympic Heritage Centre - celebrating and exploring the sport's unique history. The displays showcase the determination, sportsmanship and vision that gave the world the Paralympic Games. On exhibit are some of the first racing wheelchairs, former Paralympic torches and a variety of sporting equipment used at the games.

Sports have a lot of iconic moments that stick with us. But when it comes to track and field, there are few more iconic than that of former World Champion, Derek Redmond being helped across the line by his dad.

In 1992 at the Barcelona Olympics, championship favourite, Derek tore his hamstring in the 400m semi-finals. Devastated, he limped on, with his dad leaping from the crowd to help him finish the race and cross the line.

The moment was witnessed by millions across the globe and has gone down as one of the most memorable images in British sporting history. And we're lucky enough to have Derek join us today.

[Kirsty] Derek, Hi. Thanks for talking to us. It's so good to speak to you again.

[Derek] Yes, it's good to see you as well. It's been a while, but yeah, good to see you.

[Kirsty] Now, we've just re-lived your iconic father-son moment in Barcelona with your amazing dad. A huge story in sporting history. How do you remember that night, though?

[Derek] I see it very different to a lot of other people. I went there to win a gold medal. I had a very good chance of winning the gold medal. I'd won the qualifying rounds and, you know, the last thing I expected was to pull a hamstring in the semifinal.

I remember everything about that whole day. You know, my preparations, the warm up, going to the track. The race starting. In the moment that I pulled the hamstring. The moment I decided to get up and continue, you know, running. All of this noises and the sounds. And then my dad coming onto the track and the conversation that we had. So it's very vivid in my memory. But I guess one of the nice things to come from it is it showed, yeah, it showed a little bit of the relationship me and my dad had.

[Kirsty] You have a raft of achievements ranging from world championships to British records. I know this is a difficult question. Of all the races you've run on home soil though, which was your favourite and where was it?

[Derek] Favourite track? Simple. My favourite track was in the Midlands. It was in Birmingham called Alexander Stadium, and there's a few reasons why it was my favourite track. Number



one, it's my home track. So, the club that I ran for, Birchfield Harriers, were based there. And as a young athlete, that's where I used to have to travel to, to go and train and, you know, one of the ways I used to get there, being literally a stone's throw / a few miles from New Street Station, I used to get the train to go and train. So, I used to train to train basically.

So that was absolutely fantastic for me because it made my life so much easier. You know, it was an easy way to get there. And one of the great things about travelling by train, more important, on the way back when it was on the way there, I could actually sleep a little bit on the way back because you are absolutely clattered from the training session. So, I get on to try and get my head down for an hour there or thereabouts, and then get off the train from, you know, back home in Northampton.

The other reason it was my favourite stadium is because I just thought it was a fast track, a quick track, and as I say, where I can play for my club nationally or internationally, I always felt like I was competing at home when I train there.

[Kirsty] So the train played an important role in those early years?

[Derek] As I got into athletics, and most competitions were at weekends, obviously that put a bit of pressure on my mum and dad because they had other things to do. So, a lot of the time, again, being in an area where there was a train station quite close by, it was great that they could drop me off the train station. I'd get the train to the stadium and then the team manager would meet us there and we would go away to the competition, win a lot of medals and certificates.

And I can remember as a youngster jumping back on the train and I feel sorry for any of the general public that was in there because you've got this carriage full of, I don't know, nine, ten, 11 year olds all clambering all over the place, cheering about, shouting about what medals, what trophies, what, you know, certificates they've all won.

They were good times, good memories actually. And that's where my kind of athletics background and the base of my athletics career really started.

[Kirsty] Derek, in your opinion, how important is it that young people get the opportunity to participate in athletics or sport generally? And what doors does it open for them?

[Derek] Yeah, I think it's really important. And you know, not every person who takes up a sport is necessarily going to be a future world or Olympic champion, and that's not a reason to get into sport, but it's also not a reason not to get into sport.

A lot of people who get into sport, me included, had no idea where it was going to take us.

