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## Developing talent: in search of the Philosopher's Stone of elite coaching

***The Leisure Review* invited a string of coaches and performers with experience of elite sport to discuss the nurturing and development of talent. Jonathan Ives reports on the question of what makes the pinnacle of performance special.**

Given that the topic under discussion was elite performance and the development and nurturing of elite talent, fun made an early entrance to proceedings. Chris Robertson, England Squash and Racketball's head coach, was the first speaker and, perhaps to the surprise of some, he introduced the concept of enjoyment of sport early in his presentation.

"As a governing body," he said, "we're putting a structure in place for juniors. We create a culture where juniors can try to be good but, while we want them to emulate the top players, we don't want to take out the fun and enjoyment."

As a former national coach for Wales and, at one stage in his squash playing career, number two in the world rankings, Robertson has extensive experience of the elite end of his sport and he explained how the governing body is able to work with talent, from the promising juniors through to the established tournament professionals travelling the world in search of prize money and ranking points.

Senior players work with juniors as often as possible and coaches working with the junior squad seek a balance between a comprehensive competition programme and time for skill development. After the juniors there is a transition stage where players move through the development structure and explore whether they have what it takes to perform as professionals. At this stage in the process the coaching team will have gained an idea of how far a player might go and will set about agreeing on a vision for a player's performance goals.

For a coach, Robertson explained, taking responsibility for a player's career is a big undertaking. A coach's advice is paramount and the player's working environment is crucial to their development. His coaching team emphasises "the three Ps" – perception, process and progressing players – and supports players in their efforts to make sure that their working environment, the day-to-day business of living, playing and performing, are conducive to success. A number of performance "hotspots" around the country, for example in Harrogate and Manchester, where players have congregated make this slightly easier for the coaching staff.

"We're looking for something that sets the player aside," he said. "We don't have funding to enable us to accompany players around the world so we need a player to be a self-sufficient decision-maker. They need the ability to learn. A thinking player can do a lot of your work for you and you need to be aware that players' significant others are crucial. Whether these are girlfriends or husbands, you have to remember that we all want the same thing: success."

Robertson explained that changes to the way the modern game of squash is played have influenced the coaching approach. Coaches now look for a "super strength" – a particular skill or ability – that sets a player apart. A super strength combined with "a rock-solid foundation" can make a top-ten player. Coaches work hard on the development of these skills but also personal traits.

"We're very big on reflection and honesty," he said. "We are dealing with different players and different personalities. Everyone is different and if you treat everyone the same way you'll get disappointing results. I certainly have. We have to remember that we coach a person, an individual. It is a coach's job to build a dream and offer that vision."

Dave Rotheram, national player development manager with the Rugby Football League (RFL), had been working closely with juniors in developing his

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presentation on the psychological qualities required by top-class performers and how coaches can help develop them. "I had to ask my 11-year-old what the Philosopher's Stone is," he said. "Apparently, 'It's magic!'"

Less inclined to trust to the supernatural than many 11-year-olds, the RFL has developed a player development programme with six areas: technical, tactical, movement skills, athletic development, lifestyle, and psychological development. "How much time as a coach do you spend on these areas?" he asked his audience.

"Elite rugby league coaches were asked to come up with 10-point list of the differences between a good player and an elite player," Rotheram explained. "Psychological aspects came at top of the list." He was also adamant that these aspects of performance can be learned. "As a coach I didn't think you could change a person," he said, "but as I've got more experienced I think you can."

Surveys of coaches of US Olympic athletes as well as rugby league coaches have consistently identified psychological attributes as critical to the achievement of success in their particular fields. Rotheram used the example of the England under-16 squad that went on a tour in 2001. Of the 24 15-year-olds involved in that tour only one now plays in the Super League, a statistic that demonstrated how fine the line between elite performance success and failure. Psychological attributes are, he argued, where the difference lies.

Gwenda Ward, an Olympian and former elite athlete herself, picked up this thread of potential performers falling by the wayside. Taking as her title *Systems Failure: How Talent Falls Through the Net*, Ward was keen to emphasise that although she spent a lot of time involved with the governing body of athletics she in no way represents it. Her blog, which was begun by her late husband, is highly critical of how athletics approaches the development and management of talent. Ward argues that, in common with so many aspects of the sport, elite development is hopelessly mismanaged by a governing body that has failed to manage the sport with any great degree of competence.

"We have declining participation and standards," she said. "This is not exclusive to athletics but it is prevalent within the sport. The blog is saying the emperor has no clothes. The bottom line is that we cannot identify talent without an adequate coaching workforce. Athletics doesn't have much professionalisation of coaching, in contrast with other sports. Sportscoach UK makes a claim of 70,000 athletics coaches but there are not even that many athletes. Fewer than 3,000 athletes in the UK may be more accurate and there are probably around 3,000 coaches but the diversity of the sport means that it is very difficult to identify talent."

However many coaches there may be with an interest in athletics, a key issue, Ward argued, is that athletics as a sport does not know where these coaches are, what they coach or what motivates them. This means that the governing body cannot support them to work to the best of their ability. The sport's coach education system focuses on the technical to the detriment of the personal, which does little to promote the self-management skills fundamental to athlete development. Ward argued that this in turn undermines the continuum that runs from self-discipline to the achievement of potential, which she characterised as: self-discipline leads to self-control, which leads to self-confidence, which leads to self-realisation, which in turn leads to fullest potential.

"We need to support coaches in different ways," she said. "There is a lot of research on motivation of athletes but nothing on the motivation of the coach. What I see in athletics coaching comes from the need for power and desire for professional power. How can the athlete be developed if this is the case? If we are serious about talent we need to have career pathways for coaches. Coaches need security and respect; they need ethical supervision and management. The coach needs self-awareness and self-management. We're very bad at this in athletics."

As ever with Coaching Insight sessions, discussion quickly followed the presentations, the audience engaging the presenters in debate on topics such as different approaches to coach pathways in various sports, the issue of "the face not fitting" for coaches in certain sports, and why national governing bodies fail to treat coaches like customers and value them accordingly. Gwenda Ward clarified some of the figures in her presentation, explaining that a participation study suggests there are fewer than 3,000 active athletes between ages 20-35 in the UK. "The question is," she suggested, "why athletics receives any funding at all based on these figures."

Discussion and argument continued over coffee before delegates were brought back together for an open space session in which everyone in the room was invited to suggest a topic that they would like to see explored in greater detail before leading any group that might or might not join them towards some sort of conclusion. With such a wealth of coaching experience in the room all the topics that emerged, which included breaking into high-performance coaching, talent identification, how to spot desire in performers, and the role of the performance director, were pored over in minute detail until the clock dictated that a reluctant halt be called to proceedings.

***The Leisure Review Coaching Insight series continues. For full details visit the events page.***

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

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