

Coaching matters: so what is the future for our profession?

Long before Seb Coe booked the Olympic circus into Stretford 2012 had been identified as a key date for sport, or at least for coaching. Joe Coach looks backwards and forwards while reflecting on the nature of professionalisation.

The start of a new year, let alone a new decade, does make you look back as well as forward. During the recent break from hostilities I started to reflect on the fact that I have been coaching as a volunteer (and for a few years on part-time wages) for 30 years and began to feel the need to air my views on the future of coaching and particularly progress to date on the development of a fully recognised and professionally regulated occupation and vocation.

Outside coaching – and please bear with me as this is relevant – I have had a career where I have followed a professional programme of education with regular continuing professional development (CPD) and a clear and flexible pathway where different roles and remits are well defined. I have also been an active member of an independent professional body where there are explicit ethical standards and values which are enforced by various regulatory groups. The experience of working within a discernible and defined profession has therefore informed my questions on the future for the full professionalisation of sports coaching but you don't need my background to be a little concerned.

As it is a new year I shall begin with some positives. It is clear that coming into sports coaching in 2010 is a big improvement from when I started, back in 1980. While I may have wanted to study for a sports coaching degree, the lack of appropriate careers advice at school coupled with the fact that there was only one course that seemed to offer what I required (which I only found out about too late) meant that I followed the tried and trusted route of making coaching a 'labour of love', fitting my coaching activities around a full time career in another industry. National governing body (NGB) qualifications, continuous CPD workshops and attendance at various National Coaching Foundation workshops enabled me to just about to keep up to date with the latest developments but attendance for most of these learning opportunities came out of my own pocket. In fact a key moment in my coaching career came in the early 1990s when it became clear that I had to cut back on my coaching activities (which had expanded to take up three or four evenings each week plus most weekends) when family commitments arrived and coaching was burning too big a hole in my pocket.

In 2011 I limit my involvement in coaching to just a few hours a week but find a very different situation facing the new coaches who are part of my coaching group and want to follow a career in sports coaching and sports development. For a start, there is a multitude of sports coaching and related degrees on offer on the UCAS website. The fact that many young people have already taken some form of sports leadership certificate at school is hugely beneficial. There are sports scholarships on offer now at a number of different institutions. The careers guidance at school also seems much improved as young people are advised about suitable physical education and related subject options at GCSE and A level. Most significantly, many students staying on to study A levels or more vocational courses have already started their coaches learner journey by enrolling on UK Coaching Certificate (UKCC) Level 1 courses. There also appear to me many more (although often very confusing) sources of funding for young people who are starting out in coaching.

All of which amounts to a vast improvement on the way things were 30 years ago and that is before you acknowledge, and indeed celebrate, the improvement in recognised national coach education standards and the availability of more opportunities to coach, both on a part- and full-time basis, especially in high-performance settings.



Coaching in the UK: several tacks forward and an equal number of tacks back?

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However, there is a flip side and on it are some key components that are sadly lacking when we compare coaching to other fully professionalised occupations. Consider a recent quote in Sportscoach UK's in-house magazine, Coaching Edge, which in summer 2009 (commenting on the future of coaching) said: "We still have a long way to go in British Coaching... we are a long way from the full professionalisation of coaching. We need to improve the recruitment, employment and deployment of coaches because these areas remain problematic and piecemeal."

In my capacity as a volunteer coach (with aspirations to have followed a part- or full-time route into coaching) I am very confused and frustrated as to why certain aspects of the full professionalisation of coaching seem not to have moved forward or why if steps forward have been taken they were closely followed by several steps back. I remember British Association of Sports Coaches forming in the 1980s and the subsequent formation of British Institute of Sports Coaches, which in turn disappeared. I am not sure if there is a current professional coaching body for sport coaches, although my NGB has an "officially recognised coaches association" which seems to sell insurance and courses on behalf of the NGB but does little else.

When I look upwards and out of my NGB silo to find out what has become of the drive to full professionalisation, which, correct me if I'm wrong, was and has been the vision for coaching since the 1990s, there seem to have been several false dawns in the all too arduous journey; does anyone else remember the publication and promotion of Coaching Matters which called for a more coherent and integrated direction for sports coaching in the UK some time in the early 1990s? And if my memory serves me correctly projects like Champion Coaching made some great early strides, didn't they?

Further progress on the road to establishing a framework for the professionalisation of coaching did seem to take two major steps forward with the formation of the Coaching Task Force in 2001 and the advent of the UK Coaching Framework (UKCF) in 2006. But in the last few years from where I stand (just to the side of where real people are doing real sport) there seems to have been a real loss of momentum in policy development and strategic leadership. I know I was informed by my NGB that the UKCF was a "main plank of the 2012 Olympic legacy plans" but that seems to have gone very quiet of late. Sport England's recent announcement on recruiting, training and deploying 40,000 sports leaders as the next generation of sports volunteers to lead grassroots sporting activities as part of the Places People Play plans is a laudable plan on its own but where does it fit with a wider 2020 vision and strategy for coaching as a profession? And what will the recent government deficit reducing funding cuts, which will hit school, community and NGB sports programmes, do to coaching in these contexts and in general? It certainly sounds like unless there is a pow-pow of the great and the good in sports coaching (the question of who and where they might be is one for another day) that we will all be treading water, or maybe slipping under it, as we continue to try to move coaching to a professional, recognised vocation for all coaches, be they volunteer, part-time or full-time.

As ABC nearly had it, "I don't know the answer to these questions, if I did I would tell you" but I do want to share these concerns for the future with other people who care about coaching. Of course, if I was a member of a recognised independent professional association of coaches I could confidently do that at the click of a mouse. Let's hope the young people I'm trying to help into coaching are not as old and tired as I am now before we have a comprehensive and integrated approach to professionalising sports coaching.

Joe Coach is the nom de plume of a highly experienced and impressively qualified sports coach. Read Joe Coach Coaching: Art or Science in the December issue of *The Leisure Review*.

The Leisure Review, February 2011

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