

# The ‘Nearby’ in Football: How Amateur Leagues Reconnect Urban Communities in Jiangsu

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**Abstract:** In the cities of Jiangsu, amateur football leagues are unexpectedly helping people rebuild community connections. As modern life becomes increasingly fast-paced and digitalized, many urban residents live in the same building yet remain strangers, with neighborhood ties growing weaker. However, through weekly football matches, neighbors who were once unfamiliar gradually become friends, and people of different professions, ages, and backgrounds find common ground on the same field. This phenomenon aligns with scholar Xiang Biao’s concept of “the nearby”—the idea that genuine community bonds often emerge from seemingly ordinary face-to-face interactions in daily life. By observing amateur football activities in multiple Jiangsu cities, this study explores how these spontaneous football communities help urban residents rebuild a sense of belonging and examines their implications for urban community development.

**Keywords:** amateur football; urban community; social connection; the nearby; Jiangsu

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## 1. Introduction

On a Nanjing Saturday morning, strangers gradually fill a community pitch—office workers, chefs, students, and retirees. What begins as a casual kickabout evolves into spirited matches, then shared meals where talk ranges from football to neighborhood life. This scene repeats across Jiangsu, where amateur football is quietly reviving the “nearby”—real-world connections fading in our digital age. While we message globally, many don’t know their next-door neighbors. Football changes that organically: no expensive facilities needed, just a ball and open space transforming strangers into friends through repeated shared moments. The Jiangsu Community League (JSCL) exemplifies this phenomenon. When student-athletes, delivery workers, and programmers play side by side, the pitch becomes a mosaic of urban life—melding identities, bridging economic divides, and sparking collective nostalgia. Our research explores how these spontaneous games succeed where urban planning often fails: Creating egalitarian spaces where job titles don’t matter; Turning casual encounters into lasting community bonds; Offering offline antidotes to digital isolation. Through participants’ stories, we’ll uncover how football’s simple magic—the pass that becomes a conversation, the match that sparks a friendship—helps rebuild what modern cities have lost: the art of belonging.

With accelerating urbanization, a growing number of people are exposed to mental health risk factors stemming from both the social and physical urban environment. A 2024 report on urban mental health in China indicates that in major cities like Beijing and Shanghai, 68% of residents spend fewer than five hours per week meeting friends or family face-to-

face—a stark increase from just 23% in 2000.

## **2. The Disappearing “Nearby”: How Cities Are Losing Community**

### **2.1. Broken Spaces, Broken Connections**

China’s rapid urbanization has created “closed-off” neighborhoods. Government data shows 89% of new housing complexes now have gated security, compared to far fewer in the past. This physical separation weakens social bonds—a 2025 survey found 72% of city residents don’t even know three neighbors by name (in 1995, only 18% didn’t). Scholar Xiang Biao’s idea of the “disappearing nearby” is clear here: when homes are locked behind security gates, natural neighborly interactions vanish<sup>[1]</sup>.

For example, a new neighborhood in Hangzhou has gyms and playgrounds, but its group chat is mostly complaints to the property manager—almost no one helps each other. Yet, football changes this. In Chengdu’s community leagues, 91% of players say they’ve actually connected with neighbors through games—proving real-world activities beat online small talk.

### **2.2. No Time for People**

Long work hours and commutes are stealing time for social life. In major cities, people average 10-hour workdays plus 1.5-hour commutes—leaving little room for friends. A study found 63% of office workers meet friends offline less than twice a week, with many only texting. One Hangzhou tech worker admitted: “We don’t even have time for dinner together, let alone community events.”

Yet after just three rounds, the competition - dubbed the “Su Super League” by netizens - has become a cultural force. Single-game attendance peaked at 22,613 during a June 1 match in Yancheng - a figure nearing the average attendance of the 2025 Chinese Super League (CSL) season - while related content on Douyin, the Chinese version of TikTok, has surpassed 900 million views. But football finds a way. Shanghai’s “Office Workers Football League” meets early on weekends—members say “two hours on the field relieves stress better than any app.” By carving out small, regular time slots, they turn sport into real friendships<sup>[2]</sup>.

### **2.3. The Social Media Illusion**

We’re constantly “connected” online, but truly alone. While the average WeChat user sends 127 messages daily, 83% are just emojis or likes. Young people spend 9+ hours daily on phones but confess: “I have 50+ online friends but maybe 3 real ones.”

Football offers a fix. In Chengdu, fans who watch games together in person form closer bonds—89% gain 5+ meaningful friendships in six months. On the field, they relearn eye contact, teamwork, and real laughter—things screens can’t replace.

Our phones keep us busy with constant notifications, but leave us feeling strangely empty. We scroll through hundreds of posts, yet miss the warmth of real conversation. Football cuts through this digital fog in the simplest way possible - by getting people together in person, face to face, sharing actual experiences.

In Chengdu’s football communities, something magical happens when people put down their phones and focus on the game together. Strangers become friends not through online profiles, but through shared moments - cheering the same goal, groaning at the same missed shot, celebrating victories and consoling defeats together. These aren’t superficial connections measured in likes, but real bonds built through: High-fives after a great play; Casual chats during halftime; Inside jokes that develop over seasons; The difference shows in small but important ways. Online, we carefully curate what we share. On the sidelines, people see the real you - your excitement, your frustration, your unfiltered reactions. That authenticity creates trust no filter can match<sup>[3]</sup>.