I believe sport helps promote the behaviours and the attitudes that we need to succeed. Whatever you do in life. And an example is whenever you look at a job application, the first 50-60% is the kind of person that that company is looking for. They're looking for someone who's dedicated, who's this, who's that, motivated? Self-starter? You're talking about people who've been involved in sport. We have all of those traits.

[Kirsty] Finally, it's not just young people that need to immerse themselves in sport, is it? What would you say to those armchair sports fans out there?

[Derek] Live sport is so much better than watching it on a square box. I don't care how big that box is getting to live. Sport is the best thing ever.

I still go to as many live events as I possibly can because the atmosphere, the experience, it's... you know what? You also get a bit of motivation from it and that is what makes people, I believe, take those particular sports up. And you get so much more from being there, and you take so much more away from being there, than you can in any other format of watching sport.

[Kirsty] Quite right. So, there are so many benefits to enjoying sport in the real world. I'm sure you've inspired lots of people to make the trip. Derek, it's been a pleasure as always.

[Derek] Thank you. Thank you. Good to see you. And hopefully we'll catch up at some point somewhere soon.

Derek touched upon the importance of participating in sports, and when it comes to athletics, there are more opportunities to take part in races and fun runs across the country than ever before. The Parkrun movement, which is a fully inclusive, organised running event, has exploded in popularity across the UK, being held at over 2000 locations so far.

Some of the biggest events are held regularly in Edinburgh, Bushy Park, Southampton, Milton Keynes and Cardiff. All of them are within a 30-minute walk or bus ride from the nearest train station. Meaning if you want to take part, then you can just pop on your trainers and hop on a train.

At the other end of the spectrum are Ultra Marathons. In fact, one train company hosts its own, in partnership with the Railway Children charity. 250 runners tackled marshland, nature reserves, beaches and seaside towns as they ran across the banks of the River Thames to the finish line in Southend.

World-recognised, mass running events are held annually across Britain and are open for all to apply. The train plays a key part in these events as they involve closing public roads.

Events such as the London Marathon, that I've completed myself, and the Great North Run see thousands of competitors a year ditching the car and travelling to the start line by train.

One of the most successful ever competitors at the Great North Run is Sir Mo Farrah, with a record of six consecutive wins. At the South Shields Interchange train station - a 26-minute train journey from Newcastle Central Station - you can find a permanent cast of Sir Mo's footprints commemorating this achievement.

But if you're looking for somewhat of a more professional club, then you could try becoming a member of the Birchfield Harriers running club in Birmingham.

Just a half-hour walk from Perry Bar Station, or it's quicker if you run, stands Alexander Stadium. This world-class venue has been host to a variety of top-flight international competitions, but as a member of the club, you have access to the track and training facilities. Meaning you can train and compete on the same surface as some of the world's greatest athletes and homegrown talents, like 400m British and European Record Holder, Matthew Hudson-Smith.

Other clubs across the country also offer access to stadium-based tracks for training. Such as South London Harriers who use Crystal Palace National Sports Centre - a three-minute walk from the station. And Reading Athletics Club who run at Palmer Park Stadium, around half an hour's walk from Reading station.

While we're covering homegrown heroes, we thought it would be a great opportunity to chat with National Rail's very own former team England athlete, Philip Barnard.

[Kirsty] Hello, Philip.

[Philip] Hello, Kirsty.

[Kirsty] I can honestly say in this audio series, you're the only sportsperson we're interviewing who also works for National Rail. You really are quite unique. Now your sport is racewalking. Can you tell us a bit more about it?

[Philip] Yes. Race walking is an athletic discipline where athletes compete over long distances, such as 10km, 20, 50.

These distances are similar to long distance running races. However, race walking requires you to adhere to two main rules. Firstly, you cannot lose contact with the ground. This means your toe cannot leave the ground until the other heel has landed. Secondly, you cannot land with a bent knee.

To add to the difficulty of this, in every race walk there are judges spotted around the course and they check your technique. They hand out warning cards for violations and they can, and often do, disqualify you from the race on the spot for breaking the rules.

