

## [Transcript] The News Agents / Morality in football: should Manchester United bring back Mason Greenwood?

Mason Greenwood has been charged with attempted rape, engaging in controlling and coercive behaviour and assaults occasioning actual bodily harm.

The club moved quickly to suspend him after multiple allegations were published on an Instagram account.

Mason Greenwood, the Manchester United striker, has had charges of attempted rape and assault dropped.

This is more than a year after he was originally arrested.

We're going to talk on this podcast about football, except we're not really talking about football.

I guess we're talking about morality, proper behaviour, whether highly paid sports professionals are on a pedestal and should be held to a different moral level than other people in our society, or whether you just let your football do the talking and don't give a damn about the background, the behaviour of those highly paid professionals.

In a nutshell, that's a decision that Manchester United have to take as they prepare to kick off their season this evening at Old Trafford.

Welcome to the newsagents.

It's John and no Emily and no Lewis who's recovering from his wedding on Saturday.

I might say a little bit more about that at the end of the podcast, but we'll start today with Manchester United, with football, with allegations of rape, with what is acceptable behaviour and what is not, because the case of Mason Greenwood is complicated.

He faced charges, those charges were then dropped after a key witness said she was not going to give evidence.

It's all out there on social media, but frankly, we've taken the view that it is all too horrible to play.

So we're going to stick to what we know about this story.

I should add at the outset that Mason Greenwood has denied all charges that have been levelled against him.

So let's talk now to Adam Crafton from the Athletic website, brilliant football reporter on the wider ethics of football, of what happens on the field, what happens off the field.

And Adam, just take us through the Mason Greenwood story.

Well, I suppose we have to go back to, I suppose to give some context, Mason Greenwood emerged as this teenage sensation, striker at Manchester United, scored a lot of goals as a teenager, broke into the team, started playing for England.

And then around 18 months or so ago, a video emerges on social media.

It was a Sunday morning, and it was probably one of the most shocking things I think most people have seen who follow football or, I mean, really one of the most shocking things you will see, I would say, even on social media.

And it was these secretly recorded moments where Greenwood could be heard shouting at a woman to move her effing legs up and his voice, it sounds threatening, it sounds menacing. The woman replies that she doesn't want to have sex, and Greenwood's tone becomes more menacing again.

And this all led to Greenwood being suspended by Manchester United, a police investigation, and eventually the police and CPS charging, Mason Greenwood.

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And the charges were attempted rape, assault causing actual bodily harm, and engaging in controlling and coercive behaviour, all involving the same woman.

And the prosecution was also saying that Greenwood's behaviour had a really serious effect, that he made threats, derogatory comments, monitored social media accounts, and also altered the way that she socialised.

A Crown Court trial was then scheduled for November, but it didn't happen.

Because the woman dropped the charges?

Essentially, the reason given at the time was that some new material had come to light, and also that key evidence had been withdrawn.

And as a result, they didn't feel that there was a realistic prospect of conviction.

So what did Manchester United do now?

So Manchester United, as soon as the police investigation was dropped, they announced that they were doing their own internal investigation, their own kind of inquiry, a non-legal inquiry, but they wanted, they said, you know, to establish the full facts that led to the complaint being made at the time, to take in any possible context.

But we're now quite a long time on.

I mean, I think we're now almost six months or so on from when Manchester United opened that investigation.

There was a real expectation that Manchester United would announce the verdict of that internal inquiry before the start of the Premier League season.

But Manchester United start their season tonight against Wolves, and as yet nothing has been publicised.

I mean, it's like an episode of The Moral Maze trying to navigate your way through this.

Although he has not been found guilty of anything, and normally if there has been a trial and you're found not guilty, then the club probably have got very little grounds to say, you shouldn't be here.

But as you described so vividly in your first answer, there is the social media material that is out there in the world and people will make their own judgments on his behaviour, whether there is enough to bring a prosecution or not, because the key witness doesn't want to proceed with the case is another matter.

Yeah, and I think this is where it's really unusual.

I mean, how often do we hear about incidents of alleged sexual abuse, alleged rape that either don't bring charges or don't bring convictions?

The difference here is that the public has been exposed to something, and I think a lot of the public appear to have made their mind up, and that's external to a legal process.

And it is, you know, how often do we talk about the Court of Public Opinion, but I don't think that's ever been more true than in this instance, where, you know, I think with time and distance, perhaps people start to just think, oh, it's the Greenwood situation.

