

Luca, modeling data to monitor mental health

Creating a startup is always challenging. Founding one during a tech downturn, cost of living crisis and recession seems near impossible. However, with risk comes reward and many of the world's most successful companies were founded during times of economic uncertainty. As part of a series with Antler, Maddyness has interviewed founders hoping to become the entrepreneurial success stories to emerge from this time of crisis. This week, Maddyness spoke to Nick Greenhalgh, cofounder of Luca.

Luca took shape in my mind during my MBA in early 2020 but then the pandemic hit and I had to finish my studies prior to bringing it to life.

The spark came from meeting Kearnan Myall at the University of Oxford, where we were on the rugby team together. Kearnan had just retired from a 14 year professional rugby career and was commencing a PhD in Psychiatry, researching mindfulness based interventions to improve depression in elite athletes. A topic very close to his heart having struggled with depression during his career. He helped me understand just how pervasive mental health issues are in elite sport – 50% greater than in the general public – and why

teams are not the ones to address it.

It's unrealistic to expect athletes to be open and forthcoming about such issues with the very people that select them, who decide their contracts and who ultimately have a big say on the trajectory of their careers. I saw this dynamic when I played a couple of years of professional rugby for Northampton Saints straight after school but was surprised to hear that next to nothing had changed in the nine years since.

I then saw a very similar dynamic at the University level, and that was when I realised that somebody needed to build an independent, digital, mental health screening tool that provides frictionless pathways to help. Something that actually works for athletes. And that's what Luca does!

Can you share your elevator pitch?

There has been a global awakening regarding mental health and we believe that people will come to want to prioritise and monitor their mental health just as they do their physical health. But there's currently no real way of doing that.

A broken bone shows up on an x-ray, but there's no x-ray for mental health. Mental health assessments are typically made by trained doctors, and they are not based on biological indicators, rather a doctor's experience. This experience is built over time, by assessing patients and studying related cases; it is in other words based on data.

At Luca, we're building an app based mental health screening and symptom identification tool that can detect symptoms as soon as they develop by leveraging the power of machine learning and artificial intelligence. In other words, by modeling data.

By detecting symptoms at the earliest stage, people can receive the treatment they need when their conditions are still mild and this will significantly reduce the amount of long term suffering that so many people are currently dealing with.

Our tool has the potential to help everybody but it is your high performance professions, where people are pushing themselves to the max and operating in environments where it's difficult to be vulnerable that will benefit the most.

Can you tell our readers about your engagement with Antler?

Antler has been fundamental in bringing Luca to life because they introduced me to my now cofounder, Vas. Meeting Vas made Luca possible because he's everything I'm not! We're very complimentary with him being a software engineer and me a generalist. He also has lived experience of depression and the desire to stop others suffering is what fires him up and gets him through the long days. I bring my sports contacts from my rugby days and an understanding of how to navigate the market, especially in the UK.

What has been your biggest challenge so far and how have you overcome this?

Building a startup is so all consuming that your current struggle or project feels like the only thing you've ever known, so I'd say that fundraising is currently a challenge we're working hard to crack. Everybody knows how tricky it is to raise in this current environment, but it's also kind of fun. Your thinking and positioning comes in for so much scrutiny that it forces you to rethink certain parts of your strategy and product that you might not have had to 12 months ago. That can only be a good thing for the long term health of the business!

Being a first time founder, fundraising takes a little time to work out. You start overly optimistic, assuming everybody's going to be as excited about your startup as you are but you quickly realise it's a volume game and you can't underestimate the power of a warm introduction! On the angel front it starts out feeling like you're trying to find a needle in the haystack, but if you manage to find the right needle, suddenly others unearth themselves.

What's in store for the future?

The immediate future is wrapping up our funding round. Attention will then turn to the fun stuff, doubling down on business development, evolution of the product and growing the team. We recently reached a big milestone by becoming revenue generating, and we'll be working hard to sign a number of other professional teams from the start of Q2 onwards. On the product front, in the very near future we'll be adding new visuals to the app to help users make better sense of their results and where their wellbeing is today versus the past. We're also going to be working on integrating more technology into it and that will be aided by adding new team members, which is why we're raising a round as we speak. Looking further ahead, we're also working to form partnerships

with research institutions to develop new and more innovative screening / assessment tools, but clearly they will take time to validate. All in all, lots to keep us busy, but all very exciting!

What one piece of advice would you give other founders or future founders?

I'm always hesitant to dish out too much advice as we're still really new to this game and have an awful lot to achieve to get to where we want to be. But from being nearly a year into it, teaming up with the right co-founder is everything. Ideally, you will complement each other in terms of skill set but don't try to be too clever and overly engineer the profile of your co-founder. What's most important is that you get on really well, genuinely like spending time together and can have the tough conversations. For me, that's overwhelmingly the most important thing to get right at the start. That, and celebrating the little wins and feeding off the momentum that they give you.

Nick Greenhalgh is cofounder of [Luca](#).

[Antler](#) is one of the world's most active early-stage investors. With 900 portfolio companies in 27 countries, they have a global community of early-stage founders addressing the world's biggest challenges.

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