This technique takes a long time to master at the start, but once perfected, it leads to that iconic smooth race-walking flow that you see.

[Kirsty] You climbed the amateur ladder to get into Team England and participated in Olympic qualifier events. How did you realize you were so good at it?

[Philip] The realization for race Walking came when I was appointed manager of a railway booking office in London, just the age of 20 years old. It was a fairly hectic office environment, so to burn it off at the end of the day, I decided to take my fascination for athletics seriously and a step further.

And as half of my commute was walking and I tell you, I can walk pretty fast, I started to time myself and I said 'There must be a sport in this' - and there was! So, I walked into my local sports centre and asked about it, and I just got a blank stare. Then just as I was walking out, somewhat dejected, a receptionist out the back shouted out, What about Alan O'Rawe?

It just so happened that there was a race-walking trainer where I lived, which being a minority sport is a pretty rare thing, and that moment changed everything for me.

Alan took me under his wing and started training me three times a week. Twice a week I'd take an extra stop on the train coming home to Leigh-on-Sea station, where he'd have me train on the punishing belt on ways just outside that station, going up and down the hill - mostly up, to build endurance.

And this is where I learned the meaning of endurance. You know, rain, shine, snow, thunder. You went out at your fastest until you felt like collapsing. I then linked up with a former GB international walker, Irene Bateman, and both of them together coached me to success, winning club championships, county championships and qualifying for Inter-County National championships and racing for team England.

[Kirsty] So how would you recommend that people get involved in race walking?

[Philip] If you're inspired by the Olympics, there's lots of places you can try race walking by yourself, be it sports centres, tracks, or even just open spaces. And these are all accessible by train.

If you like what you see, give it a go. I guarantee you will feel silly doing it for the first time, but you never know, you could be our next Olympian.

Not every athletics club has a racewalking division, many do though, some notable ones would be Tonbridge and Steyning down south, Enfield and Harringey, Belgrave Harriers and Ilford AC in London, Birchfield Harriers and Leicester Walking Club in the Midlands and Lancashire Walking Club in the north.

If you feel you want to give it a go, contact one of these or your local club to find out more.

[Kirsty] Philip I'm sure I'm not the only one who's going to give race walking a try after this - I am. Thank you so much for speaking to us today.

[Philip] Brilliant. Thank you, Kirsty. Thank you for having me.

As we've heard, athletics has always drawn huge interest at all levels of the sport. There is a purity and simplicity that seems to speak directly to our hearts.

Whether you want to watch the herculean feats of pro athletes, take part in a marathon or fun run, or join one of Britain's amazing grassroots athletics clubs, just remember, all you need to do is hop on a train to get involved.

When it comes to sport, nothing beats being there. Visit [nationalrail.co.uk/sportingroutes](http://nationalrail.co.uk/sportingroutes) to discover the rest of our audio series and plan your next journey to watch, learn about and discover new sporting passions by train.

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## **Episode 7**

### **Darts**

Hello, I'm Kirsty Gallacher and this is Sporting Routes. The audio series where we explore some of Britain's most inspiring sporting locations and the role that rail has played in helping put them on the map.

We want to motivate more people to take a trip to watch, learn about and discover new sporting passions by train - so they don't miss out on the well-being benefits of experiencing sports in the real world.

You can plan your own journey of sporting discovery by train with National Rail today. Because, when it comes to sport, nothing beats being there.

In this episode, we'll be taking a look at a game that started off in British pubs and grew into a mammoth global sport, demanding pinpoint accuracy and nerves of steel. It's darts.

Whether people are watching a competition or taking part in it themselves, the thrill and tension of the game is undeniably addictive. 2024 has seen a rise in people taking up the sport, and in tandem, its supporter figures have rocketed to record highs. But what is it about this sport that's getting us so hooked? Is it the skill of the players, the enthusiasm of the audience or just the fact that anyone can play it? Let's jump into the history of this beloved game.

Darts emerged in the early 19th century. Initially played in pubs and working men's clubs, the game went through a variety of dart types and board layouts, before it evolved into the game we know and love today.

