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The English Institute of Sport: a view from the top

The English Institute of Sport is one of the organisations at the forefront of high-performance sport and the continuing quest for medals. With the London 2012 clock officially ticking, Jonathan Ives spoke to EIS national director Nigel Walker about sporting relationships, his organisation's core values and the potential impact of funding.

Nigel Walker has been national director of the English Institute of Sport (EIS) since the summer of 2010 and, as a former civil servant who has run at the Olympic Games and represented his country at rugby union, it is a post for which he seems admirably qualified, even if the country in question happens to be Wales. Behind this impressive job title, which he admits does sound rather grand, is the task of leading the delivery of sports services to elite sports performers on a day-to-day basis. It puts Walker at the cutting edge of high-performance sport and at the forefront of those supporting the push for medals at London 2012.

Invited by The Leisure Review to summarise his route to the national director's post, Walker runs quickly through a self-deprecating account of his career to date. An athletics career "way back when" took him to the 1984 Olympic Games as a hurdler and, having retired from athletics in 1992, he started playing rugby for his home-town club, Cardiff. Within five months, having been "in the right place at the right time", he was playing for Wales, going on to win 17 caps. In 1998, having hung up his boots next to his spikes, he started a career as a broadcaster and commentator which led to the post of head of sport at BBC Wales. The next step was as head of change and internal communications, representing the interests of sport on the BBC Wales board. He was then made programme director for the BBC Wales drama village ("Where they make Doctor Who and Pobol y Cym..."), a post he relinquished to come to the EIS.

"I've been very fortunate that things have fallen in my lap at the right time," Walker says, noting the ten years he spent as a civil servant while pursuing his athletics career and his time as a development officer for the Sports Council of Wales. In the 1990s he did "a bit of coaching", working with Katharine Merry, Darren Campbell and Jamie Baulch among others. His involvement with UK Sport, which supports the EIS, began in 2006 when Walker was appointed to the board. He remained a board member until his appointment as national director of the EIS and still sits on the UK Sport major events panel.

Having established his credentials, the next question is equally prosaic: what does the EIS do? Given the protracted debate over its actual role that dogged its early days and the fact that it seems to keep a fastidiously low profile, the question is perhaps not as otiose as might first appear and it is clearly a question that Walker is used to answering. He dives in with enthusiasm. "The EIS is at the elite end, as UK Sport is," he says. "UK Sport funds governing bodies – hockey, canoeing, UK Athletics are funded directly by UK Sport – and it's those governing bodies that come to the EIS to contract our services, which are sports science and sports medicine." He explains that under these umbrellas come specialisms such as physiology, physiotherapy, nutrition, biomechanics, strength and conditioning. "They don't all purchase all of those services. It's a bit of a pick and mix; they can select what they require off our shelves."

Walker also points out that the EIS is not just about service delivery. It is also involved with research with partners such as the British Olympic Association and educational establishments to look at specific issues within sport. By way of example he suggests that if particular injuries were occurring frequently in a particular sport the EIS might explore causes and treatments, offering the input back to governing bodies. It is, Walker explains, part of the EIS working across the elite sport sector to make sure

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Nigel Walker: admirably qualified

"If funding were cut dramatically between London and Rio you might see a slight tremor in Rio in 2016 but I can bet you that things would fall off the edge of a cliff in 2020."

that they have the best solutions for those sports.

The relationships between high-performance athletes, their coaches, their sports' national governing bodies and funding bodies is notoriously difficult. How effective is the EIS able to be in managing what are often complex and volatile situations? "I wouldn't say they're notoriously difficult," he says. "Obviously, wherever you've got human beings involved relationships are important. People don't always see eye to eye but we're professionals, athletes are increasingly professional and we work at those relationships. I would say our relationships are good and I would say that where there are ever any areas of conflict or friction we sit down and talk about it. But they are few and far between because we've got the best interests of the athletes and the governing bodies at heart. The governing bodies have got the best interests of their athletes at heart so we work together."

Walker is emphatic about the amount of work that the EIS gets through on behalf of its client athletes and client governing bodies. We happen to be talking on the day that marks 500 days to the opening ceremony of the London 2012 Olympic Games and the significance is not lost. "Today it's 500 days to go and between now and the start of the London Games we will deliver approximately 500 hours of sports science and sports medical services to athletes per day. We've got approximately 250 practitioners across the country and they're delivering. 500 hours, 500 days to go; so it's really quite significant."

