

If you've been following lower-league football as long as I have — and had a career or years of playing under your belt — you've probably noticed something peculiar: your knees start acting up when the weather turns cold, especially on those long away days. That ache that used to be just a niggle creeps in deeper, and standing on concrete terraces feels like a challenge in itself.

This post unpacks why that happens, focusing on the kind of knee pain we see cropping up after years of playing or supporting football. We'll look at football culture's role in how pain is reported (and ignored), what's really going on inside your knee joint, and what you can do to put yourself in a better position to enjoy matchdays rather than dread them. Plus, I'll run through some resources and treatment routes you might find useful.

Football Culture and the Stigma Around Reporting Pain

First up, let's talk football culture — because how we react to pain influences what happens next. For decades, the ingrained mindset in football, especially at the semi-pro and lower-league levels, has been that reporting pain or discomfort is a sign of weakness. Players and fans alike grow up hearing that pain is “part of the game.”

That leads to:

- Players hiding injuries or niggles to keep playing.
- Fans dismissing knee soreness as just ‘getting old’ — not something worth addressing.
- Coaches and medics not encouraging honest conversations about pain for fear of ‘softness’ or losing players.

This stigma delays proper assessment and rehab, setting up many for long-term knee problems. I'm all for grit and passion, but years in changing rooms taught me ignoring or downplaying persistent pain often makes things worse, not better.

What Is Going On Inside Your Knee?

You're wondering why that ache worsens on cold away days. Let's break down key mechanisms behind chronic knee pain after sport, especially in older fans and ex-players.

1. Imperfect Healing — The Body Never Gets It 100%

Years of running, twisting, tackling, and occasionally landing wrong take their toll. Injuries don't often “heal perfectly”. Instead, tiny scars and weak spots can stick around inside the joint.

When temperature drops, joints tend to stiffen up because blood flow slows and tissues get less elastic. Old scars or previously injured tissues become less forgiving, leading to that familiar ache when you're standing for ages or trudging across cold terraces.

2. Cumulative Loading — The Wear and Tear Isn't Just Age

You might hear “it's just osteoarthritis” and assume it's inevitable as you get older. Osteoarthritis is indeed common in people with a history of knee injury and repetitive loading — standing, jumping, tackling — common in football.



What happens is cartilage wears down over time. Cartilage doesn't regenerate well. So, the more cumulative load your knee has seen, the more likely you are to develop rough spots that create pain and inflammation.

3. Central Sensitisation — When Your Nervous System Joins the Party

Ever notice how sometimes your knee aches even without a clear recent [ankle pain years after sprain](#) injury? Or the pain lingers long after the match? This can be due to central sensitisation — a condition where the nerves in your spinal cord and brain become extra sensitive to pain signals.

This means your brain might interpret normal sensations as painful or ramp up the intensity of pain signals. Cold weather can influence this system too, making your knees feel worse than the physical damage alone would explain.

Standing at Football Matches and Pain: Why Is It So Tough?

Standing on hard, cold terraces for hours is an endurance test for your knees. When you're younger and tissues are more resilient, it's manageable. But as years pile up, that sustained weightbearing becomes a trigger for pain flare-ups.

This pain happens because:

- Joint surfaces under constant pressure start to wear.
- Inflamed tissues tighten, reducing joint mobility.
- Muscles controlling the knee lose strength and don't support the joint as well.
- Nerves become sensitised, amplifying discomfort.

If you find you're often sitting or limping when you want to be enjoying your team, that signals your knees are sending an urgent message to slow down and take action.

Long-Term Outcomes: Osteoarthritis and Persistent Pain

Being proactive about knee pain is important. Without appropriate management, persistent knee pain can develop into:

- **Osteoarthritis (OA):** The breakdown of cartilage and changes in the bone that cause joint stiffness, swelling, and pain — especially in cold weather or after prolonged standing.
- **Chronic pain syndromes:** Where pain continues beyond tissue healing, often linked to central sensitisation and how your nervous system processes pain signals.

Knowing why pain worsens can help you focus on strategies that target the root issues — not just masking the symptoms.

Active Rehab: The Best Way Forward

Here's the clincher: "Just resting it" isn't enough, and in fact, can make knee aches worse over time. Long-term outcomes improve when you engage in active, graded rehab that addresses strength, flexibility, and pain processing.



Graded Exercise and Strengthening

Instead of suddenly pushing through pain on a cold matchday, try a consistent routine that gradually builds your knee resilience. This should include:

1. **Low-impact strengthening:** Exercises like seated knee extensions, straight leg raises, or using resistance bands to build quad and hamstring strength without overloading joints.
2. **Balance and proprioception:** Simple one-legged stands or wobble boards help improve joint stability and reduce injury risk.
3. **Stretching:** Gently loosening tight calf, hamstring, and thigh muscles to maintain mobility.
4. **Gradual load increase:** Slowly increasing standing or walking durations rather than jumping into long away days cold turkey.

Consistency is key — these small efforts protect your knee from cumulative damage and reduce pain sensitisation.

Additional Resources and Medical Pathways

For those wondering about supplementing rehab or exploring all options, here are some useful tools and pathways:

UK Anti-Doping (UKAD) Guidance

If you are an active player or involved in any level where anti-doping rules apply, it's crucial to check what medications or supplements are permitted. Chronic knee pain sufferers often look at anti-inflammatory meds, but some treatments may require exemptions. The official UKAD website offers clear guidance.

Private Clinic Pathway for Medical Cannabis

Medical cannabis is emerging as an option for persistent pain unresponsive to conventional drugs. Some private clinics now offer assessment and prescribing pathways if appropriate — importantly, this is not a first-line treatment and should be done under specialist supervision to consider risks and benefits.

Practical Tips For Cold Away Days

- **Wear layered, warm clothing:** Keep knees warm with compression sleeves or thermal leggings under your jeans.
- **Support your knees:** Use a brace or strapping for extra joint stability if you know you'll be standing and walking a lot.
- **Keep moving:** Avoid standing completely still for long stretches—try small steps or shifts in weight to keep blood flowing.
- **Use heat packs beforehand:** Applying warmth before the match can help loosen stiff joints and reduce morning stiffness.
- **Plan recovery:** Ice or compression after the day and gentle stretching soothe aches and prevent flare-ups.

FAQ – What Changed in the Last 6 Weeks?

I always ask this question because new or worsening pain means something in your routine, activity level, or body's condition has shifted:

- Increased standing or walking? New job or hobbies?
- Longer or colder away days than usual?
- Recent injury or flare-up ignored?
- Changes in footwear or support gear?

Pinpointing these can guide your rehab and pain management choices better than vague advice like “rest it and see.”

Summary

Your knees ache more on cold away days now you're older because of a mix of football culture that has traditionally discouraged open discussion about pain, biological changes inside the joint from imperfect healing and cumulative load, and nervous system sensitisation. Standing on cold, hard surfaces amplifies these issues.

The good news? Active rehab with graded strengthening, improving joint support and mobility, and practical cold-weather strategies can help reduce pain and maintain your enjoyment of football for years to come. Don't buy into the myth that pain is just “part of the club” or something you have to silently tolerate.

For treatments beyond standard rehab, always check with professionals regarding permitted medications or cutting-edge options like medical cannabis through regulated clinics, and review resources such as the UK Anti-Doping website to stay informed if you're still playing.

Remember — your knees have carried you through games, seasons, and unforgettable moments. Now it's time to carry them, too—with respect and care.

Written by a former semi-pro footballer turned MSK physio assistant, inspired by over a decade in football changing rooms and rehab bays.