When darts began to be televised in the 1970s its home was undoubtedly the Leeds Irish Centre. Just over half an hour's stroll from Leeds train station is the legendary venue that hosted the 'pub games series'. Viewers would tune in to watch darts, bar billiards, skittles and table football. The club was recently awarded a blue plaque naming it 'The Crucible of Darts'.

The British Darts Organisation, founded in 1973, organised numerous tournaments across the UK. The crowds for these large competitions became known for their unrivalled banter and camaraderie. With many darts fans choosing to attend in elaborate fancy dress costumes. You'll be hard-pushed to find another top-flight sporting event where you can take in the action sat between an Umpa-Lumpa and a unicorn. A truly unique experience.

The growing railway system allowed players and fans to easily travel to darts events, even if they were on the other side of the country. Major tournaments were often held in locations, such as the Circus Tavern in Essex and Lakeside Country Club in Surrey, which are both easily accessible by train.

They drew large crowds and stoked the national interest in darts. Over the years, British players like Eric Bristow and Phil 'The Power' Taylor would go on to win multiple world championships, becoming household names and achieving legendary status.

These venues still hold darts tournaments today. With Lakeside being home to the WDF World Championships and the Circus Tavern hosting the World Senior tournament. They are both within a 25-minute walk from their nearest train station, giving fans even more chance to soak up the excitement of live darts.

Events often have a carnival-like feel to them with colourful crowds and entrance sequences for each player that are showered in lights shows and anthemic theme tunes. Spectators return to those venues year after year to forge new friendships and memories in the unique environment of a darts crowd.

But today, it's Alexandra Palace, London - often referred to as "Ally Pally" - which hosts the biggest darting event of the year. This iconic venue is now the home of the PDC World Darts Championship every December. A tournament that attracts the world's best players with its unrivalled first prize of two and a half million pounds.

Just a 15-minute walk through the park, this historic and atmospheric venue, is a must-visit for darts enthusiasts. The players are always sure to bring their A-game, as are the audience. The feverish fanbase often rolls out their most elaborate costume creations for the event. Making it feel like part sports and part pantomime.

If you're looking for a more regular hit of the sport, then Premier League darts is a way to scratch that itch. The Motorpoint Arena in Nottingham regularly features as part of the Premier League Darts tour. It's known for drawing large crowds and is a cornerstone of the vibrant darts scene in Nottingham.

The arena is the biggest live entertainment venue in the East Midlands and the atmosphere on matchday is something very special to experience. The venue is less than 15 minutes stroll from Nottingham station, allowing people to travel to the tournament by train, whenever the darts tour is in town.

And while in Nottingham, you can check out Sabre Sports in Sutton-in-Ashfield for a selection of darts, boards and other equipment. It's under half an hour's walk from Sutton Parkway Station. And who knows, with the right gear and enough practice, you might be one of the premier league stars of the future.

Talking about stars of the future, we're joined today by new kid on the block Luke Littler who is taking the world of darts by storm. In 2024 he was both runner-up at the Darts World Championships and crowned Premier League Darts champion all at the age of just 17.

Luke "The Nuke" Littler is Britain's very own darting prodigy and he's really only just getting started.

[Kirsty] Hi Luke, nice to meet you. How are you?

[Luke] I'm all good. How about you?

[Kirsty] Yeah. Yeah. good. Thank you. It's a pleasure to talk to you, Luke. You must be used to people asking about your age, of course. But I've got to know. How old were you when you started to play darts? Come on, tell us.

[Luke] I started playing when I was 18 months.

[Kirsty] Oh my goodness!

[Luke] There's a video on YouTube of me in a nappy on the magnetic board and throughout the world championships, after my first game, the video just went up even more views and it was the popular video that was going about.

I think my mum and dad said we went to the shop and I picked up a toy and the toy was a magnetic dartboard.

So, who knows what would have happened if I didn't pick up the dartboard.

[Kirsty] Listen, going to junior tournaments, Luke and league matches must have involved a lot of travel. I know, I know that. What was that like for you?

