

The CCPR conference: fact and fantasy

In recent years the CCPR has done much to shed its blazered image but John Amaechi's presentation to the national conference might have come as a surprise to the organisation's most committed advocates of change. Jonathan Ives was there to see the dust being unsettled.

The CCPR's 38th national conference marked 75 years of the organisation that works on behalf of the national governing bodies to improve their lot and present a united front in the name of sport. Some 150 delegates – a number some 50 down on the usual tally for the event but deemed to be an encouraging turnout given the prevailing financial and political uncertainties – had gathered in the basement conference rooms of a modern hotel in the shadow of St Paul's Cathedral to consider the conference theme of Fair Play in Sport – Fact or Fantasy? The afternoon promised a discussion of whether Corinthianism had been vanquished by cynicism but it was the morning session, with its sub-heading 'Challenging Taboos – Sport leading the pack or failing to act?' that had caught our attention. How would John Amaechi, a man with trenchant views on the way sport is shaped and controlled by those charged to lead it, go down within the context of an organisation that for much of its past been associated with traditional sporting structures and some traditional sporting attitudes? We were not disappointed.

The morning's opening speaker, Brigid Simmonds, the CCPR's chair, outlined some of the challenges that the world of sport was facing the modern era but she also indicated that, for all its historical associations with tradition, in its modern guise the CCPR was aware that the sporting world had changed over the last three quarters of a century. She highlighted some of the darker moments of the sporting year, including rugby's fake blood scandal, Formula One's deliberate crash and a world champion subsequently lying to its officials, Thierry Henri taking the game of football into his own hands and accusations of match-fixing in professional snooker. There were others; there would be more. How, Simmonds wondered, had we come to this. When most still value the game over the victory and sport represents one of the last areas of society where fair play is still a concept with any meaning, do we expect too much of our games and their players? There is more to fairness than fair play, she noted. Access is about how we treat people as individuals and the gender divide is still too wide. Why are there so few gay male athletes and why are there so few black managers despite the number of black players? "These are not abstract notions," Simmonds said. "They go right to the heart of what governing bodies do."

Mark Saggars, the conference compere, had already demonstrated the hyperbole with which so much of modern sport is presented by his introduction of the morning's speakers and panellists. Attempting to whip up some enthusiasm in an early-morning audience, he employed the declamatory style perfected in the studios of Talksport, the commercial sports station for which he works, but his description of those on the programme as "the highest class panel that I think has ever been brought together" caused more than a few eyebrows to be raised, several of them no doubt among the panellists themselves. With the CCPR chair having opened proceedings at a lively pace, Saggars introduced a film of the previous night's awards dinner in which "ESPN's Ray Stubbs" could be seen assisting the CCPR's president, HRH the Earl of Wessex, present the CCPR sports club of the year award to Oundle Town Rowing Club. This image of a former BBC sports presenter who had moved on to more lowly things and a minor royal who had inherited his royal title and his position as CCPR president from his parents recognising the achievements of hard-working sports club volunteers and coaches did little to raise the energy levels in the room. But it did, unwittingly or not, set the stage perfectly for John Amaechi.

Taking to the lectern, Amaechi confessed that he had written three different versions of his presentation and had only just made up his mind which version to use. "I think this will be uncomfortable for some, unpalatable for some but a breath of fresh air for others," he said. "I say only this: if the cap fits..." With this warning, he then told the CCPR national conference something of his vision of sport.

As a black, gay man, Amaechi explained that he ticked quite a few of the minority boxes but as a six-foot-nine-inch highly rated former star of America's professional basketball leagues he does not fit the conventional image of a gay man. Given his stature and his status, few people choose to offer him racist or homophobic abuse to his face but he still receives a few death threats each month by email.

"I've been involved in sport my whole life," he said, "but I never drank the Kool-Aid. Sport does what we make it do and I don't think we look carefully enough at what we make it do." Sport, Amaechi argued, is very fond of, and very good at, offering examples of individuals who found success against the odds and showing how sport



Does the panel think: [left to right] Gordon Taylor, Chris Broad, Sue Mott and John Amaechi

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can teach so many valuable lessons. However, while the message is seductive, the evidence is often thin.

"Sport in school teaches a rank anti-intellectualism," he said. "It teaches us that victory by any means is OK. When you make it in sport it teaches you that the rules never apply to you." In America his status as a celebrated sports star meant that bar tabs and restaurant bills were frequently picked up by someone else; speeding tickets had been waived in return for an autograph. The circumstances and values that allowed him to take advantage of his status also allowed the vitriol and emotional illiteracy of coaching staff to be overlooked. They allowed and continue to allow sport "to indulge in a hierarchy of bigotry". While it may no longer be acceptable to be racist, PE lessons and sports club sessions continue to establish all kinds of stereotypes. "Sport is designed to teach boys how to be boys," he said. "A lot of that is about not being a girl." He asked his audience to think about the reaction they have in their own organisations to racism. "It is something we can all stand up for yet everyday there are slights against women and gay people."

