

A vision for coaching: Frank Dick's perspective

As UK director of coaching from 1979 to 1994 for the sport of athletics Dr Frank Dick OBE oversaw the planning and athlete management for four Olympic Games. He recently spoke to Gwenda Ward about athletics, coaching and beyond.

Eager to talk and oozing passion for his subject, Frank Dick explained why, after 45 achievement-packed years in coaching, and given his successful career in business and sport consultancy, he still cares. "That's an easy question to answer. No-one goes into coaching to make money. It's a passion – some people have that leaning as an athlete, and some acquire it later – but the point is that the passion does not leave you. Coaching has not been my remunerated career since 1994 but my passion and commitment remains the same. And clearly much remains to be done, in the sport generally and in coaching. That fires the blood."

What, then, are the major issues that give him concern? "The first thing is that the culture of athletics coaching demands harmony between unpaid voluntary coaches and paid coaches. It is my perception that such harmony is not quite there for athletics coaching in the UK." Given that this very issue has been picked up by many, his choice of the phrase "not quite there" might be an understatement. "Well," he continues, "it rests with the leadership skills of the national federation's salaried coaches to create and preserve that harmony. Harmony may not be easy to achieve but it is essential, not only for the best interests of current athletes but also for creating a greater coaching future."

"Under the old salaried national coaches' scheme," Dick explains, "harmony was achieved by the salaried national staff – then national coaches – having primary responsibility for coaching coaches, teaching teachers and supporting coach-athlete partnerships. This generated a mutual trust and respect, and also ensured that the influence of the professional coach extended across the coaching community. In that model the federation's salaried coaches do any personal coaching in their own time, just like the volunteers, creating yet more common ground. It was a system that worked both for effective partnership between sectors and for national performance. The record over almost two decades from 1980 demonstrates that clearly. Now salaried performance staff are focused on coaching elite and elite potential athletes exclusively. To be fair, there are some exceptionally talented coaches in that staff and Charles [van Commenee, UK Athletics (UKA) head coach] is an outstanding leader. That model can and does work in terms of effectively controlling the performance management process and environment. However, it is also entirely dependent on the federation having very deep pockets."

When Dick became chair of Scottish Athletics in 2009 he was shocked to discover how expensive coaching qualifications had become for volunteer coaches and how much each individual then finds themselves spending. "I have conducted enquiries that show that British coaches variously spend 5 to 22% of their personal income to carry out their vital service for athletics. In at least these next 24 months they will feel a lot of pain due to economic pressures. Some are already suggesting they will have to cut back on their input. We must wake up to their needs and indeed the needs of all our volunteers. It may be that UKA is already looking into this but it is simply not acceptable that the cost to coaches for the first two levels of coach education hits them for a minimum of £455, excluding travel and accommodation costs, which could easily double that figure. This might be OK in a sport where there is probability of a commercial future career but in athletics? In effect, volunteer coaches are funding the federation's recruitment programme."

The coach education process is currently undergoing yet another rewrite and some question the necessity of this. "It is very regrettable that it is taking so long to put the coach certification programme beyond Level 2 in place," he sighs. "Naturally the team doing so will want a very professional job done on it But it



Frank Dick: leading the debate on coaching

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has created a bottle neck. This hurts the committed coach, and surely must also hurt the athletes they coach. Presumably they need their coaches to benefit from the content of Level 3 and beyond." One possible solution is the adoption of the European programme. "We simply cannot deny coaches their right to progression," he argues. "The IAAF programme is actually the model used by the European Council for Coaches [ECC] for all sport. So it fits perfectly to the European coaching framework recognised by the European Union, and this is likely to be increasingly significant. Why, very expensively, re-invent the wheel? The materials are fantastic and are all there waiting. Why not adopt it then adapt it to the development needs of our coaches? Simple!"

Dick is known for his view that the on-going process of self-managed, continuous personal learning and development should be facilitated by coaches themselves. "Giving coaches access to education and certification is the responsibility of the national federation," he explains. "The latter may also provide access to workshops, clinics and so on but that is probably not the right way. Coaches associations should do this." That may seem like a radical departure, but Dick doesn't agree. "In actual fact, the European Athletics Coaches Association was founded in 1960 because national federations were not providing coaches with help in their development," he argues. "Sir Arthur Gold, as European Athletics president, gave EACA official status by 'recognising' it. Paradoxically, he would not countenance a coaches association in UK. UKA and England Athletics continue to oppose the formation of a coaches' association. Germany is similar in this respect, so in that sense, I suppose it could appear radical."

