

Submission to the All Party Group on Sport

The state of sports coaching in the UK

Background

The Leisure Review is a magazine for practitioners in the sport, leisure and culture sector which in the five years since its launch has developed a strong sports coaching thread. This in turn has led us to offer the Coaching Insights seminars, a series of local opportunities for developed coaches to come together and debate issues of concern to them. Because we talk to and listen to coaches it has become increasingly obvious to us that sports coaches, coach developers and coach managers are concerned at the direction and speed of progress in the development of a UK coaching system.

Last year we wrote to Lord Pendry expressing this concern and he was kind enough to invite us to submit this briefing paper. To inform the briefing we contacted 111 members of the coaching community, including grassroots volunteers, professional coach development managers and senior academics.

Introduction

2012 will see an explosion of interest in and support for the UK's sports teams as the Olympics come to town. Our elite performers will deliver medals in part thanks to the sport science and coaching systems put in place by UK Sport, both of which are world-leading.

Below the elite level, however, despite people such as Liz Nicholl arguing that "Quality coaching is fundamental to British sporting success", we have reached a place that has prompted Lord Coe to say, "We have consistently, to our shame, undervalued the role of coaching and demeaned its definition." Baroness Campbell has also asserted that "coaching in this country is nowhere near where it needs to be".

The perspective of people at the very top of the British sports system is shared by people within it and this submission is an attempt to identify the most commonly held opinions as to why this is the case. Unfortunately the solutions that will drive the transformational change that is needed at every level are neither agreed nor simple and will require both time and a real political will to achieve.

The current situation

The messages received from coaches have some common threads:

- We have under-valued coaching and coaches in British sport. This has been accompanied by **a lack of understanding and empathy for coaching** from sports administrators, including those with supposed responsibility for coaching.
- Sports coaching cannot become a profession along traditional lines but the occupation of *sports coaching* can **professionalise** (through, for example, boundaries, regulation, evident expertise, qualifications, licensing, and standards of practice).
- The increase in sporting and social policy initiatives involving voluntary clubs and other community settings has meant **greater and varying skills demands on coaches**. Coaching and coaches are being used as a 'catch all' and deemed suitable for all contexts when in fact the training and education of

coaches is still largely pitched at the classic governing body contexts of club and performance sport.

- The current **lack of an agreed definition of sports coaching** makes it difficult for coaches, those employing or deploying coaches, or those using their services to understand what service is being provided.
- There is a **lack of leadership** in the coaching system. To quote Professor John Lyle: “We have now reached a state in which the agency supposed to be responsible for coaching has no leadership, limited expertise, and no evident policies, and has completely retrenched from any policy leadership within sport.”
- Getting formally involved in coaching and **developing as a coach is too expensive and too complicated**. Provision of coach education courses is sporadic, both geographically and in time, which is in part due to the fact that large national governing bodies of sport (NGBs) treat coach education as an income stream while smaller NGBs do not have the necessary resource to provide a high-quality coach education programme.
- **Women** and people from **ethnic minority** groups **are noticeable by their absence** from every level of coaching.
- **Too much emphasis is placed on technical knowledge** and too little on the psycho-social, cultural and community contexts in which coaching increasingly occurs.
- Sport England and consequently NGBs insist on hitting what many regard as meaningless participation targets and this effectively **mandates the under-preparation of entry-level coaches** and a total lack of relevant CPD as they progress. In turn this produces emotionally illiterate (mostly) men who believe their job is to teach sports-specific skills and tactics, rather than take the holistic role that their engagement with especially young people demands.

The way forward

Being coaches we look for solutions but the challenge is complex. As a minimum we would suggest:

- As a nation we start to **take coaching seriously** and when we look for solutions we do not lump coaching in with anything else, such as school sport or health.
- A **strategy** in which politicians take the lead, addressing structures, professionalisation, funding, licensing, NGB adherence, coach education, deployment practice, CPD and workforce management.
- Training and education of coaches which recognises the **varying contexts** and specific demands of those contexts in which the modern coach is asked to work. One size does not fit all.
- A body is required that channels the **voice of the coach** into the mix.
- Consistent, dedicated **funding**.

Final word

The situation is complex and the solutions on offer as varied as the constituencies offering them but, below the elite level, one thing is clear: coaching in Britain *is* broke and it *does need* fixing and if the legacy expectations for London 2012 are to be realised the process needs to start very soon.