But if you go back and hear that audio footage, and if you go back and read those words, I think it's very difficult for people to desensitise themselves away from it, and not only to desensitise themselves, but you're also going to be asking people to potentially cheer for this person.

Right?

And that's how football works, you know.

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You go to a football ground to cheer someone on.

And I think that's also where, you know, there's a straightforward line in terms of the behaviour. Many people would just consider not acceptable, but then on top of that, we're going to go there, sing his name.

But this is interesting, isn't it?

Because here's a 21-year-old kid who just happens to be an incredibly gifted footballer.

Maybe a shit human being.

Who knows?

But he's not trying to become a member of parliament, and he's not a priest.

He's not preaching from a pulpit.

He talked with his feet, and no charges have been brought.

And Manchester United are probably thinking, oh, we'd like to win the premiership, or we want to qualify for the Champions League, and we need the best squad available.

Yeah, and look, I mean, this has been, I think, one of the considerations.

Well, Manchester United would say that they would treat Mason Greenwood exactly the same as they would treat a board member, a scout in this situation.

I think the realistic, you know, and I'm speaking speculatively here, but I think realistically, of course, the talent must come into play.

You know, they have been asking the manager, Eric Tenhag, who said during the tour in the summer that he's given his opinion.

He wouldn't say what that opinion was, which suggests to me that perhaps it means, you know, he might like this player back.

I don't think that's overly speculative to suggest.

And yeah, I mean, there is a, you know, I think most football fans don't expect, you know, footballers to be perfect, right?

You can accept affairs, or you could accept, I don't know, players swearing at referees even or things like that.

But I think surely you then get into the point where it's, OK, so what is actually the point at which you would break ties with someone of supreme talent?

What is that point?

If not this, what is it?

It's such an interesting question and you frame it beautifully.

I suppose the other aspect of this is that whether they like it or not, footballers are sort of role models.

They're paid very large sums of money.

They are very young.

A lot of people dream of becoming a Premier League footballer.

And although they are not asking themselves to be put on a higher moral pedestal than anybody else, whether they like it or not, when they're taking those sort of wages, they are.

They are.

And they are open to an incredible amount of scrutiny.

Some of it, I think, is really fair.

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Others is not fair.

You know, would you want your son, grandson, to have a Mason Greenwood top, your granddaughter

to have a Mason Greenwood top?

You know, I'd sometimes think when it becomes around famous people, we kind of make these discussions perhaps a lot more complicated than they perhaps need to be in the sense of if this was your sister, your daughter, your granddaughter, how would you feel?

And that's a really messy situation.

There's been one other suggestion that I found fascinating slash disturbing slash washing your hands of it was the suggestion that Manchester United might ask the women's football team at Manchester United what they think about it and whether he should play or not, which is like kind of trying to exonerate all responsibility for a decision.

You know, well, it wasn't us who decided it was the women.

Yeah.

So this is something that kind of kicked off a little bit over the weekend.

And I think this is the one place where I would partially defend United in the sense of I don't think it was a briefing from the club to say we're going to speak to the women and then make a decision.

I think it's far more a case of Manchester United viewing this as an employer employee situation to resolve, but they also I think want to I suppose give key stakeholders as they would term it, whether that's in some way fan groups or the women's team, a heads up essentially of what that decision will be and the opportunity for feedback.

But I certainly don't think it's going to be a case of saying to Manchester United's women's team who's going to make that decision.

However, because that story emerged on Friday, it then led to the women's players.

If you go under their Instagram posts, for example, and several of them at the Women's World Cup at the moment, and we're talking here over the weekend before England were playing in the World Cup quarterfinal and you go below the line and you have these Manchester United supporters saying to the Manchester United players who play for England, bring Greenwood back, help Mason back and it's like, I mean, that became a really sort of absurd and quite menacing situation and I think so the male supporters threatening the women players almost, you've got to get behind Mason.

Exactly.

Exactly.

And it's really hot.

One of the things that is really difficult to gaud with all of this is what is the fan sentiment because when you're talking about Manchester United, if you believe what they say in their accounts, you're talking about hundreds of millions of supporters, almost a billion supporters around the world.

Well, okay, how do you categorize what Manchester United fans think therefore?

I think is a really difficult thing.

I think there appears to be a divide between, I suppose, match going fans and certain sections of the online fan base, but clearly it is one which I think is only going to become more

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divisive this call as Manchester United get closer and closer to announcing their decision. If it wasn't worth a hundred million, which seems to be the figure that all top players are now valued at.