[Luke] For myself it was the case of, if my dad was working away, it'd be me and my mum going to the competitions and there was no other option apart from the train, which was very easy, few stops wherever we were going to. But no, it was just pretty easy when we used to train. Whenever I'm on a train, I just always want to get to the venue as quick as possible and just throw darts.

[Kirsty] And there are so many amazing sort of darts venues around Britain. Which are your favourites, would you say? And where are they?

[Luke] I loved Manchester, of course, I got a Premier League nightly win there, and I'd have to say the match play even though it didn't go to plan. The Winter Gardens, it was unbelievable atmosphere for myself.

[Kirsty] Do you get nervous?

[Luke] Not really. I just. Just enjoy it, enjoy whatever stage I'm playing on and it's a new venue I'll always enjoy it as well.

[Kirsty] And it's great to see so many supporters, isn't it, follow your journey and come and watch you. And I mean lots of them obviously piling onto the train, piling off the train into the venues to watch you. What does that mean to you?

[Luke] It's always a good feeling, but not only for myself, for the other dart players, because they're not only coming to watch me, they're coming to watch however many players are playing in the competition, that I'm playing in myself. So, the travel that they do to watch us, I know there's a fair few that I know who travel by the train to go and watch me, but they also go and watch the other professionals.

[Kirsty] And you are an inspiration. You really are to youngsters. And I suppose you also would love others, other youngsters to discover their own sporting passions by train like you did, do you?

[Luke] Yeah. It's especially if, like their mum and dads are in work and they could just use the train. It's very easy. As soon as you step foot onto the train, you always you're just thinking about, you just want to get there now and get involved as everyone else.

[Kirsty] And how important is it to be at a live sports event to actually be there and not just watch it on the TV?

[Luke] I think everyone does say the crowd sounds really good on TV. But when you're there watching it yourself, it's, it's even better. You get involved. Well, I know the fans, they get involved themselves. They start doing the chants and stuff. So, if people are at home watching it, they need to start going to these events, not only just the darts but for all of the sports across the country.

[Kirsty] Absolutely right. You're right, Luke. There's nothing better than being there, is there? Thank you so much.

[Luke] Thank you.

Thanks to players like Luke, darts' rise in popularity has seen more Brits taking an interest than ever before. Fans have even been calling for it to become an Olympic sport. With both the men's and women's games growing rapidly and producing well-known stars such as Luke Humphries and Lisa Ashton, more people are wanting to try the game out for themselves.

And if you want to take your own game to the next level, then you should visit St Helen's dart shop in Merseyside. Just over a half an hour walk from St Helen's Central Station, this family-run business has been selling professional-grade darts equipment to the community for over 20 years.

While people can travel here from all over the country by train, their real claim to fame is their training academy. Which has produced no less than four world title contenders, including Girls World Champion Eleanor Cairne, and our man, Luke Littler. St Helen's Darts Academy is held at Sidac Social Club, a 25-minute bus ride from Lea Green Station and is fast becoming famous for training darts stars of the future.

Littler's rise to fame has mirrored the ascent of amateur darts clubs and pubs, giving more people the opportunity to experience the health and wellbeing benefits of sport in the real world. A fast-growing mainstay of the social darts experience is the brand Flight Club. The company is famed for its bars and clubs across the country that feature a variety of traditional, multiplayer and high-speed formats of the game, for players of all skill levels.

Their Glasgow venue is a mere 2-minute walk from Queens Street train station. In fact, lots of Flight Club's venues are within walking distance from train stations, so stepping up to the oche and aiming for the bullseye has never felt easier.

So, in short, this part of British social heritage continues to grow. With more venues, more leagues and more superstars than ever before, our country has never been hungrier for the game of darts.

With so many world-class dart venues and clubs located moments from our wide-reaching rail network, literally anyone can experience the thrill. Because, when it comes to sport, nothing beats being there. Visit [nationalrail.co.uk/sportingroutes](https://nationalrail.co.uk/sportingroutes) to discover the rest of our audio series and plan your next journey to watch, learn about and discover new sporting passions by train.

