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It's not rocket science: a disability conference in Sheffield

Intrigued that a Danish marketing man with a passion for community enterprise should be running a conference on disability in sport, Katy Young went to the EIS in Sheffield to investigate.

Friends of Svend Elkjaer call him a force of nature. His detractors have other ways of describing the fast-talking, dog-walking Dane who, by his own admission, does little more than “stand up, wave my arms in the air and tell stories” but he is such an affable, open chap that one suspects envy is at the root of any sustained criticism. Such envy and parochialism are fuelled by the twin fears that Elkjaer might take some business which rightfully belongs to the “experts” in the field he is currently striding towards and insecurity that his emperor’s new clothes approach to a problem will leave those experts looking more like charlatans than is comfortable.

The subject ostensibly under discussion at the English Institute for Sport was how to increase disabled people’s participation in sport and active recreation but the question uppermost in many people’s minds was why it had taken Elkjaer’s intervention to persuade over 100 people with a professional interest in disability sport to come together and share practice, ideas and contact details.

The Dane’s introduction explained the genesis of the event: he spotted a gap in the market, contacted the English Federation of Disability Sport (EFDS) and was quickly invited to share his plans. Elkjaer paid tribute to “the national body for disabled people in sport and physical activity” whose officers had responded with an openness and enthusiasm not characteristic of all central agencies with ‘sport’ in their title but their energetic response does not obviate the fact that without Elkjaer nobody would have spotted the need, let alone set out to meet it. While nobody is claiming that this conference will produce the transformative change advocated by people like Baroness Grey-Thompson – it was more a guerrilla raid than a D-Day invasion – its wider impact will be similar to that of an elephant dancing on its hind legs; the remarkable thing is not the quality of the dance but the fact it is happening at all.

Part of the issue is that the world of disability sport is riven with difference. Governing bodies abound and the art of definition seems as much part of the game as the games being played themselves. Campaigners too seem to fall into camps, the pushy and aggressive at one end of the spectrum and the hard-done-by and passive-aggressive at the other. Providers likewise can be defined by their approach, from the compliant and co-operative that work within the system to those who crash the party and damn the eyes of anyone who oppose them.

Following a mannered exploration of the SportsAble project from Windsor, we were treated to a Welsh version of our host; a breath of fresh air for some, an unwelcome and icy blast for others. Glyn Harding lectures at the University of Worcester, which supplied all four outfield England players in the blind football World Cup last year and is a production line for goalball players, wheelchair basketball teams and coaches uniquely attuned to the needs of disabled performers. Harding is an enthusiast and a doer but he is also abrasive and happy to criticise agencies that see difficulty and problems where he sees opportunity and potential.

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With coffee offering an opportunity to stretch cramped legs and check out the crowd, it became apparent that this was no run-of-the-mill sports development affair. Sprinkled among the circulating networkers were a man in a dog collar and a man with a dog, neither of which is a common sight at this type of event, and, with the delegate list embracing universities, county sport partnerships as well as grassroots clubs and national governing bodies, the chatter mixed the common with the arcane.

The journey from coffee to lunch was made in the company of Hannah Webber from the University of Nottingham, the only higher education (HE) disability sport officer in the country (a position originally funded by HEFCE but now absorbed wholly by her institution), who described the particular activities and challenges of delivering a disability sport programme within a university. Primarily it seems that inclusive sport challenges head-on the ongoing numbers fixation of the average sport development officer. The Nottingham programme recognises that impact on an albeit much smaller group of participants is just as valuable as the plethora of double-counting that exists elsewhere. Webber's university, for example, has a disabled student population of only 7.3% and much of this may be 'academic disability', which has little or no bearing on their ability to access sport. Illustrating her programme's strong links with community organisations and a growing AnyBody programme internally, Webber was clear that her HE can not only serve their own disabled students better but also facilitate inclusive sport in the wider community.

Karen Lewis-Archer from Sport North Tyneside also highlighted the importance of identifying partners to work with rather than replicating activity for a small target population. She also emphasised the importance of providing activities that are inclusive rather than isolating for disabled people, using a disability swimming session as an example. By promoting the session as a disability recreational family swim, as opposed to a disability swimming session, numbers have increased to 45-50 attendees a week.

After a nice lunch the day moved on to hearing from sport providers, beginning with Liz Moulam, founder and chair of Boccia Epsom and Ewell, and Sue Blaylock, founder and director of Simply Cycling. There was a marked difference in approach, with Sue embodying the 'just do it' spirit, but both women want to offer high-quality sporting experiences to disabled people and both emphasised the importance of including parents and carers in the activity provided, not only for their own wellbeing but for the more practical reason that their commitment to bringing the disabled participants is fundamental.

Adam Parry of Northern Thunder (the powerchair football club rather than the netball club) opened many eyes to the logistical nightmare of organising a team when you add the need to transport multiple powered wheelchairs plus carers alongside players into the organisational mix. The costs are frankly astounding – the £66,000 for competition chairs is just one bill – and the fact that the club even exists is again testament to the hard work and dedication of volunteers involved in disability sport.

England Volleyball, Access Sport and Bradford Wheelchair Tag Rugby ended the day with tales of modified versions of existing sports. Again, the benefits of bringing disabled participants into the fold of existing club provision and competition were mentioned, which chimed with the main message from the day, that 'inclusive' sport is what is wanted, not special sessions away from mainstream activity. As Karen Lewis-Archer rather wonderfully put it: "It's the same participation issues with a few twists."