And non-top players.

And non-top players that haven't played for very long but seem to suddenly attract those sorts of sums of money, would Manchester United find the decision easier?

I think that's a question only Manchester United can answer.

Do I think it might have been resolved quicker if this was a fringe player or something like that?

Quite possibly.

Ultimately, yes, Manchester United under the Glazer ownership, they don't have a huge amount of leeway this summer to spend huge money in the transfer market.

They've got really one proper senior striker that they've just brought in and maybe they are looking at it and thinking, you know, this guy can be useful for us.

Unfortunately, we don't know very much about what Manchester United is thinking because they don't really communicate publicly on this.

And when you don't communicate publicly on this, you create a vacuum in which people will make conclusions and speculate.

Well, I should say that we've just spoken to Manchester United ourselves and they said that no decision has been made, etc., etc.

I'm going to put you on the spot.

What's your hunch?

My hunch is if you take, for example, the fact that they clearly see the need to be informing different stakeholders before their decision, I don't think they've been worrying about doing that too much.

If the decision was, he's not coming back.

So that at the moment leads me to think in some form, he will still be contracted to Manchester United.

So whether that means a loan move where he goes abroad for a year or something like that, so that they, I suppose, build up his value again and then can sell him next summer or something like that, or if he's just phased back into the team in some way, that at the moment I would expect.

Adam Crafton, thank you so much.

Pleasure.

Thank you.

I'm joined by Em, who is a Manchester United supporter, and I think I'm right in saying Em is going to join the protest this afternoon against Mason Greenwood being allowed to play again for Manchester United.

Why?

For me, it's really important that a club, any club, but particularly Manchester United, you know, one of the biggest clubs in the world, very proud tradition, stands loudly and vocally against any aggression towards women.

We know that it's a big problem in football and has been for a long time, and I think

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the Greenwood scenario is one where there seems to be very clear-cut things that people have seen and heard that I don't want to stay hated by my football club, and I actually think it's pretty terrible for, not just for women, but for male supporters of the club to have that kind of role-modelling condoned, so that's why I'll be there.

And what do you think about the way the club is dealing with it so far?

I'm pretty disappointed, if I'm honest.

It seems to have been very slow, very protracted.

Obviously, last week there was a comment about wanting to consult the club's female players.

I mean, it's pretty terrible in lots of ways, right?

They should have consulted them a long time ago.

They shouldn't be briefing or leaking that kind of stuff to the media, and the fact that players are out playing in the World Cup at the moment is pretty shocking timing.

You know, I've read about England women players getting horrible messages from so-called United fans, right, which kind of makes me feel pretty sick.

I suppose the Manchester United had to wait until the legal process played itself out, and of course, the legal process has played itself out by there being no trial against Mason Green.

Would therefore, there are no charges against him.

I suspect some of those people who are being vile on social media would say, well, he hasn't been convicted of anything, he should be allowed to play for the team.

Yeah, and you know, that's certainly a lot of the commentary I've had.

It's a contract issue.

For me, it's not a contract issue.

It's an ethics issue.

It's a morality issue.

Football and clubs have gotten an enormous amount of importance to people in this country, in the world.

And, okay, a process is a process, and a contract is a contract, but for me, if we're going to move the sport forward in terms of proper respect for DEIs, then you've got to take a more grown-up stance on this, right?

I would hope that they find a way to back supporters, because certainly most supporters who live in Manchester and go to the game don't want him to play.

And just, DEI is diversity and inclusion, yeah?

Yeah, yeah.

What sort of pressure has there been on those people who think that Mason Greenwood should not return to the club?

And you talked about messages being left for Manchester United women players and the England players as they prepare to face Australia on Wednesday night.

I mean, is it a toxic atmosphere?

It is.

Media, particularly for women, is toxic all of the time, it seems.

But certainly, you know, I've encountered people probably more in the kind of everyday sexism, telling me that I'm stupid, stupid woman, get yourself educated, stuff like that.

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And you know, I spent most of last night just blocking accounts that quite clearly only had, you know, 10 followers or whatever.

So for women to feel safe in sport, to feel included in sport, we've got to make sure that football is welcoming to everybody.

In no way seeking to defend all those horrid things that were on that tape of Mason Greenwood.

Is there any argument that says he's a kid, he's 21 years old, he needs to learn, he needs to grow up, he needs to mature, but he shouldn't have his whole life defined by this?

