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[back issues](#)

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[back page](#)

## Sitting at the feet of giants

**Our second Coaching Insight session of the autumn schedule saw the programme of seminars for developed coaches return to Nottingham where the adventure began. Three of Nottinghamshire's very best coaches were on stage, with even more in the audience. Mick Owen reports.**

For the average coach or coach educator making their way around the foothills of the sporting landscape it is rare to meet Olympic or international coaches either past or future. They do their work in their habitats and the rest of the coaching population do theirs in theirs. With this in mind, when Simon Starr, Sport Nottinghamshire's director, floated the idea of bringing some of coaching's deities down from their mountain top The Leisure Review was more than happy to oblige.

Nottinghamshire calls itself "the sporting county" and, if the coaches brought together at Nottingham Trent University were anything to go by, it is not an idle boast. Without an English Institute of Sport (EIS) hub or a 2012 venue within its boundaries, there is no imposed congregation point for elite sports people and their support teams so to find so many high-quality coaches in the room, let alone on the platform, was a welcome surprise. The seminar title – Sitting at the Feet of Giants: what can we learn from the coaches of elite performers? – may have had a slight ring of irony about it but the opportunity to hear what some of today's top coaches know and do attracted coaches of similar quality as well as coaches still making their way in the coaching game.

An informal survey of the room's occupants revealed three people who had been honoured at the Sports Coach UK coach of the year awards, three coaches of current Olympic or Paralympic hopefuls, two men who have coached performers to Olympic medals, two national governing body heads of coaching, and a man who claims to have coached both of the right wingers who started for England in 2007 when both men's and women's teams contested rugby union's world cup finals. The mix of sports was eclectic and the discussions as varied and intense as regular attenders – and this was the fourth Nottingham Insight – have come to expect.

The first speaker was Glenn Smith, a swimming coach at a local authority pool in the depressed former coalfield of North Notts, hardly a job description to stir the blood. That the pool in question is the Rebecca Adlington Swimming Centre and that Smith was one of the coaches honoured as part of Adlington's "coaching chain" is far more exciting; and the fact that he is currently working with two Paralympians with 2012 medal potential gave a real edge to his presentation. Despatches from the front line of the 2012 battle for gold do not come fresher than this.

Despite his palmares, Smith sees his job as being to support the swimmers he works with. Contrast this approach to swim coaching's biggest name, Bill Sweetenham, and his modesty is even more refreshing. His use of language is telling. Whenever he refers to hard work or challenge he uses 'we' but whenever he speaks of winning medals or breaking records the pronoun changes. At one point when talking about the journey simply to get selected to compete for Great Britain next year he acknowledge it would be "quite an achievement for those two".

The two swimmers he spoke about in depth – he is head coach for the whole Nova Centurion swimming programme and works with a host of developing talent – were Charlotte Henshaw and Oliver Hynd, young people whose every movement is choreographed and recorded. Smith went through their training regimes for just one week and emphasised the importance of structure. "Routine is everything with these athletes," he said and, when questioned later about the need for variety to provide motivation, reiterated this point. As the audience were made privy to the race analysis of Henshaw's world record swim and the complexity of the support system – physiotherapists, nutritionists, and

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strength and conditioning coaches to name but three of the experts who work with the swimmers – the weight of detail he has to be in control of became apparent. However, it was when he strayed into anecdote that the complexity of his challenge was most obvious.

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When the Olympic aquatic centre was ready to be viewed Smith and Hynd were able to 'take the tour'. After a 90-minute health and safety briefing and a trip through what is still effectively a building site they got to the pool and were suitably impressed by the design, the finishes and the preparation areas. However, it was only when they walked from the 'ready room' on to poolside and were faced by the 17,000 seats rising vertiginously around them that Smith realised how febrile the atmosphere will be when all those seats are full. With no previous experience of such a huge and hugely excited home crowd Smith is still working out how to prepare his swimmers. Such is his attention to detail and commitment to his role that there is little doubt he will find a way.

