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Challenging the sports movement

Asked to offer a perspective on the state of the UK sport system under pressure, *The Leisure Review* packed an overnight bag and headed for Denmark.

Denmark, like Norfolk, is flat and, if the roads around Billund airport are anything to go by, largely empty. Henrik Brandt, director of the Idrættens Analyseinstitut (Danish Institute for Sports Studies) had intimated that Vejen, the host town for their 2011 conference titled in translation “The biggest challenges of the sports movement – facilities, voluntary sport clubs and commercial enterprises”, was a little on the quiet side and he had not exaggerated. Given the challenges of orbital motorway traffic, the vagaries of a major airport’s passenger management systems and an ongoing threat from Icelandic volcanic ash, the calm and unhurried efficiency of the Danish conference experience was more than welcome.

Relaxed is a word you can use freely about the Danish people, or at least the 300 or so sport and leisure managers from federations, municipalities and government agencies who met in Vejen on 25 and 26 May to consider the pressures currently being brought to bear on their sport system and how to react to them. Sport may be under pressure but that does not mean sports managers need to be.

That *The Leisure Review* was invited to speak, not just listen, to the debate is either a testament to Direktor Brandt’s perspicacity or a function of the expression “lost in translation” but with the opening day’s sessions being conducted, not unreasonably, in Danish our contribution to proceedings was bound to be minimal. With the aid of a local guide, however, it was possible to learn a few things. In Sweden the Nordic skiing association Vasaloppet have grown their annual race from 132 participants to over 50,000 using only volunteers and are now delivering a year-round programme, bringing runners and cyclists to use the same circuit used by the skiers minus the snow. Their director, Jonas Bauer, is an enthusiast who, even in Swedish, is a rousing advocate for what has become a major generator of tourism, television coverage and revenue, all of which goes back into the organisation. In Denmark the representatives of the major agencies and organisations representing sport do not necessarily see eye to eye on the future, or indeed the present, state of the sports system. And in Vejen on a warm afternoon a walk around the football fields, athletics track and beach volleyball court is a tempting alternative to the conference room.

One of the clearest messages from the experience was apparent from the moment of first entering the complex: sports facilities do not have to smell of sports people, be shabbily decorated in municipal Pantones or have the acoustic qualities of an aircraft hanger. They can be light, airy, have art on the walls and lift the spirit. They can be sunny.

The commune of Vejen has a population of some 44,000 souls spread over 817 square kilometres. The sports centre at Vejen has a hall large enough to accommodate a conference for 300 people, a hall set out as two handball courts, an open-sided gymnastics space the size of four or five badminton courts, a double dojo and the main handball arena. Plus a swimming pool, a couple of stylish meeting rooms, all the outdoor space and a nice little café which is big enough and open enough to accommodate a motor car – presumably being raffled – in its environs without any perceptible loss of movement space. It is space and the sense of flow it engenders that sets this facility apart. Built in stages over decades, the complex works around a sun-filled central space offering tempting glimpses into the main arenas. Designed as an informal space with formal meeting rooms around it and decorated with gymnastics equipment offered as art, this would be a dead area in most British facilities. Here it shares its calm with boisterous young people passing though,

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invites the uninvolved to relax and reflect, and allows business and gossip to be traded equally over a coffee; a coffee, let it be noted, that tastes of coffee and is provided free and without fetters throughout the working conference day, along with fruit, bottled water and the occasional brownie. No corporate stinginess here.

A conversation over dinner, taken in buffet style as all Danish meals seem to be, in the theatre adjoining the purpose-built conference hotel just over the road from the sports centre revealed that the remodelled facility was designed not just to accommodate but to encourage conferences, weddings and corporate events. Technical specifications have matched the design intent with appropriate parameters, such as an air-handling system ensuring that “sweat does not roll down the walls” when the rooms are used for sport. As an aside, and returning to the dinner, in all the years that The Leisure Review has been attending and delivering conference-style events we have never seen a bar so empty nor a post-dinner space so free of disco music, bad dancing or drunken delegates. In the words of the advertisement, it made a refreshing change.

The opening session of the second day was conducted in English both out of courtesy to the three foreign speakers and out of necessity, given the rarity of bilingual Englishmen. Remco Hoekmann of the Dutch Mulier Instituut was first to offer a perspective. Sport in the Netherlands is clearly under severe budgetary pressure and Hoekmann’s analytics pointed out those who will suffer most. With a society in which footballers pay five times less per season to play their sport than volleyballers, the squeeze will impact on the former more than the latter. Football is a game played in Holland by the lower classes and by immigrants. Volleyball, an indoor game and so inherently more costly, has attracted the moneyed in Dutch sporting society. When the squeeze comes it is the former who will be forced to cut sport from their life, not the latter. Hoekmann’s forthright interpretation of his current and apposite data showed how the timely collection and appropriate analysis of data can be directly useful and how much we miss in this country by putting our faith in the Active People’s survey.

It will surprise few who have heard him speak or read his work that The Leisure Review’s managing editor Mick Owen, who followed Hoekmann, amused some and confused others in his audience. TLR has long taken an idiosyncratic view of the sport, leisure and culture sector in the UK and, having been asked to be frank by the conference organisers, he offered a lively analysis which, by ending with a reference to social enterprise as one management solution and the attractions of outsourcing municipal services to the commercial sector as another, led seamlessly into the remaining English language presentations.

Those who have encountered Svend Elkjaer of the Sports Marketing Network will know that English is not his first language but in introducing the concept of community enterprise to his countrymen and women he experienced more than a language barrier. His brand of common sense and good practice gleaned from voluntary and commercial contexts, and predicated on putting the customer at the centre of your operation, is challenging enough but, in a country where the Vejen Idrætscenter is a shining exception and by no means the rule, it met resistance.

Nick Hawkins, however, met more. As a former MP and barrister Hawkins will be used to hostile audiences and the innate politeness of the Danes as a nation would preclude any unpleasantness but whether by luck or judgement – most probably the latter – Henrik Brandt had set up a session which offered many challenges to his audience. The commercial management of municipal facilities may have been one too far. From 2007 until recently Hawkins was legal director and company secretary of Danoptra Ltd. He is now a consultant to Danoptra, the parent company of Leisure Connection Ltd, one of a number of companies, and he was careful to name them all, which manage other people’s facilities for profit; not an inordinate profit but a profit nonetheless. He explained how this model worked, where Leisure Connection fitted in the scheme of things and, if he favoured fewer key performance indicators and a laissez faire approach in general, as a former Conservative shadow minister that can have come as no surprise.

Given the tenor of the presentations, the instincts for interaction of the speakers and the barely disguised intent of the session chair to get key areas of the debate out in the open, the question and answer session which followed was always going to be lively. There is an ostrich tendency in some parts of the Danish sports system when it comes to predicting the outcomes of political change and it was evident in the session but so was an appetite for change and a realisation that there are more things in heaven and earth than may be dreamt of in some people’s philosophies.

If this trip was an accurate 'toe in the water' experience of Danish culture it was one which suggests that a proper paddle would be fun, stimulating and challenging. Danes are articulate, outgoing and have a fine sense of irony, and if their country is a little flat it is also clean, well ordered and attractive. And they certainly know how to organise decent conferences for the practitioners within their sport and leisure industry; something to be learned by the English, perhaps.

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