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## Leading in Leeds: melting pot or crucible for coach developers?

**When Professor Pat Duffy extended an invitation to the nation's coach developers Mick Owen went along to hear what a siren song sounds like close up.**

The new stand that rises behind the try line at the Leeds home of both codes of rugby provides a delightfully malleable metaphor for the modern approach to sport as well as the perfect venue for Patrick Duffy's return to the world of coaching politics in the UK. The stand was built by the very modern Leeds Metropolitan University but is labelled the Carnegie Stand, an acknowledgement that the new university stands on the shoulders of the teacher training college which went before it. The new build is steel and glass modernity incarnate but sits cheek by jowl with cobbled streets and back-to-back terraces. The stadium plays host to the city's union and league sides, an abiding conundrum and a testament to both parties' appreciation of collaborative working which means in Headingley rugby is just rugby. Not only do two rugby clubs share one stadium but they both then share their ground with Yorkshire County Cricket Club, a juxtaposition not uncommon at the grassroots but at the top levels both a rarity and a perfect symbol for modern sport where commercial reality obliges strange bedfellows and creative solutions.

The location of so many organisations in such a small space creates, to coin a phrase, a melting pot of ideas and dialogue, and this concept was chosen by Leeds Met's relatively new professor of sports coaching, Pat Duffy, to brand his first visit to the world above the parapet since leaving his post as chief executive of Sportscoach UK (scUK) two summers since. Duffy's departure was shrouded in confusion and animosity but with the late afternoon sun beaming down through the plate-glass frontage of the Lewis Jones hospitality suite and the room filling with the aristocracy of English coaching development it seemed churlish to rake up the past. That so many present were former employees of scUK may have had something to do with personal loyalty but it was also a function of scUK's role in developing excellent coach developers, the currency and the quality of the conference programme, and the recent 30% cut in staffing levels at scUK which has left too many good people exploring the potential of future work in the world of coaching consultancy and beyond.

Ostensibly the conference was part of the university's newly minted coaching strategy and an opportunity to promote that document and all it presages but the politics are unavoidable. Duffy may not have seen himself as parking his tanks on Sportscoach UK's lawn but plenty in the audience, both in Leeds and beyond, certainly will. However, there was no sabre-rattling from Duffy, only the most oblique of references to his former role, a great deal of forward thinking and his usual Celtic charm. Duffy came to Leeds from Dublin and his latest move, just a few hundred yards round the corner, has allowed him to develop his international activity and much of his focus is on the European coaching scene. With the EC dominating so many aspects of modern life in Britain while the government tries to push "localism" it will be interesting to see which direction coaching takes.

With "new directions" one of Duffy's themes, his first job was to introduce fellow Celt, former rugby union international and dean of his faculty, Gareth Davies, who put the conference in context for anyone who needed a justification for collecting over 140 coach developers in one place and inviting them to interact. Davies positioned the university's new coaching strategy with political ease before introducing another political adept, Steve Grainger of the Youth Sport Trust. His overview of the sport system and coaching's place within it may not have endeared him to the hard-core coaches in the room but the message that politics is a game we all need to play if we want to stay ahead of the wave rather than getting swamped by it was timely and well

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Pat Duffy [second from right]: into the melting pot

**Duffy believes in systems, believes that we "need to make international connections in a globalised world", arguing we "cannot do it alone".**

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How many of the big beasts of the coaching jungle who were sprinkled around the room had come to hear Grainger speak is moot but there is little doubt that the atmosphere changed when the next speaker, French-Canadian Jean Côté, took to the lectern. Côté is a leading name in the study of “the developmental and psychosocial factors which affect sport and physical activity performance and participation in children” and is clearly a draw card. His material is scholarly and some of his conclusions challenging. His cost-benefit analysis of early specialism in one sport versus early sampling – where the child chooses many different sports – came down very clearly in favour of the latter as a model for the production of well-balanced, socially adjusted young people. What the governing bodies of sports that require early specialism of their participants – swimming, gymnastics and table tennis for example – thought about that went unrecorded on the night.

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It is in the nature of their kind that big beasts will bang heads and so it was that as Cote finished other academics led the ensuing debate. The same occurred when David Haskins, following Cote in the limelight, left off his exploration of the “5 Cs of coaching”. The tang of burning ego edged the air as Haskins was forced to use his not inconsiderable charm to turn away one particular leviathan’s attack. All good, knockabout fun for the aficionado but a reminder that the groves of academe are not always as tranquil as they may appear. Haskins’ book is reviewed in the April 2010 issue of The Leisure Review but Haskins updates as he goes and his presentation was current, relevant and over too soon.

