

[front page](#)

[news](#)

[back issues](#)

[comment](#)

[letters](#)

[advertise](#)

[subscribe](#)

[about us](#)

[contact us](#)

[back page](#)

The building blocks of coaching inspiration

The people who named the facilities on the University of Hertfordshire's Hatfield campus were clearly looking to the past. *The Leisure Review's* latest Coaching Insight had its eyes on the future.

Quite why a visitor would be surprised to find that the Hertfordshire Sports Village is simply a very big leisure centre with a café in the foyer probably goes to that visitor's naivete rather than the duplicity of the marketing profession but even someone disappointed not to find thatched roofed squash courts, swimming conducted in a duck pond and cricket being played on a village green surrounded by artisans' cottages, a pub and a church could not fail to be impressed by the chrome and glass development which marks the University of Hertfordshire's commitment to the health and fitness of its denizens. As afternoon turned to evening on the day of our own visit the climbing wall was busy; the gym looked full; the pool certainly was; the only eerie silence was in the cricket nets, an indoor provision which a British springs makes sensible; and a steady trickle of local coaches were making their way to the centre's conference facilities for the latest Coaching Insight seminar supported by Premier Sport.

When The Leisure Review plans and delivers one of its lauded Coaching Insight seminars much of the success and all of the praise is due to its partners in the venture and Rob Hardwick of the Herts Sports Partnership is an old-school gentleman who made absolutely sure that the 30 or so coaches who came together to debate the motion "Go on inspire me; is inspiration the job of the coach?" had a brew to hand, something to nibble on and space enough to move around in, a factor which came into play almost from the off.

Billed as an academic who could explain the theoretical basis of inspiration, Richard Cheetham from the University of Winchester exceeded his brief by providing academic enlightenment, entertainment and inspiration in equal measure. The first think he did was to play Jenga. Having already stacked a garden-sized set of the square wooden batons which are used in this party game, Cheetham invited the audience to give it a go. One by one coaches nudged and nudged while Cheetham provided a stream of, possibly spurious, information on the development of Jenga as an international sport. Inevitably one brick too many was removed and the tower teetered and toppled. All good fun and an enjoyable diversion but Cheetham's point was that throughout the process everyone in the room was "engaged" and if coaches want to inspire, motivate or even just entertain the people they coach then they have first to get them hooked.

With rain sporadically clattering against the room's plate-glass walls Cheetham spoke of the challenges he faces as a coach at Basingstoke Rugby Club. The club attracts players from 18 to much older who travel up to an hour around the M25 to make training, often in the kind of foul weather conditions Hatfield was enduring. Creating positive engagement and the possibility of inspiration requires enjoyment not boredom, games not drills, and a commitment to "understand what they want" rather than a determination to give them what you have in your personal coaching tool box.

Quite early on in his presentation Cheetham answered the question in the seminar's title: coaches are responsible for creating inspiration. Then, using house-drawing, a game of Bump! and an unlikely magic trick with carrots, he drew the audience into his world where it is a win if a player says "You've just made that up" and where a temporary loss of performance is a small price to pay for the long-term gains brought by change and innovation; and, most importantly, where we all coach sessions he would be happy to see his daughter take part in.

Cheetham was followed by Justyn Price of StreetGames, a national charity

www.theleisurereview.co.uk

"The partners brought theme and venue, the audience brought open minds and a desire to learn, and the speakers brought cutting-edge information, polished expertise, unbounded energy and intellectual challenge"

The Leisure Review is supported by:



The Leisure Review is written, designed and published by:

tlr.comms
TLR Communications Limited

dedicated to reducing the gap in sports participation between affluent and poor communities. Price wanted to talk about “doorstep sport”, its power to inspire young people in disadvantaged communities and the contribution of the coach to the process. It was a salutary 30 minutes for many in the room with a straw poll showing that everyone bar Price was currently working with “clubs and squads”, the traditional preserve of national governing body coaches.