This is not any job.

This is playing for, in my opinion, the greatest football club in the world.

That's an honour.

That's an honour.

I expect players who play for my club to uphold correct behaviour in all parts of their lives as far as possible.

Right?

Yes, he's human.

Yes, he's young.

But, you know, this isn't a job for everybody, it's a job for the best people.

And if, if Manchester United decides that they're going to honour his contract and he is selected and he comes out onto the field, what then for you?

What will it make you feel?

Will it make you question your support for Manchester United?

What?

I've said to a lot of my friends that I'll walk away from the club if this happens.

You know, I'm 40 years old, I've supported the club for the best part of those 40 years.

I'll give very long hard thought to walking away from the club, which again is, is, is pretty sad.

I'll have to find quite a lot more things to do with my time.

Do you think you are a minority, a majority?

Have you got any sense of what percentage of public opinion you speak for?

I think there is support and there is vocal support.

I have a lot of female United friends and it's them who've encouraged me to come tonight, Monday night, eight o'clock, it's not the ideal way to stop football season, but to, to go down and join the protest, it was actually women, as it so often is, who are driving this.

And, you know, I know there's an organisation of female fans against Manchester Greenwood.

If you've put out statements and are driving the protest this evening, I'd like to see more men be vocal about it.

Some of them are and we're, we're incredibly grateful and proud of them for doing that.

But, you know, there is a lot of silent acceptance.

My primary sense is that in Manchester, people who go to the games, they don't want them to play.

How that plays out on Twitter and the rest of the world, I'm not quite so sure.

Look, you did say to us, you didn't want us to use your full name because of, you know,

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fears of safety and the abuse that you'll get.

Do you feel it in any way intimidated to be going out to protest this evening?

Yeah, absolutely.

Absolutely.

And, you know, my, my husband, who's an Arsenal fan, depressingly, is actually going to come with me because he's, he's a bit worried about me.

He also believes in the cause.

That's why I married him.

My trust is in Manchester.

I believe that people who will be outside the ground will be people who go to the match, match going, mancunians, and I think, I think they'll have my back.

So I'm not worried about it, but the fact it's made me think, I think tells the story.

Thank you so much.

No worries.

Take care.

And obviously we'll be watching what happens at that protest tonight closely in a moment.

We'll be back talking the NHS and targets for treating cancer patients.

This is the news agents.

Welcome back.

Now, after the hugely successful Stop the Boats week last week, I hope you can detect the irony in my voice at that, the government seems to be having NHS week this week.

And already one of the first things that the government is talking about is streamlining targets for waiting times for patients who may have cancer in England.

Now the health service is trying to say that this aims to catch cancers earlier, but how can that be when it seems to be that the scrapping of these targets might mean that you're going to have to wait longer before you have a first specialist appointment with a consultant if you think you may have a cancer?

And that is a question we're going to discuss now with former Conservative Health Secretary Stephen Dorrell, who then went on to be chair of the Health Select Committee when David Cameron was Prime Minister and Stephen Dorrell.

Very good to talk to you.

What do you make of the decision apparently coming that waiting time targets are expected to be scrapped in England in many cases?

Well, I think it's important to be clear here what the real issue is.

I think the government are actually right when they say that I think it's 10 targets at the moment are unnecessarily complicated.

And that's certainly a view that's been often expressed, not just by NHS management, but by clinicians as well.

The real issue is not so much the number of targets, sometimes addressed the wrong issues and most important of all, that they're regularly missed.

Are we going to be better off or worse off as a result of these changes that the government is apparently agreeing with health professionals?

I don't think changing the target will change anything.



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What will make cancer patients better off is receiving prompt diagnosis.

And when the diagnosis says treatment is necessary, prompt treatment, it's meeting the targets that matters, not setting the targets.

And is that a question of resources or a question of priorities and better organization?

I think the truthful answer is both.

We all know that the health services unable to meet the demands placed upon it with the resources currently available.

But having said that, there is also considerable scope for using those resources more effectively.

So did we go a bit target mad then in the 90s and the 90s, where it was very on train to say, you've got to see a GP every now and then about this, you've got to be tested for that.

And then you've got to do all these different things, which set up a whole series of pointless encounters.

Yes, I think that is true.

I actually think targets are an important part of calling any service, public service or indeed a privately paid for service, to account.

They're important because they look at the service from the point of view of the person who uses it.

