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## Telfer on coaching: an expert's view

**With forty years of experience, both as a practitioner and an academic, Hamish Telfer is well qualified to talk about the subject of sports coaching but, as Mick Owen discovered, Dr Telfer is also well capable of offering a challenging perspective of the sports system, the coaching framework and sport's attitude to safeguarding.**

There are few things more compelling in sport and in life than passion and expertise and when an individual possesses both other people should pay heed. Hamish Telfer is a hardly an enigma but he does present a number of contradictions to the casual observer: he is an academic and a practitioner; he coaches individual and team sports; despite being sometimes known as a didactic lecturer, he teaches and advocates self-reflection; he cares about British sport but he is walking away from it; and he is a charming Scotsman.

His charm may be anomalous with the caricature of a nippy and chippy Glaswegian footballer but Telfer was good enough at the Scottish national game to flirt with a professional career at Queen's Park FC before focusing on athletics under the wing of the then national coach and coaching guru, John Anderson. Injury forced Telfer to give up a promising sprinting career and at the tender age of 19 he became a coach. Forty years later he is still at it, although that may only be a matter of time. During the course of our conversation it becomes clear that if Dr Telfer does walk away from the coaching realm he is unlikely to have cause to regret leaving anything unsaid.

Our starting point is the current standard of coaching in Britain. Telfer's assessment is swift and frank: "The quality of coaching practice, where coaches are working with children and young people, is at best variable and normally extremely poor." The causes of this, he suggests, is the impact of a risk-averse society and that resources are "being poured into a conservative policy regarding safeguarding". He is at pains to point out that he uses the word 'conservative' with no political overtones, despite being "more left-wing than Karl Marx", but his worry is clear: the nature of the current focus on safeguarding is obstructing the development of coaching. He characterises the problem as "the notion that if we put someone who has passed a CRB check in front of kids then 'coaching' is going to be a better place". He fears that the 'safeguarding at all costs' agenda "is now driving the standard and nature of coaching for children and young people, rather than it being driven by anything to do with how we develop young children, the quality of their experiences in sport and indeed what, in terms of young children, sport is for."

Given that one of the most read articles TLR has ever carried was an interview with Anne Tiivas of the Child Protection in Sport Unit (CPSU), which gave an extremely reassuring message to volunteers and coaches, it seems strange to hear such sentiments, especially from an, admittedly former, four-year veteran of the CPSU research task force. Is Telfer saying that Tiivas's message is somehow too focused on the danger of sexual predators targeting children using sport? He is careful with his explanation: "The CPSU has helped drive forward an awareness of the issues. The rhetoric and the reality, however, don't match. The CPSU still continue to produce resources to support their message of 'awareness' but this is not coaching-focused enough. Bluntly, it's social work-focused. It needs a clearer focus on practice. The connections are not being made clear enough so people still think it's the principles not the applications. That would make the difference."

The confidence with which he makes his case suggests that he has statistics at his fingertips on the prevalence of sexual predators in sport, data that Tiivas could not offer when we spoke. "We know from criminal convictions that we are consistently jailing sexual predators in sport," Telfer says. "It's a real issue and we must address it but we are no different in that



Dr Hamish Telfer: forty years of sports coaching to date

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Coaching practice: under scrutiny

respect to any other profession such as teaching, nursing and so on. However, we do not have any real prevalence study undertaken in British sport that allows us to answer the question 'what are the stats?' Now I know Professor Celia Brackenridge is pushing really hard on this issue but on the CPSU research task force our hands were virtually tied because without statistics, without the evidence, without the studies, we can't research. Doors are beginning to open – in rugby league and swimming for, example we are getting some limited results – but we have no prevalence studies."

Talk of aquatics, where he was employed as a national coach in the seventies, brings Telfer to his former colleague Paul Hickson, the GB swimming coach jailed for the rape and sexual assault of swimmers in his care and the catalyst for the work done since on child protection and safeguarding throughout the UK's sports system and beyond. Telfer notes that Hickson is now out of jail and coaching again, albeit abroad. The Leisure Review expresses the nation's disbelief and Telfer demures. "You say 'no' like that but remember that football re-employed Graham Rix while he was still on the sex offender's register [following a prison term for 'unlawful sexual intercourse' with a 15 year-old]. This epitomises a set of attitudes and values about outcome-oriented sport that links back to the amount of money we're spending on London 2012."

