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## Coaching the hard to coach

**The pre-event publicity for the second of *The Leisure Review's* Coaching Insights seminars made much of the disjunction between coaches and the performers they work with but the five presentations made on the day made light of the challenges, offering solutions, suggestions and data-based ways forward.**

For *The Leisure Review* to continue with the fiction that the Coaching Insights series is a function merely of this magazine's managing editor's interest in sports coaching would be disingenuous if not dishonest. Without the support of Sport Nottinghamshire and Nottingham Trent University the second Insight seminar might never have happened and certainly would not have been so successful. The format is simple enough – a room is found, refreshments laid on, speakers recruited and an audience of coaches invited to join the discussion – but the alchemy which creates a vibrant exchange of information, ideas and inspiration is harder to conjure. However, the three-way partnership of county sports partnership, university and independent communications channel seems to be able to do it.

Much of the credit for the success of the event and the high quality of the debate lies with the speakers and their audience. The presenters came from schools sport, community sport, business, elite sport and a national agency, while the audience comprised coaches from football, cricket, rugby, aquatics, mountaineering, squash and parkour able to call upon experience of every level of coaching performers from beginners to Olympians. The only downside to the afternoon (if the impossibility of parking easily on a university campus when "double games" is on the timetable is discounted) was the chronic shortage of time created by having five speakers. People spoke and listened quickly but you cannot debate at high speed; the energy in the room when interrogations began contrasted with the rapt attention as information was being passed, clearly showing that people were there to debate.

Given 'Coaching the hard to coach' as the theme of the seminar, an obvious first point of departure for an East Midlands event would be the depressed former coalfields of north Derbyshire, north Nottinghamshire and South Yorkshire. Doncaster, perhaps unfairly, has a reputation for deprivation-induced wildness that sets it apart even from its geographical neighbours and sits within the depressed triangle decimated by Margaret Thatcher in the last class war this nation fought. With David Cameron and his cronies waging their own budgetary war on the less well-off it was reassuring to hear from Lindsay Gray and her colleagues from the Flying High Schools Sports Partnership, whose patch covers all of Doncaster, with a confident, optimistic presentation that talked about an approach to coaching that puts the needs of the young person being coached at the forefront, with the needs of the national governing bodies of sport very much a secondary concern.

Three years ago only 40% of Doncaster's school students were taking up the three-hour offer of non-curriculum activity. Schools reported that the same young people were participating in all the offered activities and with 90% of coaches on the local authority register listing their main sport as football, rugby, athletics, cricket or hockey. There was a major issue with the local sports system's capacity to generate interest and then to grow the interest in the community through sustained participation. The antidote to the 'traditional' approach has involved listening to young people, using 21st century communication channels and delivering quick, fun games where everyone is on a level playing field, as it were. From a coaching point of view the focus has moved from technical mastery to personalised support and such is the demand from the newly developed market that rather than train casual coaches Flying High have recruited a two 'young people specialists' to drive participation, engagement,



The TLR Insight presenters (left to right): Kath Robinson, Lindsay Gray, Andy Lockwood, Athalie Redwood-Brown, Liz Jones and Chris Lillistone

**"The thirst for knowledge and the hunger for opportunities to process it in the company of one's peers exhibited in the second Insight certainly shows that the vocation of coaching contains an energy which, if harnessed, could drive that change"**

capacity-building and the development of exit routes. One of these, Craig Collins, a young person himself to many of the audience, spoke compellingly of the engagement of turned-off youngsters and the development of boot camp fitness, rock-it-ball, ultimate frisbee, handball, tchukball and parkour sessions. "The experiences on offer have to meet young people's demand," he said. "The days of training into fixtures have gone. Social participation is where the masses attend and where disengaged young people want to participate."