So to take, for example, one of the issues under discussion on cancer targets, if you see a GP and the GP tells you there's a serious risk you have a cancer developing, that's an issue of huge concern to you and your family.

And you want to see the specialist as quickly as possible.

That's what lies behind the two week wait.

Now, the government are proposing, as I understand it, with the support of the profession to move that so that you won't any longer be told you can see a specialist within two weeks.

You'll be told that you will have an answer, but that will take four weeks, not two.

Because beyond the two weeks, there was always a period of waiting while the diagnosis was completed.

Now, I think that's reasonable, but what is important is that looking at the service from the point of view of the individual who's told that they may have a life-limiting disease, you need to have an answer quickly and to get an answer within a month.

That's still a month.

Goodness me, just imagine if you'd been told you had cancer, being told in the next breath, you have to wait a month before you know whether you've got cancer.

That's going to seem the longest month of your life.

Of course.

And there will be the suspicion, among many, that this is being driven not by clinical need but political expediency, that it gives the government a bit more breathing space and it gives consultants a bit more breathing space.

Yes.

And I think that's a completely proper question to ask.

As you know, John, I'm no longer a conservative and I'm not a particular apologist for this government, but I do think they're right to ensure that this subject is led by the clinicians.

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But then professional view of clinicians is tested against what it feels like to be a patient.

Now, if the truth is that the quickest we can get a definitive answer is one month.

We don't actually do ourselves any favours if we try to set targets that are undeliverable.

But there have to be these kind of targets.

And most importantly, not just there has to be targets, they have to be met.

But also, if you are a patient and you've very correctly made this patient focused in your response to what the government is saying, you want to see someone as quickly as possible, and it's all very well for the GP to say that, but you want the cancer specialist.

You want the oncologist who is there to tell you, and if you're going to have to wait longer to see that person, that's awful.

That's true, but what's even worth is that if you're going to have to wait unnecessarily long for an answer, it's the answer you need.

I mean, go back, put yourself in the position of somebody who's been told the GP thinks there's a serious risk they've got cancer.

What you need is not just to see somebody, but to be given an answer.

The question that I think needs to be asked is, what's the shortest time it's reasonable to expect the National Health Service to give a definitive answer to that question effectively posed for the patient by the GP?

And if it's a month, of course, prefer it to be shorter, but let's start with a month and ratchet it up rather than as we've been doing recently.

See, take another target, another important target, actually, that if there's a diagnosis and you do need treatment, the current NHS target, which is not, as I understand it, proposed to be changed, is that you must start treatment within two months.

Now, of that period, take that target, fewer than 60% of patients who are told they need treatment actually start their treatment within two months.

The target is 85%.

I wouldn't want to be one of the 15%, even if the target was being hit.

But at the moment, if I was told I needed treatment and I was put on a course for treatment, I'd have little better than a 50-50 chance of starting treatment within two months.

That's appalling.

What is the answer?

The answer must be to prioritize resources towards the urgent cases.

And that does require targets, accurately judged targets.

And then it requires the system to respond and meet those targets and for it to be properly resourced to do so.

That's, of course, it's partly about money.

It's also about making certain you've got the right number of the properly qualified staff available, preferably not on strike, so that patient needs can be met.

Stephen Dorrell, I'm grateful to you.

Thank you very much indeed.

Thank you.

And if you're waiting for me to dish the dirt on Lewis Goodall's wedding, don't go away.

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Welcome back.

And before I go, as promised, my first-person report on the Lewis Goodall wedding.

It was glorious, fabulous venue in South London, lovely warm atmosphere, bit quirky in places, Norway, meeting England.

It was fabulous.

And speeches that were to die for.

Best man speech from Richie, extraordinary.

However, I think because of the libel laws, I better not repeat some of what he said because frankly it would be an ugly look if one news agent was to sue the other for defamation.

So I won't mention anything about the detail of Richie's speech.

I will instead focus on the two maids of honour and their joint speech because they recounted the moment that Lewis met his future to be wife.

They met in a pub.

There was a spark.

The conversation flowed.

They got on like a house on fire and it was clear there was an attraction between the two of them.

And she says, in all innocence, like you do, so what do you do?

And he said, Google me.

Oh, and see how many Twitter followers I've got.

Really Lewis?

Really?

Is that what you did?

We'll be back tomorrow.

See you then.

Bye-bye.

This has been a Global Player original podcast and a Persephoneka production.