There would seem to even the most casual of observers to be an inherent contradiction in a system that makes volunteer coaches spend time and money on attending safeguarding workshops while simultaneously allowing convicted child abusers to coach young people. Telfer agrees and offers an explanation: "Because it is so politicised – 'Look at us, we're the best nation', which is very East German, very Soviet Union – British sport is now prepared to turn a blind eye and some coaches that have served custodial sentences for sexual assaults seem to find no real problems in re-engaging with sport where there is a belief that they 'can get results'."

Telfer is also adamant that this particular focus on safeguarding is mistaken because the incidence of sexual predators in sport is still, thankfully, relatively low: "When you look at the broad sweep of things that the CPSU speak about – physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect and emotional abuse – in reality, poor coaching practice is by far the greatest issue." It is a view that the Football Association shares. The FA has identified bullying behaviour and inappropriate communication with young people – what might be termed 'bad coaching' – as their major concern. Again Telfer is careful to be clear: "That's not to say that they are not concerned about sexual abuse but at the moment it is the inability to communicate appropriately – and given that communication is a key skill of coaching practitioners, that's a big issue – and straightforward bullying behaviour of the 'drop and give me 20' kind that are by far and away their biggest concerns."

The FA is taking steps to address poor coaching and bullying (with a series of non-qualification courses called Youth Appropriate and a film starring Ray Winstone) but not many governing bodies have soccer's resources. According to Telfer, there needs to be a pan-sport improvement.

"The message coming out of the CPSU needs to be ameliorated and reframed because the focus, in the public mind, is still on sexual abuse," he says. "It is important that we keep that as a focus but it is only one of a range. The CPSU have done the good job they set out to do and used 'shock and awe' tactics to get people's attention, and we have sexual predators locked up in jail who were part of coaching as a consequence, but there is a bigger job to be done in terms of the quality and standard of coaching in relation to the communication and coaching methodologies that are deployed when working with children and young people. Child Protection or safeguarding is about more than just sexual assault."

"When they were restructuring the UK Coaching Certificate Pat Duffy and his team at Sportscoach UK identified that [the paucity of coaching of children] and are now promoting the 4x4 model where you can progress vertically as well as horizontally and become an 'expert coach' at coaching young people."

Having spent more than thirty years as a lecturer in physical education, sports development, sports coaching and even Olympism, Telfer has a breadth of awareness not shared by many. His ability to link inputs in one sector of the sports system to outcomes in another means that the jump

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from safeguarding policy to the coaching framework comes naturally. The fact that he has coached national teams, international athletes and worked at the highest level in and with half a dozen sports as well as teach also makes some of his views on how funding should be allocated, such as the suggestion that funding for children's coaches should, on occasions, take more precedence over funding for coaches of elite athletes, something of a surprise.

"Now that sport has become absolutely and overtly politicised one might well question whether the amount of money put into 2012 is justifiable," he says. "I am not arguing that we should not put some money into it but when you take the £200 million or thereabouts we put into Beijing and divide that by the number of medals we won, was that a good return on investment? There needs to be a more carefully thought-through process about how we divvy up whatever funds are available in relation to making the UKCC work for the benefit of children and young people, who are by far the biggest constituency affected by it, but the outcome orientation – the medal-winning – is beginning to overtake everything. Rather than really looking and questioning the quality of the coaching that we are delivering to children and young people we give elite sports performers who are dollar millionaires lottery money."

Despite his many years in coaching and coach education, Telfer seems to have lost none of his enthusiasm and when he does finally ask Sportscoach UK to take him off their tutor workforce a great many safeguarding and equity courses will be struggling to find a facilitator. He reckons to deliver at least one a week on average and to interact, therefore, with over a thousand different coaches every year, plus those he lectures and works with in other settings. It is a position that enables him to make an informed assessment of the state of British coaching.

"When I deliver these workshops," he says, "I am obliged to link the subject matter to coaching practice and I try to do this. As I go round the country I observe that the knowledge base of coaches under interrogation is extremely low. They know the skills, the drills and the practices but they know very little about how to implement them. The standard of work done by governing bodies with their coaches at Level 1 and Level 2 on 'how to coach' not 'what to coach' is still really not robust enough."

Telfer is dismissive of the argument that the UKCC and of governing body coach educators throughout the UK ensure that the 'how to coach' part of coaching is perpetually drummed into candidates at Level 1 and Level 2: "In all the [SCUK] courses I do I find the default setting is drill delivery. They go back to their tacit knowledge, what they themselves were coached, the style they were familiar with as players. This is because there is no follow-up. The impact of one weekend or two weekends at best is very, very limited on the actual practice of coaches. A 12-hour exposure is not long enough to change attitudes, values and behaviours. It needs to be followed up and coaches need mentoring, and the place for that is in the club.