He started with some statistics. Young people from poor households are significantly less like to participate in sport than their counterparts from more affluent backgrounds on every one of five measures. When it comes to “organised competitive sport”, for example, 38% of affluent 16 to 24 year-olds are involved. The figure for participation among young people from poorer homes is half of that.

Policy-makers and even programme deliverers, usually from the upper end of the earning scale, might like to reassure themselves that these statistics reflect a disinterest in sport and physical activity among the less affluent in society, the Cameronian Reflex where the dispossessed are blamed for having been denied the opportunity to do any differently. However, without politicising the issue Price pointed out that the converse is true: 68.9% of the disadvantaged young people polled wanted to take part in sport but could not.

StreetGames work with young people in the bottom 20% of society, the disadvantaged and the excluded, many of whom live chaotic lives. Asked why young people in these circumstances might choose to attend a coaching session, the coaches in the room identified a number of possibilities but failed to recognise a desire to be away from a chaotic or threatening home environment. Asked to suggest why these same young people congregate where they do and again nobody in the room picked up on the fact that youngsters select well-lit areas where CCTV is being deployed as “they know exactly who they do not want to run into”; and if they do run into them they do not want that meeting to happen out of sight and out of mind.

The challenges faced by StreetGames’ ultimate clients are legion but the charity deals in solutions rather than lobbying and answers rather than rhetoric. Price was keen to explore how coaches can deliver “doorstep sport”, a concept which is “sport delivered close to home, at the right time, in the right place, at the right price and in the right style”. Coaches need to focus on the individuals taking part, not on the nuances of the sport they are taking part in, and to build relationships built on trust and respect. Price ended his presentation with a quotation from American psychologist Dan Gould, who said that young people “don’t care what you know until they know you care”.

The challenge facing Nick Levett in “the graveyard slot” which followed a networking break was to energise his audience when his thunder had been largely stolen by Price’s presentation. Levett looks a lot like a traditional football coach. Indeed, not only does he coach within a Premiership clubs’ academy but his day job is with the FA, an organisation which numbers the inspiration provided by the three lions, Wembley Stadium and David Beckham among its marketing collateral.

“The FA doesn’t need to find inspiration,” he said and cited the case of a member of the Fulham Under-10 squad he coaches who takes an underground train, an overground train and then walks to training four times a week, all on his own. The challenge for football coaches, and indeed for coaches in all sports, is to not “de-inspire kids”. To make his point Levett showed some data on an 11 year-old. The graph mapped the boy against a number of age bands with his physical age being assessed at just over nine while his technical age was that of a much older player. He could have been consigned to football oblivion categorised as “too small” but somebody was patient enough. Patience was a theme Levett returned to and the lad turned out to be Jamie Carragher.

Something of a presentational midfield dynamo, Levett layered research upon theory upon anecdote with his views on coaching as relevant to bowls and badminton as they were to football. On the subject of winning he was clear: “For children, striving to win is important, wanting to win is important but 10 minutes after the game they have moved on.” His views on medals was dismissive: “How many of us have a shoe box full of medals in the loft?” With clubs laying out thousands of pounds on medals per season, he suggested they were a devalued currency, important only to the adults.

On the subject of coaching style he was a breath of fresh air with an assertion that when faced with a field full of cones laid out in serried ranks he knows that “very little learning will take place”. Children should be taught through football,

not taught football, and drills should be left in B&Q. He likened the traditional approach to coaching to a piano teacher standing behind a learner shouting, "Black key, white key, black, black, black!" He advised that "floundering is a vital part of learning".

As Levett drew to a close the coaches privileged to have been in the room prepared their questions for all three speakers and the debate continued well past the published finishing time. Coaching seminars, like all sporting collaborations – teams, events, coaching relationships – mix quality ingredients with a little magic and produce the extraordinary. In Hatfield the partners brought theme and venue, the audience brought open minds and a desire to learn, and the speakers brought cutting-edge information, polished expertise, unbounded energy and intellectual challenge. The result was unadulterated coaching inspiration.

The Leisure Review, May 2012

© Copyright of all material on this site is retained by *The Leisure Review* or the individual contributors where stated. Contact *The Leisure Review* for details.