The recruitment of a speaker from the Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation (WSSF) to speak about coaching the hard to coach would seem to imply that women fall into the target category, a dangerous thing to do. Chris Lillistone, the foundation's insight and innovation manager, made life easier all round by titling her presentation "Women: hard to coach? Debunking the myths" and did such a good job of challenging some old canards about women in sport that some in the audience even came to believe that women were the same as men. The WSSF have recently published a series of six factsheets (see below) outlining where men and women differ. The cumulative message for coaches is: "You will work with people who do not fit the averages. You will work with men who also want to be coached in a similar way. The key is to get to know what makes your athlete tick and to listen to them." Chris was gracious enough not to punt her next visit to Nottingham from the platform but, given the event will include Olympian Tasha Danvers, presentations on teenage drop-out, marketing sport to women and designing programmes to meet women's needs, many of the audience might be tempted to switch local university campuses on 28 March.

Having seen the audience split politically and by gender, Liz Jones introduced the concept of Generation Y and split the room chronologically. A consultant who specialises in helping companies manage their 18- to 25-year-old workforce – Gen Y – Jones outlined the characteristics of the young people who will make up 50% of the working population by 2018. Born into a digital world, they read blogs not newspapers, buy music online not in shops and use instant messaging rather than the telephone to communicate. Significantly for people expected to coach members of Gen Y, their decisions are highly influenced by their peers, their loyalty lies with big, bold, well-designed brands and, while they like to win, enjoy reward and team success, they are less keen about being out in front on their own, can be bad losers and always need to believe that the prize is worth the effort. A short discussion focused on the "sad situation" which saw young people psychologically addicted to social media, the challenges of coaching squads full of Gen Y performers and the implications for employers such as national governing bodies of sport (NGB) and county sports partnerships (CSP) with young work teams and not-so-young managers.

The ability to understand the psychology of both groups and of individual performers is clearly part of what makes Athalie Redwood-Brown successful in her chosen field, despite that field being all about objective data. As senior lecturer in performance analysis at NTU, Redwood-Brown's working life should revolve around hard data but the interpretation of that data and its implications means she is often balancing performers' brittle psyches, especially performers who operate at the highest level, against the needs of those for whom they perform. When it comes to managing the egos of the elite there are "none harder than Premiership footballers". Having worked in a number of England's leading soccer clubs, she has become adept at using empirical data to close the gap between reality and interpretation. With the average coach unable to use more than 30% of observed information the collection of statistical data and its analysis can not only increase that percentage but also, if managed, allow player and coach to reach consensus in their interpretation of what each perceives to be "the facts". Redwood-Brown told the story of a striker unable to score whose self-image depended on his scoring. His confidence was spiralling downwards as he focused on his failure to score. By encouraging an analysis of the performance elements that went into "scoring" – making runs, beating defenders, using space – and then measuring those the striker was persuaded that he was in fact (not opinion) playing well. The title of the presentation – The numbers don't lie – may well be a truism but the application of those numbers is more subtle than would at first appear.

At first sight the involvement of commercial companies in the coaching process would appear undesirable with the profit motive at odds with the

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ethical basis on which many contexts, programmes and indeed whole sports are based. However, the world is turning and Kath Robinson of Sport Structures made the idea seem less threatening with a brief exposition of her company's place in the sport system, not only in the West Midlands where the consultancy is based but further afield. Having set up a community interest company (CIC) to manage a comprehensive coach education and intervention programme in disadvantaged parts of Sandwell, the company has moved on to provide the coach education function for a CSP, a major metropolitan local authority and most intriguingly more than one NGB. Being a coach educator and trainer in her own right, Robinson read her end-of-afternoon audience well; her bare-bones account left time for questions and the room responded. The role of the NGB, the pressures facing the smallest of them, the place of the coach educator in maintaining a sport's culture and the lack of care exhibited by some commercial coaching companies were all put under the microscope in a flurry of rapid debate.

At the end of the report of the first Coaching Insight [see TLR, September 2010] we mused that the world of coaching may be about to change. The thirst for knowledge and the hunger for opportunities to process it in the company of one's peers exhibited in the second Insight certainly shows that the vocation of coaching contains an energy which, if harnessed, could drive that change. But does anyone know where the ignition key is?

**Full details of the WSFF event on 28 March can be found on *The Leisure Review* events page.**

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