"It's not about knowledge, because knowledge is useless unless you can impart it. It's not about qualifications, because a qualification is just a piece of paper. It is about the experiential part of coaching because it is that that we should be trying to quality-mark. Are coaches competent? Do they bring everything together and deliver? If so they have expertise and we have good coaches. Now, sadly, what happens is coaches go on their Level 2, somebody tests them on what they know and they get a bit of paper. And because there is no mentoring system, because there are no checks and balances, because there is nobody stood on the side of the pitch saying 'What are you doing that for?' we are not improving standards. We're increasing the uptake of qualifications. We're improving coaching knowledge. But don't ask me if we're improving coaching expertise, because I don't think we are."

There is, Telfer argues, a way to avoid the domination of the lowest common denominator: "This is where the scarce resource becomes relevant. It should be a key part of Clubmark that every club has a trained coaching mentor in place. If you go to a club with Clubmark you are supposed to be assured of a 'quality' experience. That must surely include coaching but they don't look at coaching. What does Clubmark ask: Have you done your safeguarding? Have you done your equity? Do you have first aid and do you have policies and procedures? This is nonsense and will really not improve the practice of coaching."

Clubmark is, of course, another Sport England product but for some years it has been managed and developed by the team at Knight, Kavanagh and Paige, the Bury-based consultancy of another combative eminence gris, John Eady. Has Telfer debated Clubmark with Eady? "No. Nobody has asked me my views. As a principle I'd agree with what they are doing – setting a quality standard – but I would not agree with the way they are going about it. We need to push it forward again."

The need to change the culture of coaching is almost a mantra with Telfer. He identifies the preponderance of volunteers in coaching as one of the challenges to this ambition. The traditional relationships which should be a strength have, Telfer argues, been skewed by the imposition from above of the 'value your volunteers' credo. "We are very cautious with our volunteers," he says. "We must value our volunteers and sport would collapse if we didn't have them but that should not mean that they are not open to criticism. On the contrary, we have to make sure that the quality of the product is absolutely the best that we can achieve and simply because you are a volunteer does not mean you are exempt from criticism. That's a balance we are not yet striking."

Does he think that this holds true in coaching, where many of the people involved, driven by one of the key tenets of coaching, that you strive to get better, welcome criticism? Telfer is rueful: "You may say that but I fear you are in a minority, I really do. You would be surprised at how many people come into coaching because they want to take the under-13s team and win the league with it. I have no problem with aspiration but could you not take the under-13s team because you want to work with young people, give them a positive experience within sport, develop them as best as you can and if you win the league while you're doing that, well done; not the other way round?"

Telfer sees no respite in the future as the great hope for the professionalisation of even voluntary coaching, licensing, has been traduced and watered down. He laments a lost opportunity: "I was a great advocate of licensing and helped pilot the first licence systems under the UKCC. I was a strong advocate. I am bitterly disappointed at the lack of resources that went into it. That is where the funding that goes to governing bodies should have been ring-fenced so the money could only be used for putting in place a structure to support licensed coaches and provide quality assurance at club level. To be fair some governing bodies are looking at mentoring but for what they call high-level coaches through the institutes of sport and are being quite astute in their definition of 'high-level coach' so they don't have to be Level 3 or Level 4 qualified but until we stop rewarding coaches based on what their performers achieve rather than the quality of experience that is being delivered by them we will never change coaching. We have the focus absolutely wrong and should focus on rewarding competence and expertise, not just achievement."

As the conversation draws to a close Telfer reflects on what he has said and indeed what he has done with his coaching life. Still a vibrant and energetic man (he has recently added fell running to his résumé) the interview nevertheless has the tenor of a parting shot. "Yes, it could be," he admits. "I may do one more winter. I believe everyone has a shelf life and I want to go while people think what I have to say is relevant and alive. If people continue to think my beliefs, attitudes and values are still of significance and want to work with me I would be more than happy to work with them. I just believe after 40 years in coaching it is time to say 'that will do'."

From Telfer's Lakeland back door he need only pass through a farmyard and over a stile before he is walking the fells, leaving behind the noise and nuisance of the world. If he is serious about walking away from coaching someone really should run after him.

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