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## **Episode 8**

### **Football**

Hello, I'm Kirsty Gallacher and this is Sporting Routes. The audio series where we explore some of Britain's most inspiring sporting locations and the role that rail has played in helping put them on the map.



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You can plan your own journey of sporting discovery by train with National Rail today. Because, when it comes to sport, nothing beats being there.

In this episode, we'll be taking a look at Britain's most popular sport. The skill and passion it demands is almost poetic. The memories and bonds people make through the sport last a lifetime. No wonder they call it the beautiful game. Today, we're exploring the world of football.

There's something indescribable about walking into a stadium on match day. The wall of noise coming from the crowd, the songs, the banter. Then there's the pitch. A perfectly kept expanse of green grass in the middle of this tiered monster of movement. And the game itself. It's physical and it's beautiful, almost balletic in its nature.

Most football fans can tell you about the experience of their first match in a big stadium. Because it's something you can never forget.

Football has been around for hundreds of years in one shape or form. The simple joy of kicking a ball and running has kept us playing the sport for generations.

In medieval times, villages would get together en masse and separate into two teams with no limit on numbers. They would then attempt to transport an inflated pig's bladder to markers at either end of the village, by any means necessary. A far cry from the sport we know today, but some villages still play these early formats of the game.

One example is in Workington, Cumbria. Every Easter, the village gathers at Workington Hall Parklands and plays an often-brutal game called 'Uppies and Downies'. They now use a ball instead of a bladder, but this ancient sport is a fascinating sight to behold.

Brave-hearted spectators can walk from Workington train station in 20 minutes to take in a game. But a word of warning, just don't get in the way. The unpredictable competition can often spill out into the town centre and beyond. It can get pretty intense.

The modern game of football wasn't invented and codified until 1863. Many regional teams were founded, and in 1888, 12 of them formed the English Football League. Teams would travel by train to play against each other, relying on the growing network to move from town to town to fulfil their fixtures.

The League expanded over the decades to include more teams and divisions. In 1992, the FA and leading clubs broke away to form the Premier League. Which is the most-watched football league in the world.

Many of the teams that founded the original football league, still play in the topflight today. Including Aston Villa in Birmingham, Everton in Liverpool and Wolverhampton Wanderers in the West Midlands.

As with most teams in the leagues, their home stadiums are a short walk from their nearest train stations. Meaning that people can take in the roar of at least one of the hundreds of league games a year, thanks again to the train.

As the sport exploded in the late 1800s, many of the goliath teams of the English game were founded. Liverpool, Arsenal and both great teams of Manchester - United and City - all started their march towards league dominance before the turn of the century.

My boys are both mad about Manchester United. We go regularly to see them play at Old Trafford. The feverish excitement of match day is infectious, and they just can't get enough of it. On the train on the way in, we all get to chat about our favourite players and what the opposition is like. I often marvel at the fact that there would have been boys their age supporting this same team, almost 150 years ago.

To learn more about those early days, the National Football Museum is based in Manchester city centre. The museum is just over the road from Manchester's Victoria train station and displays important collections of football memorabilia. Including vintage boots, historic footballs, and other artefacts. Both of the two balls used in the first World Cup Final in 1930 are displayed there, along with a replica of the original World Cup trophy, the Jules Rimet. Which was actually made in secret by the FA after the original was stolen.

And how could we mention the World Cup without touching on England's historic 1966 victory on home soil. At the original Wembley Stadium in front of a crowd of almost 97,000 people, Alf Ramsey's England beat Germany 4-2. The heroics of players like Bobby Moore and Geoff Hurst have long been upheld as one of our country's most memorable sporting achievements.

In 2007, Wembley Stadium was knocked down and replaced with a state-of-the-art facility that hosts international football for the men's and women's games. As well as multiple cup finals, promotion play-offs and trophy matches, the stadium has its own dedicated train station, so it's never been easier for fans to watch a live match at this very special venue.

Stadium tours are run throughout the year giving people access to parts of Wembley that are usually reserved for our sporting superstars. Check out the changing rooms, players' tunnel, press room and even get down onto the pitch.