Does this mean that the EIS will be claiming to have played a huge role in the success of Team GB? He laughs. "Well let's wait to see what happens! I expect us to be successful but yes we will have a huge influence. When I talk to our practitioners they know this. They know that every single treatment, every single contact with an athlete is vitally important. It could make the difference."

Outside the inner circles of high-performance sport the English Institute of Sport has very little profile. Few beyond the most dedicated of armchair sports fans will be familiar with the name of the organisation, fewer still would be able to offer a summary of what the EIS does. To what extent does the EIS need recognition of its contribution? "Recognition never does any harm when a country is successful," he says after a brief pause. "In Beijing we know we achieved a record number of medals – 47, the most in the last 100 years, a fantastic performance – and everybody would like to get due credit for what they have done within that. I think we will be successful in 2012 and I'd like to think that our practitioners have played their part. Government knows what part we've played."

At a recent gathering at Bisham Abbey, one of the EIS high-performance centres, sports minister Hugh Robertson was talking to participants and practitioners about their pre-2012 programmes. It is an indication, Walker suggests, that those who need to know – which might include ministers, UK Sport, the BOA, national governing bodies and athletes – all know the part being played by the EIS. "It's not for us to bleat about it," Walker says. "It's for us to make sure that we are as professional, as good and as excellent as we can be. Our three values are: innovation – ground-breaking work with those governing bodies and those athletes; collaboration – working with those partners to make us as easy to work with as possible; and excellence – being the best we possibly can be. I've said to everyone in this organisation that [these values] must run through us like a stick of rock."

Such a culture is, Walker admits, difficult to achieve but he is adamant that the EIS has talented people working in a coordinated and cohesive manner. They are ensuring that athletes will be as successful as they possibly can be in 2012 and that "government is getting maximum bang for its buck". Given that the public finances are now routinely portrayed as in meltdown and the prime minister has been punting a happiness quotient as a major strand of his government's policy agenda, delivering outcome bangs for input bucks is as important for sport as ever. In this context how important is it for sport to be able to live within its means in straitened times and how large does the London Olympics loom for the EIS? Is there any view beyond 2012? Walker tackles the last part of the question first: "Of course there is. UK Sport and ourselves have got more than an eye on what comes post-2012. It's called The Road to Rio." This is enshrined in a document which Walker says is aptly named. It looks from 2012 to 2016 and notes that Australia did very well in Sydney but, after its home Games, funding was reduced. Australia did reasonably well in Athens 2004 but not

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very well by their standards in Beijing. It is a lesson of which Walker is all too aware. "We've got systems and structures in place and those structures need to be funded, but if funding were cut dramatically between London and Rio you might see a slight tremor in Rio in 2016 but I can bet you that things would fall off the edge of a cliff in 2020. Which is why those structures that are in place need to be adequately funded. I think, for what it's worth, that the past government and this government realise that sport is important. I'm not going to say it's more important than education, health or defence, or any other of those streams that we hear about every day but it has its part to play... It's up to government to decide how important it is and fund it accordingly."

Picking up on the question regarding the requirement for sport to live within its means, he continues on this theme: "I don't know about more funding but I know about appropriate funding and I can tell you that if the structures which exist in the UK now are not appropriately and adequately funded there will be an impact on the number of medals we bring home." He suggests that the popular image of the plucky Brit who turned up having walked to the stadium, put on his plimsolls and competed with distinction is probably a myth and, even if there is an element of fact, such times have long gone. "If you want to perform like a winner you have to prepare like a winner. The system in the UK at the moment is set up to produce winners and Beijing was a living example."

And while there is a vision beyond 2012, the London Olympics do loom large. What results would represent a good Olympics for the EIS? Again, Walker is clear and concise: "UK Sport's aspiration is to finish fourth in the Olympic medal table and second in the Paralympics. Of course, the margins between gold and bronze are tiny but for us it is about playing our part in meeting those table targets. Or, dare I say, better. Each sport has its own stretch target. We're playing our part but the whole system will have to look at itself if we fail to meet those targets. Team GB will be as well funded, if not better funded, and better prepared than any other team ever to have represented Great Britain. The EIS is playing its part in that."

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