This explains why football friendships last. When you’ve stood together in the rain to watch a match, or celebrated

a last-minute winner with hugs and shouts, you create memories that stick. Unlike digital friendships that fade when algorithms change, these bonds remain strong because they're built on shared experiences, not just shared interests.

Perhaps most importantly, football reminds us how to be fully present. There's no multitasking during an exciting game - you're completely focused on the moment, the people around you, the energy of the crowd. In a world of constant distractions, these moments of undivided attention become rare gifts we give each other.

The lesson is clear: real connection requires looking up from our screens. Football provides the perfect excuse to do just that - not by rejecting technology, but by offering something better. When given the choice between another hour of scrolling or ninety minutes of shared excitement with real people, more and more city dwellers are choosing the latter. And their communities are stronger for it.

### **3. Football as a Tool to Rebuild “The Nearby”**

#### **3.1. Fields as Community Hubs: Revitalizing Urban Spaces**

Nowadays, cities where public spaces are disappearing, football fields are bringing neighborhoods back to life in special ways. A recent government report shows China only has about one-third of a football field per 10,000 people - that's how rare these spaces are. But this scarcity actually makes people use them smarter. Take Hangzhou's Gongshu District for example: they turned an old abandoned factory area into a community football park. Before, fewer than 50 people visited daily. Now? The place is packed - 92% full on weekday evenings, with over 800 visitors every weekend<sup>[4]</sup>.

But it's not just about playing football. Parents chat on benches while watching their kids play. The hallway near the locker rooms has become a spot for people to trade used items. There's even a football-themed café where players gather after games. As scholar Xiang Biao says, these fields take on new meaning - they're not just places to play sports, but become the heart of the neighborhood where people connect. Research in Chengdu's Phoenix Hill Sports Park found people interact with neighbors 3.7 times more around football fields than at regular community centers. These simple fields are quietly changing how city life works. But the true magic of these football fields lies in all the unexpected ways they bring people together. On any given evening, you'll see mothers exchanging parenting tips while their children chase the ball, retired teachers offering informal coaching to teenagers, and local shop owners bringing homemade snacks to share. The field becomes a living room for the entire neighborhood - a place where connections form naturally without forced introductions or awkward small talk.

What makes these spaces so special is how they adapt to people's needs. During weekdays, the fields host morning exercise groups for seniors and after-school programs for kids. On weekends, they transform into vibrant marketplaces where residents sell homemade crafts and garden produce between matches. In one creative example, a Nanjing community installed movable goals that convert the pitch into an open-air cinema at night, complete with blankets spread across the grass for families to enjoy movies under the stars.

The economic benefits are just as remarkable. Small businesses naturally flourish around these hubs - from the enterprising teen who sets up a lemonade stand during tournaments to the retired chef who started a successful baozi stall catering to hungry players. In Suzhou, three adjacent football fields have spawned an entire “sports economy” block featuring repair shops for cleats, a physiotherapy clinic, and even a bookstore specializing in sports memoirs.

#### **3.2. The Power of Self-Organization**

Something amazing happens when people come together to play football - they naturally learn to organize themselves and build trust with strangers. The best example is Shanghai's “Alley Football League” that's been running successfully for 12 years without any government involvement. The players themselves handle everything - making schedules, solving disagreements, and collecting fees to keep the games going<sup>[5]</sup>.

This isn't just a Shanghai thing. A 2025 study of 38 amateur leagues across China found that 89% operate completely independently, with 76% having clear systems for managing money and resolving conflicts. But what's really special is

how these football skills translate to real life. When COVID hit, one Hangzhou team captain organized his players to help their neighborhood - and they actually worked together more effectively than the official community committee.

This shows the powerful life lessons football teaches. The cooperation and problem-solving skills players develop on the field naturally carry over into their communities. As scholar Xiang Biao observed, these aren't just sports skills - they're life skills that make entire neighborhoods stronger and more connected. The football field becomes a classroom where people learn how to work together, and those lessons stay with them long after the game ends. The beautiful part? No one's consciously "learning community skills." They're just playing football. Yet somehow, through shared struggles and triumphs, people graduate from being teammates to being true neighbors- the kind who notice if your lights are off too long, who water your plants during vacations, who become family beyond family.

In the end, these muddy fields may be our most effective classrooms. Without lectures or textbooks, they teach us how to depend on each other - lesson by lesson, game by game, until one day we look around and realize we've built that elusive thing we all crave: a place that feels like home.

### **3.3. Social Networks That Go Beyond the Game**

Football creates friendships that go far beyond the game itself. In Chengdu's "Football Fans Home" community, researchers found that 89% of fans who watched games together in person made at least 5 close friends within six months - and 63% of these friendships led to job opportunities or helping each other with daily life. Like ripples spreading in water, these football connections reach into many parts of life - from sharing meals together to organizing activities for kids and community service projects<sup>[6]</sup>.

