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- [news](#)
- [features](#)
- [comment](#)
- [letters](#)
- [advertise](#)
- [subscribe](#)
- [about us](#)
- [contact us](#)

John Mills: the world on his wheel

In April 2008 The Leisure Review spoke to John Mills of British Cycling about his goal to “produce a world-leading coach education programme”. News that he is to head the world governing body’s drive to take the British model around the world suggests he has achieved it. Mick Owen spoke to the man himself.

When the news broke that John Mills and Keith Flory had been seconded to the Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI) to deliver an 18-month project to roll out British Cycling’s coach education programme it was a resounding endorsement of Mills, his team, British Cycling’s revolutionary approach to just about everything they do and to the UK sports system’s commitment to coaches, the most important people in the whole equation. And it was a great excuse to interview Mills again, one of sport development’s good guys.

We caught him at the British Cycling’s temporary offices just a Chris Hoy sprint from the Manchester Velodrome, which is currently being redeveloped. Having established that the agreement between the UCI and British Cycling is for him to give 40 days per year to the project, we asked about logistics.

What are the practical implications of the new arrangement, John?

Currently I’m sharing my time between Manchester and Switzerland to support the development and delivery of the project. In terms of the day-to-day delivery part of my role was to recruit someone to deal with the management of the project and I actually recruited Keith Flory, who was our coaching and education manager here in Manchester. Keith expressed an interest in going out and working at the UCI in Switzerland for a period of time and so the short-term implications are that we have weakened the team at British Cycling with Keith’s departure and an amount of my time being devoted to trying to develop this programme worldwide. I think it’s a good indication of where we are in terms of British Cycling.

Which is at the forefront? Without putting words into your mouth, we are the best aren’t we?

Well, yes. I think the amount of investment that’s gone into coach education from the likes of UK Sport, Sport England and Sportscoach UK is better than any other country in the world, both in terms of financial support and technical support. We’ve also worked pretty hard ourselves at trying to develop a world-leading coach education programme based on the work of Dave Brailsford and the performance teams. All of our performance coaches have contributed to the coach education programme.

Can you give us a practical example of how that works? It sounds radical.

All of our coach education resources are based on, or have an element of, cycling skill development. What we do is have a work group – not a committee, not something that’s there for 20 years, a work group – where we pull together technical experts in a particular cycling discipline and those experts sit round a table and say, “These are the skills that you need to develop a world-class bike rider.” My team, the coach education team, will work as part of the work group committing to paper all of the thoughts of those key technical experts. These guys are fantastic coaches but perhaps don’t have the head space to write down what they know. So a group comes together regularly, say every couple of months, and we get down all of their thoughts and all of their ideas on exercises, on techniques, on skill development; all of the stuff that they currently use.

How quickly does that information work its way to developing coaches?

You are probably looking at a 12- to 18-month period to get all of that information into a finished format. So it doesn’t happen overnight. It takes a period of time to collect all that information. One specific example of how comprehensive we are can be found in track coaching. If you scour the world for information on skills for track coaching you would probably find less than 10 skills in cycling texts. In our Level 2 discipline-specific course for track coaches we have basically two books containing specific skills with a total of 22 skills in one and 19 skills in the other. That’s 41 different skills for a Level 2 coach to be able to teach versus 10 available in the rest of the world. Now those are the skills we think young track riders would need to develop to progress to the next level. And then at the next level – for a Level 3 coach – we have a further 33 track skills and all of these are written down and illustrated in pictures

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John Mills: developing coaching structures for the world from Manchester

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British coaching consistently delivering results on the international stage

and diagrams in coaching handbooks so that the coach can introduce and develop those skills. It's about taking a 14-year-old bike reader over a period of about four years and putting them on an Olympic podium.

How do coach education systems match up around the world?

There are some coach education systems in place. Australia have a good system, France likewise. But our philosophy has always been to try to develop the very best coach education programmes. Our aspiration has always been to be a world leader and because we're working alongside people like Dave Brailsford and a performance programme that's all about delivering excellence and leaving no stone unturned we've taken that philosophy to coach education and likewise to development. We want to have the best programmes in the world and have people look at British Cycling and see the best performance programme, the best coach education programme and the best development programme.

How is the development programme going? With British Cycling's staff team having risen from 70 to 200 in a very short time, driven by Sky's money, there's clearly an explosion occurring. Does that affect standards? Are you being stretched a little thin?

We have been able to maintain standards but that's mainly about existing staff's commitment. We are very lucky that everybody in coaching and development are very committed and have bought in to the philosophy of being the very best at what we do. That's my view on life and I'm pretty keen on driving that through all of what we do. Most of the managers in my team are working well beyond any normal working hours to make sure that the programmes run effectively and run well, and we pride ourselves on that.

Going back to the coach education programme, looking at the detail of the proposed UCI programme, it doesn't seem to match up with the British Cycling version.

The best way to describe it is that our Level 1 and Level 2 will basically form the UCI Level 1. The BC programme is designed to meet the needs of British coaches and the UCI programme is based on trying to meet the needs of the many, very different nations where the resources are very, very variable. For instance, I went out to deliver a coach education course in Guyana where the only facility they had was a local park and the young riders were riding on adapted BMX bikes that had been turned into road bikes, as those are the only cycle frames they can get hold of in that particular part of the world. You have to be quite adaptable in terms of your delivery in those circumstances. At the other end of the scale we have an ex-professional rider on the current UCI programme in Switzerland so we are catering for anything from someone who has ridden professionally for a number of years right down to somebody with limited or no background in coach education at all, someone who got all their information passed on from a grandfather to a father to a son.