When a conference organiser squeezes a quart of speakers into a pint pot of a programme it is often the delegate who ends up with a mind numbed to match their backside but to counter this Duffy and his team altered their point of attack for the final hour, inviting three governing bodies to present aspects of their work which Leeds Met believe represent exciting and innovative good practice. The ASA gave a flavour of their Swim for Life programme, which has transcended swimming teaching and “now blossomed to become our NGB philosophy”. It looks interesting, if a little geeky. The FA’s Pete Sturgess outlined football’s new coach development programme, which starts with a 90-minute discussion of ethics and coaching philosophy and is aimed, in part, at persuading coaches of children “to allow football to be fun and enjoyable” and “to meet the needs of the individual”. Hearing Sturgess using phrases like “understanding difference”, “coaches need to enthuse and excite the youngest of players” and “meets the need for coaches to have a greater understanding of teaching and learning” will have been relief indeed to anyone who had previously missed the FA’s “quiet revolution” which is trying to give the “national game” back to the nation’s children. Faced with a fading audience and a shortage of time, Gary Townsend, the RFU’s talent development manager and coach to Gordano RFU’s Under 12 squad, opted for gentle humour. He too spoke of a revolution but whether rugby clubs faced with implementing the findings of an ongoing pilot scheme which de-clutters the pitch for the youngest players and de-emphasises competition will go quietly remains to be seen. They should but common sense and sports organisations do not always go hand in hand.

With a ten o’clock finish on the first evening and a nine o’clock start the following morning the organisers may have been concerned that energy would be hard to come by on day two but the buzz of networking over coffee and croissants was charged and purposeful. The centrepiece of the event was always going to be Professor Duffy’s keynote and he did not disappoint, giving the personal philosophy behind the public strategy. Duffy clearly revels in his role at the centre of the Carnegie faculty but he also loves the international interaction his job allows. Evidence that global politicking can bring local benefit came in the announcement that he has been instrumental in attracting the Global Coaching Office to the university campus, an office which will support the European and global activities of the European Coaching Council and the International Council for Coach Education respectively, as well as bringing huge kudos to the host facility. Quite where developments like this place Leeds Met and Duffy in relation to the British coaching establishment in general, and the much vaunted but now stalled UK Centre of Coaching Excellence that was meant to have been established at the university in particular, is in some doubt. At one point Duffy did allude to the political ramifications of the Leeds Met strategy but only to say, “We will not be getting into a political bun-fight, just getting on with the job of proving the case”. And the case he will be proving is the case for coaching and for coaches. It is interesting to note that the strategy, to which Duffy consistently returned, “recognises the primary role of the governing body” in shaping the

future of coaching rather than any government agency. Whether this was the sound of a bet being placed or a tank being revved up it was hard to tell.

If politics coloured Duffy's presentation it was only at the edges and only if you were looking for the signs. The vast majority of what he said was about systems and vectors, all reassuringly scientific stuff for the technophiles in the room, and delivered in a philosophical context for the thinkers. Duffy believes in systems, believes that we "need to make international connections in a globalised world", arguing we "cannot do it alone". More than this, as the speed of life increases and the chaotic barrage of communications begins to hinder communication, "we need to be very clear about our system in the chaos". He used an analogy of two adjacent trees both with the same potential root, branch and leaf systems which grow to look quite different. The difference is caused by their environment which shapes each tree within the systemic parameters of the species. So it is with coaching systems. If we create a strong system as a base but allow for the environment to shape growth locally we have the best outcome for the people that matter, the individual participants.

As well as systems Duffy identified vectors for coaching. A vector is more than a compass point or a direction of travel. A vector has some surety about it, a coming from and a going to, some certainty. Identifying vectors in the chaos can be reassuring and Duffy did just that. He believes that we are on track for a clearer definition of the professional area of coaching, that coach training will change and involve an on-the-job element, that the coach developer is key, and that there will be a paradigm shift in the way coaching is defined and valued in the future. In many of these beliefs he chimed with his audience and the element of challenge was absent in the brief question and answer session which followed. A series of workshops followed and a round-up session actually identified some action points from the people who discussed the professionalisation of coaching from a higher education perspective and a will to collaborate to deliver change.

It seems churlish to be critical of an event as positively delivered and received as the New Directions conference but one nagging question remains. In Portugal the concept of there being four levels at which coaches operate, from assistant to expert, is enshrined in law. In Britain we cannot agree whether four is the right number or what to call the levels if we identify them; and if a sport decides they have lost the argument they just walk away and do what they wanted anyway. By his own admission Duffy likes a vector but such is the chaos in the sports system it will take the proscription he abjures or the leadership, which is currently absent, from Sportscoach UK (which remains in a state of flux more than a year after his departure) to get coaching in Britain moving in this direction. The development of the UK Coaching Framework has stalled and its opponents are pulling in a variety of self-serving directions. To quote Duffy, we need to stop having "We need to.." conversations" and get on with delivering against a common framework. If this is the case one has to ask why we walked away from the Carnegie stand no further forward as a profession than we were 24 hours before. With a room full of powerful, clever, positive people from across the coaching pantheon, should this conference have been a crucible rather than just a melting pot?

**Mick Owen is managing editor of The Leisure Review.**

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