There are also a variety of historical items on show at The Crossbar Exhibition, including the 1966 World Cup Final crossbar and some rarely seen winner's medals. Well worth making the trip for.

No matter who you support, many clubs feature their own tours and museums - including the likes of Liverpool FC and Everton, Celtic Football Club and Rangers FC, Spurs and Arsenal as well as Wembley. In fact, you can get discounted tickets to world class football stadium tours across the country, with National Rail's Days Out Guide. You can check this out online.

But not everyone can be lucky enough to get to big matches, especially if they're held abroad. The good news is, that you can still watch football surrounded by passionate supporters at one of Britain's many fan zones.

During bigger matches and tournaments, pop up, outdoor areas in cities and towns across the country show the match on giant screens. Popular fan zones can be found at Liverpool ONE and

in Preston Flag Market. Both are just a 10-minute walk from the train station and allow you to take in the carnival-like atmosphere while you watch the match.

Although we're still waiting for another England men's team trophy success, the women's team are playing at the top of their game. In 2022 England's Lionesses ended the country's 43-year wait for some silverware. In the final of the European Championships at Wembley Stadium, manager Sarina Wiegman's team beat Germany 2-1 with substitute Chloe Kelley scoring the winner deep into extra time.

The team's success has been memorialised all over Britain, with the railways being no exception. Trains were emblazoned with thank you messages to the Lionesses. And the train route between Euston and Watford, via Wembley, was renamed the Lioness Line to celebrate the team's achievement.

And while we're covering the success stories of women's football, now feels like a good time to chat to ex Tottenham and Crystal Palace goalkeeper Chloe Morgan.

[Kirsty] Hi, Chloe. Welcome!

[Chloe] Aw, cheers. Thanks for having me on, Kirsty. I appreciate it.

[Kirsty] Now you're a big advocate of getting girls involved in the game. How did you first get started and what were those early days like?

[Chloe] Well, this was very back in the day. I'm probably showing my age a little bit. But you know this was before social media, this was before Facebook, before Instagram. And it was basically because there were a few boys on the street who used to play football. And we used to play with these like little soft orange and yellow balls. And yeah, I absolutely just loved playing. I didn't kind of see a career in it. I just played because I absolutely loved it. And then throughout school, again, we were kind of fortunate enough to have a girls football team. So I joined that. But that wasn't particularly challenging, I suppose. And then from then I just continued to kind of play at a very grassroots level and, yeah, eventually kind of manage to find myself in Spurs. And we sort of headed into the WSL, which is something I never, ever saw, you know, coming in my journey when I, when I first started playing. But yeah, it was basically through just, yes, street football was my way in.

[Kirsty] That is quite the journey. What was it like though, when you started at Spurs?

[Chloe] I mean, it was completely different to how it is now. Yeah, obviously Spurs have been in the WSL for a number of years now. They've just been in the FA Cup final at Wembley. But back in the day when I started to play for them, we were in the Women's National League, which was tier three and you know, it's a completely different set up. We still had full time jobs. You know, I was still a lawyer at that time, had just become a lawyer. I was also juggling my career with Spurs and kind of whatever direction that was going to take. And, you know, I was having to travel off to work on the train and get into the training grounds three or four times a week. And then obviously, you know, sometimes doing work on the train where I sort of missed maybe things during the day.

So, yeah, it was yeah, it was a really interesting kind of period of time for all of us because we had so much to juggle. But I think it's been amazing really, that we had that fight from the

National League into the championship and now seeing Spurs the WSL is something that we're all super proud of.

[Kirsty] Football has taken you all over the country. What's your favourite stadium that you've been to, would you say?

[Chloe] I mean, I think I've probably got two favourite stadiums. One comes from my playing days and it's a stadium that kind of feels like it has significance for me because it was a moment in time in my career that we were trying to achieve history with Spurs women.