In this country we have the luxury of people who will pay for and invest money in their development as a coach, whereas often around the world we are given 10 days to deliver as much education as we can to leave the country in a much better place in terms of their coaching development. So what we have tried to do is look at a programme that meets those requirements. Our Level 1 is aimed at an assistant coach and our Level 2 is for a sessional coach but what people around the world will want is some idea about putting together a year-long training programme as well. So at UCI Level 1 we have said, "Let's get down to basics." It's about delivering basic cycling skills but also it has planning information to allow people to put together an annual plan for their country.

In Belize they have 12 races in a year, one a month. What happens is those guys go out and try to win all 12. The upshot is they don't win any as someone comes in from outside the country, trains specifically using a periodised programme and is in good shape, rested and in good form. They win the race and take all the prize money out of the country. We need to educate them to realise that no one can win all 12 of the races but by periodising their programme they might win some of them. We know that from having the luxury of having Sportscoach UK, the National Coaching Foundation, as the lead agency for a number of years giving us that knowledge, which we can then apply to win medals at the highest level. We need to get that sort of message around the world. So the introductory level is Level 1 and at Level 2. We've taken BC's Level 3 coaching qualification, including some higher level skills, and that's about designing and delivering longer-term plans and delivering higher-level skills. We can't fly half way round the world to deliver a three-day Level 1 so we have amalgamated somewhat to make it cost-effective and meet different needs.

This project is a massive feather in British Cycling's cap and indeed your cap, isn't it?

For me, personally, I'm really pleased but this isn't about me. It's a recognition of British Cycling and all the hard work that's gone into the coach education programme. We started 10 years ago with a blank sheet of paper and there was no coach education programme. We started from scratch and now we have UK Coaching Certificate (UKCC) endorsement at levels 1, 2 and 3. We are now going to broaden that out across all six cycling disciplines. We're not finished yet but we are a good way down the road and have discipline-specific awards for all the Olympic disciplines

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British Cycling: from Manchester to Switzerland on behalf of the UCI

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and Level 3 awards for road, time trial and track. That makes up about 70% of the sport in terms of membership.

From your perspective as one of the nation's foremost coach educators how is the UK Coaching Framework (UKCF) panning out?

I think from our perspective the framework is exactly that, it is a framework. It's up to individual sports to develop what they need from it. At BC we've used it to develop a coaching plan so that everything we do is aligned. We've looked at the five strategic action areas and feel it is relatively straightforward. Do you have a coaching structure and a coaching culture? How are you supporting coaches? What is coaching looking like on the ground? Then it's things like the professionalisation of coaching and research and development. For us that translates fairly simply. The one area of weakness for us is around research and development. That's the one area where we do require more support from the key agencies. We just don't have the capacity within our department to do research as we try to complete and implement our coach education structure. We need to do it but our needs analysis says the most important area is making sure we have coaches for all cycling disciplines at all three levels.

Some sports expect to struggle to recruit coaches to meet demand at grassroots when, or if, the Olympic legacy hits. Does cycling have any such concerns?

I don't think that we have but perhaps we're still in a honeymoon period as far as the coach education structure is concerned. We have developed a good reputation for coach education and the materials we use and as a result people want to come on the courses, want to get the information and the general feeling is we do offer good value for money. I'd like the courses to be cheaper. Certainly the work of the National Skills Academy on coach bursaries is very helpful and hopefully will continue to keep the cost down for the end user because we need coaches. We need to remove barriers and not only is the time commitment for someone doing their Level 3 pretty huge, the financial commitment is pretty large as well. In cycling there are very few opportunities for paid coaching so someone might be doing a coach education programme that's costing well in excess of £1,000 to be a volunteer coach. As a nation we need to address that. The UKCF seeks to professionalise coach education but we don't have professional structures in place in terms of a culture where we pay for coaching. Some sports do, such as tennis, but in cycling we are ten years into a programme in a sport where there was no real strong culture of coaching and we have worked quite hard to change that. Alongside that we are trying to develop more full-time coaching opportunities, not just in the World Class programme but in the development programmes as well. We regularly get contact from towns and cities around the country wanting to introduce cycling and asking what's the best way to do it. My response is get a coach on the ground working in schools and clubs, and more towns are saying they'll do that. So we're chipping away at the professionalisation of coaching but it's still a relatively small percentage of the overall number of coaches who are paid.

In the December edition of TLR Hamish Telfer was critical of the coach education model that puts people on a 16- or 48-hour course that may well erode good practice but the effects are lost when they return to a coaching culture unsupportive to the governing body's ideas. Could you comment on Dr Telfer's view?

On the coach education side I would say the short blast of education really works. Going back to the UCI programme, you get a longer blast. When it is delivered around the world it is 10 days, which is a significant amount of time but when it's delivered in Switzerland it's an eight-week programme. The coaches are there full-time for eight weeks and they get the UCI Level 1, the UCI Level 2 and in the last part of it they develop a project which they are going to then implement when they go back to the group they are working with or to their own country to move cycling forward in that part of the world. What we look at when we sit down with these coaches for a final presentation and university-style viva is what Frederic Magne, the development director there, calls "coach detection". Frederic is a French ex-professional who was ten-times world champion and what he wants to do is identify key people around the world that he can tap into to help develop cycling around the world. We stay in touch with any potentially excellent coaches and see whether they are on track, if we can help them, whether their cyclists would benefit from spending some time at the UCI. It's really a development programme that is helping to develop coaching around the world.

You must be very excited about this new project?

Definitely. It's almost like starting again 10 years on. We're all pretty proud to be involved, Keith Flory, me and the whole team at British Cycling, and we're grateful to Frederic and the president of the UCI, Pat McQuaid, who have been very supportive about trying to establish something that will benefit all the federations around the world that are members of the UCI.

Thanks for your time, John, and the best of British luck.

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