

If you're a fan of the Sunday league or those quick five-a-side football sessions, you'll know the thrill of stepping onto the pitch—until that familiar ache or swelling creeps into your old ankle injury. You might wonder, "Why is my ankle swelling again? I thought I'd gotten past this." As someone who's been around the changing rooms and rehab bays for over a decade and understands the football culture inside out, I get it. The answer isn't always straightforward, but knowing what's happening inside your ankle and what you can do about it will help you manage, play smarter, and avoid long-term issues like persistent pain or even arthritis.

Football Culture and the Stigma Around Reporting Pain

First off, let's be honest about football culture. The old-school mentality of "playing through the pain" or "shrugging off an injury" is still alive and kicking—even when it really shouldn't be. How many times have you heard a mate say, "It's just soreness, I'll be fine," or seen players hide pain in warm-downs? Coaches still sometimes punish players for backing off, thinking they're soft. This culture doesn't help anyone, especially when it comes to old injuries that might be quietly deteriorating while you ignore them.

Swelling after five-a-side or any load-bearing activity often signals that your ankle is struggling to cope. It's not weakness; it's your body waving a flag saying, "Hey, we've got an issue here." Ignoring these warning signs can lead to persistent pain or worse problems like post traumatic ankle arthritis.

Understanding the Long-Term Outcomes: Post Traumatic Ankle Arthritis and Persistent Pain

An old ankle injury isn't just a memory—it can have consequences years down the line. One of the most common long-term outcomes is **post traumatic ankle arthritis**, a condition where the joint cartilage gradually wears away after an injury, leading to pain, swelling, and reduced movement.

Osteoarthritis in the ankle can sometimes appear earlier in footballers who've had ligament damage, fractures, or repeated sprains. The repeated trauma, even if mild—like those quick turns and tackles in five-a-side—adds up over time.

Alongside arthritis, many fans and players deal with **persistent pain**. This isn't just a physical problem. It's influenced by how your nerves interpret pain signals, sometimes amplifying discomfort even when the initial injury has healed as best as it can.

What's Really Happening in Your Ankle? The Mechanisms Behind Swelling and Pain

Why does swelling pop up after playing, especially with an old injury? Let's break down the key mechanisms at play.

1. Imperfect Healing

When you first injured your ankle, whether it was a sprain or a minor fracture, healing started immediately. But healing doesn't always restore the ankle to its pre-injury strength or function. Scar tissue forms instead of normal ligament or cartilage, which isn't as robust or flexible. This leaves your joint more vulnerable to stress, making swelling more likely when you load it during the game.

2. Cumulative Loading

Football isn't gentle on your ankles. The repeated jumps, cuts, sprints, and even the odd knock all add up. With each session, you add "wear and tear," especially if your ankle wasn't fully rehabilitated or has been unstable since the injury. Over time, this cumulative loading aggravates your ankle joint, resulting in inflammation and swelling after matches.

3. Central Sensitisation

This is where it gets a bit tricky but important to understand. Central sensitisation means your nervous system becomes more sensitive to pain signals. Even a small, normal amount of joint irritation gets interpreted by your brain as more painful or swollen than it might objectively be. This explains why sometimes the pain lingers or swelling feels worse after playing, even if the ankle looks okay structurally.

Active Rehab: What Actually Helps With Football Ankle Pain and Swelling?

Here's a phrase I've heard too many times and hate: "Just rest it." If only it were that simple. Rest alone won't fix imperfect healing or prevent cumulative loading harm. Instead, building a simple, consistent rehab routine that involves graded exercise and strengthening makes a difference.

Graded Exercise

- Start with low-impact activities to restore joint motion and reduce swelling.
- Progress gradually to weight-bearing exercises, like heel raises or balance drills.
- Include football-specific drills as your ankle strengthens, giving your body time to adapt.

Strengthening

Stronger muscles around your ankle help absorb shocks and stabilise the joint, reducing stress on ligaments. Focus on:

- **Calf muscles:** Heel raises and eccentric lowering.
- **Peroneal muscles (outside of the ankle):** Resistance band eversion exercises.
- **Balance work:** Single-leg stands and wobble board exercises.

Breaking this down into manageable chunks and sticking to it is key—consistency beats doing a load in one go and getting discouraged or reinjuring yourself.

Additional Support: Medical Cannabis and Private Clinic Pathways

Some players I've worked with have started enquiring about UK Anti-Doping (UKAD) guidelines on substances like medical cannabis for pain management. It's important to check carefully before considering any medical cannabis products because, while private clinics offer pathways for accessing these treatments, footballers must ensure compliance with doping regulations.



Medical cannabis can help some with chronic pain by reducing inflammation and modulating nerve sensitivity, but it's not a quick fix. Always seek expert medical advice and refer to the UKAD Therapeutic Use Exemption (TUE) process if you're competing at a level where anti-doping rules <https://www.pieandbovril.com/general/from-the-terraces-to-the-physio-room-how-football-deals-with-chronic-pain> apply.

Summary Table: Causes and Solutions for Old Ankle Injury Swelling in Football

Cause	Description	Recommended Actions
Imperfect Healing	Scar tissue replaces normal tissue leading to reduced ankle stability.	Active rehab focusing on strength and proprioception to reinforce ankle support.
Cumulative Loading	Repeated football motions aggravate the joint, causing inflammation and swelling.	Gradual training progression, using supports if necessary, and managing volume.
Central Sensitisation	Nervous system amplifies pain and swelling sensations beyond physical damage.	Pain education, graded exposure to activity, and potentially medical management.
Football Culture Stigma	Pressure to "play through pain" leads to unreported or unmanaged injuries.	Changing mindset, honest communication with coaches and medical staff.

Final Thoughts

Old ankle injury swelling after five-a-side football isn't simply "something to live with." It's a signal your body needs a bit of care and respect. Football culture might have pushed you to ignore pain in the past, but the best players look after their bodies to play longer and better.

Focus on understanding why your ankle swells, adopt a consistent active rehab routine that suits your level, and don't be afraid to seek help if the pain or swelling sticks around. And remember, "rest" is part of the puzzle but not the whole game. Strength, balance, and gradual loading win the long match against post traumatic ankle arthritis and persistent football ankle pain.

For more guidance on safe treatment pathways and managing supplements or medications in sport, always check the UK Anti-Doping website.