So, in the women's championship and we were trying to get into the WSL, we had to face Aston Villa as our second from last game of the season and we had to get a draw. We were working, all of us working through the day, it was a night game midweek and we had to get on the train. Yes, still working some of us. And yeah, got to the ground. Had this amazing experience. Managed to get the draw, which is incredible. The atmosphere was absolutely insane. My friends and family were there, they took the journey all the way back again. It was, yeah, it was just that moment that I think we really realised what we'd done for the club and what we'd created, which is a beautiful moment for all of us who'd worked so hard throughout the season.

But I think as a fan and not necessarily even as an Arsenal fan, but I've got to say that the Emirates brings the absolute vibes in the women's game. I think when you look at what the stadium kind of brings in terms of the energy, the atmosphere, you go along to the games, there's like groups of, you know, women's football, community fans, supporters, families, women, men all coming together.

It's normally always sunny at the stadium and there's always that beautiful smell of hot dogs as you come out of the train station, you've got the band playing. Yeah, you've got this really lovely energy at the Emirates. So, I definitely think they're probably the best stadium in terms of the women's game.

[Chloe] Tell us, Chloe, in your opinion, how important is it to experience sport in the real world? Actually, be there?

[Kristy] I think it's super important to experience sport in the real world. I think, you know, so much of sport consumption now is online or it's on screens. And I think some of the best experiences that I've ever had in sport in my life have been where I've set down to a pitch. I've been playing with my teammate, where I've seen fans attending the crowd.

I mean, that's a massive one in the women's game where you know that you're being supported by other people who have made the effort to come out and see you. But I think also being present in the women's football community I think is absolutely huge. I mean, you know, being in those spaces, I've made the most amount of friends. I've increased my network in terms of, you know, people that I now go and see all up and down the country to experience those games with.

And I think, you know, like I was saying before about the experiences I've had at the Emirates, I mean, you can't replicate that feeling of actually being in a stadium and listening to the crowd and smelling the hot dog vans and things like that, unless you're actually down at the game. So I'd always back, you know, go into experience and consume football in real life because it's just, you can't really replicate it.

[Kirsty] Absolutely. There's really nothing like, is there? Chloe, thank you so much for joining us now.

[Chloe] Thank you so much for having me. I've really enjoyed it.

Now one of the best bits about football is, you can play it almost anywhere. Get yourself a ball, a couple of jumpers for goalposts and away you go. And with-it being Britain's most popular sport, the grassroots game is everywhere.

Towns and villages often have multiple teams at a variety of levels, with many of them playing in the Sunday Leagues. Sunday League is the cornerstone of amateur football in Britain. The home of which is in Hackney Marshes in London.

This 336-acre site is host to a world record 88 full-size football pitches. Just a 30-minute walk from Stratford International, via the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, lies this amazing site. Typically, over 100 matches are played here on a Sunday and pitches can be booked by teams and individuals alike. So, if you want to watch or play amateur football, then Hackney Marshes is a hub worth visiting.

Now it's plain to see that millions of us are head over heels for the game. And the fact that the growth of the sport and the development of our rail network happened in tandem, means the two are intrinsically linked.

Many teams grew by using trains to travel in the past, and this is just as true today, Marcus Rashford was spotted with his Manchester United teammates travelling by train in February 2023, to attend the Carabao Cup Final against Newcastle.

It's not just travel stories that have linked trains to football either. When the legendary David Beckham, met his wife-to-be, Victoria Adams, she gave him her phone number written on the back of a train ticket. He still has the ticket as a memento to this very day.

And if you've got your own little Beckhams in the making, his grassroots youth team Ridgeway Rovers are still going strong. The club, that also trained a young Harry Kane, is just a 20-minute bus ride from Walthamstow Central and runs teams for 6–17-year-olds. A great option for any budding England stars of the future.

So, at whatever level you want to get involved. Watching, playing or learning about the sport. Just remember that experiencing the game in the real world can be quite the adventure. Because when it comes to sport, nothing beats being there. Visit [nationalrail.co.uk/sportingroutes](https://nationalrail.co.uk/sportingroutes) to discover the rest of our audio series and plan your next journey to watch, learn about and discover new sporting passions by train.