Dick goes on to talk about the European set-up: "Every IAAF area has a coaches association, the presidents of which sit on the IAAF Coaching Commission. The chair of the commission sits on the IAAF Council and so has input to decision-making at the highest level of the sport. Ideally all national federations should have a coaches' association. Area coaches' associations should be alliances of national coaches' associations. We are working towards that in Europe, where countries such as Italy and France have very powerful coaches' associations."

Dick is careful to point out that the development of the practising coach is not the same as coach education. "Mere qualifications alone do not mean you are a good coach," he says. "Just as there is an athlete pathway building to the peak performance years, so also for the coach. The latter pathway is, however, a much longer process, stretching over many years. It includes coach education qualifications but the coach pathway also includes a personal commitment to self-directed, continuous learning through reading, study, conferences, symposiums, practical workshops and clinics, access to coaches of experience and expertise, and so on. The knowledge gathering never ends. Learning through experience never ends. The pursuit of personal coaching excellence and effectiveness never ends." Is he saying that the act of coaching well is synonymous with high personal motivation to learn more, and that drive must be intrinsic to shaping the direction of coaching? "Exactly. Coaches need to be moving in the same direction, as a body, identifying issues from practice, guiding and shaping the practical application of their art."

He goes further, saying, "Sport development requires coaching to be a properly regulated profession, and coaches must be free to regulate it themselves, as in medicine, teaching, social work and other professions. Three years ago I produced the Coach's Charter which identifies both the rights and responsibilities of coaches. Responsibilities have been identified frequently but as with all other groups of professionals, rights must also be recognised and that can hardly be done without the input and agreement of coaches themselves."

Dick is an advocate of coaches' associations throughout sport. "I feel strongly that our coaches associations must lead the move towards a properly regulated coaching profession. Sport is not a profession like law, medicine or engineering because of its need to embrace the paid and the voluntary. For us, professionalism is about attitude and codes not economics." Having said that, Dick uses these professions as a template for coaching: "By completing a university course, a graduate is not a lawyer, doctor or engineer. It is the professional body who gives license to practise. And the body is the profession's leadership – not the university faculty. In sport the federations provide the qualification at completion of the course of education but it should not be the federation who issues the licence to practise. That should be the properly regulated coaching body and it should be governed by coaches. This is the only way to harness both the energy of coaches themselves and the findings from practice."

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The discussion on the professionalisation of coaching has been going on for decades yet in many locations, especially away from large conurbations, it is impossible to envisage how the lack of Level 3 coaches, and so high-quality coaching, is ever going to be satisfactorily addressed other than by creating local employment opportunities for suitably qualified and experienced coaches. In that scenario an active coaches' association giving input to ethical, safe, achievement-focused practice would fit perfectly. Dick agrees. "I envisage a mixed economy in coaching; volunteers, employed by various organisations – or even self-employed, operating within and without club settings and in performance centres. Sport development also requires parity of esteem for coaches, paid, unpaid, working with high performance, developing or beginner, able bodied or disabled athletes, and this needs to be championed by a professional body and the associations."

Going back to the global perspective, Dick puts the UK experience into context. "The International Council of Coaches Education [ICCE] and the European Coaching Council [ECC] are both committed to establishing a professional coaching body. Actually, Pat Duffy, Miguel Crespo and I have been requested to begin work on this. A starting point has been the drawing up of a coaches' charter setting out the rights and responsibilities of coaches. I prepared and proposed this three years ago and it is now recognised by ICCE and IAAF. The next step is to do something with it. Making a decision to do something is not even close to actually doing it but it affords a strong platform to setting a strategy."

Like many other senior players in the coaching pantheon Dick is drawn to Europe. "The European Union has made big steps forward in acknowledging sport's value. At a meeting in Madrid in March, organised by the ICCE and ECC for several sports' European Federation coaches' associations, it was made clear that sport is firmly on the EU agenda and that coaching is central to this. Coaches associations are seen by ICCE and ECC as critical to any strategy in moving things forward in Europe." Exciting though these ideas may be there is a disconnect between them and the realities of day-to-day coaching activity in Britain, 2011 and Dick recognises this. "In all of this coaches must be more willing to get involved in the collective purpose of shaping their future. They may have to side-step current structures to do this. My perception is that the voluntary sector now has very little influence in where sport is headed."

This article was first published on The Inside Track, an athletics-based online publication at www.theinsidetrack.org.uk

The Leisure Review, May 2011

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