One amateur team in Hangzhou shows how powerful this can be - besides playing weekly matches, the teammates started a neighborhood canteen, coached football for left-behind children, and even helped two members' companies do business together. In our digital age where most connections happen online, these real-world football friendships are much stronger - a Peking University study found football friends interact 4 times more often than WeChat contacts and provide nearly 4 times more emotional support. When the cheers on the football field turn into discussions about improving their neighborhood, it proves something important: real-life friendships create trust and belonging that no app or algorithm can ever replace.

## **4. Football's Multiple Connection Benefits**

### **4.1. Breaking Down Walls Between People**

Football has a magic way of tearing down the invisible walls that separate us. In cities where people often judge each other by their jobs, degrees, or bank accounts, the football field is one of the few places where everyone is equal—just players chasing the same ball. A CEO might pass to a delivery guy, a teacher might high-five a street vendor, and for those 90 minutes, none of that other stuff matters<sup>[7]</sup>.

This is what scholar Xiang Biao calls "finding connection in the everyday"—when people from totally different worlds share a game, they start to see each other as human beings, not just labels. Our neighborhoods could use more of this. Instead of living side by side as strangers, we need more chances to come together over simple things—whether it's pickup games, block parties, or just sharing a meal. Because when we actually meet, our differences stop being barriers and start being bridges<sup>[8]</sup>.

### **4.2. Connecting Generations**

Football fields are where old and young unexpectedly find common ground. In a world where kids live on their phones and grandparents often feel left behind, the game gives them a language to speak to each other. A grandpa teaching his grandson how to curve a shot, a middle-aged player learning new tricks from a teenager—these little moments stitch generations together without anyone even realizing it<sup>[9]</sup>.

The lesson here? Communities thrive when they create spaces where ages mix naturally. It doesn't have to be football—it could be community gardens, storytelling nights, or even just benches where people actually stop to talk. When different generations share experiences, the whole neighborhood feels warmer, like a family rather than just a zip code<sup>[10]</sup>.

### 4.3. Rebuilding Trust, One Game at a Time

Football teaches us how trust is built—not in big speeches, but in small, everyday actions: showing up on time, playing fair, and helping a teammate up after a fall. Neighborhoods work the same way. When people come together to take care of a field, organize a tournament, or just cheer from the sidelines, they're not just building a team—they're rebuilding the kind of trust that makes a community strong<sup>[11]</sup>.

This “football effect” spills into daily life. People who play together start looking out for each other—maybe fixing a neighbor's fence, watching each other's kids, or teaming up to clean the park. Local leaders should take note: the secret isn't fancy programs, but simple, shared activities where people can work side by side. Because when neighbors have something to care about together—whether it's a patch of grass or a block party—they start acting less like strangers and more like teammates<sup>[12]</sup>.

The best communities aren't built by rules or policies, but by giving people chances to connect. This is the bigger picture: beyond the structures of governance, it is the organic, human bonds that shape the soul of a neighborhood. A football field where kids chase a ball until dusk, a community garden where neighbors swap seeds and stories, a street festival where music mingles with the scent of shared meals—these aren't just nice extras. They're the glue that turns a bunch of houses into a real neighborhood<sup>[13]</sup>.

Football's greatest triumph isn't measured in goals or trophies—it's found in the unspoken bonds it creates between people. In a world that often feels divided, the game offers something rare: a reminder that beneath our differences, we all crave connection. Whether it's kids laughing in a dusty lot or strangers becoming teammates in a weekend league, football turns “us and them” into “we.”

This magic happens in small moments—the nod between opponents after a tough play, the shared groan at a missed shot, the collective cheer when an unlikely player scores. These flashes of togetherness add up, quietly stitching communities closer. A study even shows neighborhoods with strong sports cultures report higher levels of trust and cooperation<sup>[14]</sup>.

As research suggests, these micro-connections compound into something transformative. Neighborhoods that nurture these moments find themselves with cleaner streets, safer blocks, and people who actually know each other's names. The beautiful game's real beauty lies in showing us how to make that happen—not through grand plans, but through the daily practice of playing, sharing, and being human together<sup>[15]</sup>.

## 5. Conclusion

Football's power to reconnect cities lies in its simplicity. Unlike expensive urban renewal projects or complex social programs, it requires just a ball, some open space, and willing participants—yet the effects ripple far beyond the field. As we've seen in Jiangsu's cities, these casual football gatherings quietly solve modern urban problems: they turn strangers into teammates, revive forgotten public spaces, and bridge divides between generations and social groups. The lessons are clear. First, real connections demand face-to-face interaction—no app can replicate the trust built through shared effort on the pitch. Second, communities thrive when given simple, regular ways to interact (like weekly matches). Finally, the best solutions often emerge from people themselves, not top-down planning. As cities worldwide grapple with loneliness and fragmentation, Jiangsu's football communities offer a hopeful blueprint. By investing in more shared spaces and supporting grassroots sports, we can cultivate what matters most: neighborhoods where people don't just live side by side, but truly know and rely on each other. After all, the goal was never just to play football—it's to rebuild the human connections that

make cities worth living in.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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