Finding a way, often when his fellow short track speed skating opponents were trying to block it, was one of Nicky Gooch's skills when he competed at four Olympics, bringing home a bronze medal from Lillehammer. As soon as he finished competing in 2000 Gooch moved into coaching and spent seven years as the development coach for his governing body before moving into his current role as head coach of the short track team in time to complete a full Olympic cycle up to and including the Vancouver games. It is a mark of his commitment to the craft that he describes himself as "relatively inexperienced". His is a small sport with "not a massive talent pool" so in order to maximise resources all their elite athletes train as a group in Nottingham. Within this environment the aim is to "normalise the competition environment" and so pressure is brought to bear. Gooch dropped enough hints to suggest that one of the key ingredients is his own drive to succeed and impatience with the failings of others.

Like Smith, Gooch manages the input of a range of professionals but the thrust of his presentation, which considered how to create a winning culture, dwelt in the arena of the sports psychologist. He spoke of winning behaviours, the primeval influence of fear on the brain, growth versus fixed mindsets, and the power of the chimp in us all. This last analogy was popularised by Steve Peters, the psychologist who has an office at the Manchester Velodrome where he works with British Cycling. Speed skating has adopted and adapted this and other theories to help manage the interactions in their elite group. Using a four-colour categorisation to help people understand themselves and others may seem like standard practice but, with the help of his own mentor, the group's sports psychologist Mike Rotheram, Gooch is using it to inform how he relates to athletes. He showed a one-page document which listed the behaviours he, as a "red personality" who liked to "get it done", should adopt when dealing with a skater from the blue quadrant, someone who would prefer to "get it right". The other categories are yellow, who want to "get it done together", and greens, who prefer to "get along". The suspicion that Gooch struggles with working with people who fail to see things his way was born out by his answer to a question about how to deal with talented athletes who will not buy into the group's agreed behaviours. He told the story of a skater with massive potential who would or could not fit in. Gooch ended their relationship, the skater went to roller skating and is now driving a white van. In contrast the relay team he coaches set a world record over 5,000 metres and Great Britain can boast the junior men's world champion in the 1,000 metres.

The final speaker of the afternoon was Mick Newell, the director of cricket at Nottinghamshire County Cricket Club and recently coach to the England Lions squad that toured West Indies. A former county-standard batsman, Newell is far more successful as a coach and at Trent Bridge he, like Smith and Gooch, deals with a large team of support specialists. Indeed his first observation was that there were "so many similarities" in how all three men operate, although one difference he did note, and this pertained to Nottinghamshire rather than his national team work, is that he works with some people whose highest career points are behind them.

The distinction between the England Lions environment where "all the players were still on the way up" and his day job, where he deals with players between the ages of 18 and 41 whose motivations vary as much as their age, was one of which he was keenly aware. On the positive side he singled out Graeme Swann, whose motivation seems to be that playing cricket "is better than working for a living", but he also told of a senior bowler who is now with another county having refused to buy into the rotation of fast bowlers introduced by Newell to develop both younger players and those born in Nottinghamshire.

In Gooch's presentation he used the phrase "pressure on, pressure off", a [www.theleisurereview.co.uk](http://www.theleisurereview.co.uk)

coaching litany which relates to the need to relax the tension of training once the performer gets close to and into competition. Newell then picked up on this speaking of the need to adapt to each individual's needs. Stephen Fleming, a former captain of New Zealand, would only hit a rolled tennis ball before going into bat, while others would spend 40 minutes in the nets in preparation for an innings. The need to "get into their minds" and support them as individuals is important to Newell, although he is less convinced of the need for sports psychology than Gooch. Whether this is a function of working in a team sport, complete with the fabled "dressing room atmosphere", his own self-assurance or the daily grind of the professional circuit, which means that significant changes to technique, or to mindset, can only be made in the "windows of opportunity" in the off season, is moot.

At points in the afternoon the seminar room door opened and a woman carefully counted heads. She did at one point explain that it was for a "utilisation survey" but had she been monitoring the audience for interest, engagement and motivation she would have been ticking the '10 out of 10 box' on each of her visits.

### ***The Leisure Review, November 2011***

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