The vast majority of the damage that sport does is, Amaechi conceded, accidental. It is done by not thinking about the consequences of decisions. Damage is done by location or cost. If you build a facility in London not near a Tube station you immediately limit access to those with a car. In the UK basketball has become a middle-class sport whereas in every other country in the world it is a working-class game.

"Those involved in sport must find a way to challenge the idea that just by doing sport you're a doing a good thing," he said. "In the UK well meaning is often good enough. But it's not. Great sport is what we need but we have to realise that sometimes sport is just putting a ball in a hole. We have to realise that it is more difficult to bring about the change we want to bring about."

He made it very clear that making this happen will require a major change in attitudes: "My experience of sport has been of a raging blazerati. People in sport act as if they have tenure. Even when they disappear from one organisation they appear in another. The status quo allows the bigots and the incompetent to maintain power." Waiting for the bad people in sport to move on is not an option. Sport must take decisive action to fight inequality. "You can't wait for the dinosaurs to die," he said. "They've been around for 100 years and they will be around for another 100 if you do not act."

As a challenge to the status quo it was unequivocal and as an attack on the comfort zone in which British sport has been happily operating it was blistering. While members of the audience stifled their cheers or caught their breath, Mark Sadders invited the panel to join John Amaechi on the stage. Chris Broad, international cricketer and now umpire, followed journalist Sue Mott and Professional Footballers Association chief executive, Gordon Taylor up the steps. Summarising some of Amaechi's key points, Sadders referred to Justin Fashanu, British professional football's first and to date only openly gay player, and suggested to Taylor that sport in this country does not seem to have moved on since Fashanu's suicide. Taylor, looking perplexed and uncomfortable on the stage, reacted to this emotive but crucial point by referring to George Orwell's phrase about sport becoming a substitute for war and speaking at length but to no obvious purpose about taking his English O level. Sadders pressed him to answer the question and Taylor mentioned social responsibility, that professional football clubs are now much more socially aware and that homophobia is a difficult subject. Having unwittingly but proficiently demonstrated so many of the points that Amaechi had made a few minutes previously, Taylor mentioned the Football Association's film that had intended to tackle homophobia in the game and Sadders took his cue to introduce the video that the FA had not released owing to a lack of support for the campaign within the professional game.

The film allowed other members of the panel to be brought into the discussion but not before Amaechi had wondered quite how the FA had thought that this film was going to address the issues at which it was supposedly aimed. Chris Broad said how shocked he had been when someone had thought some of his decisions as a Test match referee had been racially motivated and Sue Mott confirmed that eliminating bigotry is very difficult. Taylor conceded that the FA's film may not have been the best way to deal with the issue and that it was sad that players do not come out while they are playing. Amaechi explained that players will not come out because of the atmosphere of intolerance within the professional game. "One player did come out," he said, referring to Fashanu, "and we know what happened."

Questions from the floor began with the scenario of a 17-year-old footballer approaching negotiations for a professional contract. If the player was gay, how would members of the panel advise him to proceed? Noting that the FA's attempts to tackle homophobia had produced an ineffective video that had not been released, Amaechi suggested that the current climate would suggest that he should keep quiet about his sexuality. "I don't need any more martyrs," he said. Taylor suggested much had been done but it was down to education, a process that would include schools as well as the directors and players in the clubs. Pressed by Amaechi to say whether the player should come out, Taylor conceded that for the sake of his career he should probably not take that step. However, Taylor was clear that he wanted to get to the point where it would not make a difference to his career if he did. With further questions Amaechi explained why he thought he would have been a better player had he not had to use up a proportion of his mental energy worrying about keeping secrets from his team mates and coaches. Sue Mott acknowledged that journalists can be proactive in the way they report on sporting issues and Chris Broad confessed that he was struggling to think of

any barriers based on race within cricket. Gordon Taylor revealed that he had witnessed the impact that footballers can have as positive role models and that he thought the PFA's employment of an equity officer who was both female and of mixed race was evidence of how his organisation was willing to tackle these most difficult of issues.

Having been the starting point of an interesting and highly revealing debate, John Amaechi had the final word. "Sport will teach whatever you want it to teach," he said. "Make it do it."

The conference continued after the break, promising workshops on a variety of topics and an afternoon debate on whether the rise of cynicism in sport had brought about the death of Corinthianism, but, with Amaechi's words still stinging, The Leisure Review decided it did not have the stomach for inspecting the best of British sport too closely. While the queue formed for tea and coffee, we headed upstairs and into the comparatively fresh air of a London street.

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