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Shine a light: coach education under scrutiny

With two reports on the state of coaching in athletics emerging blinking into the light this month, Joe Coach felt constrained to take a look at a coach education system apparently in meltdown.

Alongside the increase in the amount and speed of electronic communications the opportunities for people to have a good moan increases exponentially. Commensurate with that increase has been a proliferation in job roles that involve either snuffing out complainants before they get too much of an audience or creating a louder noise and simply drowning out the dissent. The second strategy is the equivalent of a child sitting with her fingers in her ears singing “La, la, la!” at the top of her voice. The message that it is time to tidy up is still being given but such is the volume of interference between the sender and the intended recipient that the latter can quite legitimately say, “I never heard you, Daddy.”

Moving from the micro to the macro, this is exactly the situation in governing body sport and particularly in athletics. The message “All is not well at the grassroots” is being sent by adult people who have the sport’s best interest at heart and the experience to process the evidence in front of them but at Athletics House (it’s in Walsall) the fingers are in the ears and the PR team are singing a version of “La, la, la” that involves lines like: “England Athletics knows the education and development of coaches and coaching is central to the success of athletics. We are committed to supporting the ongoing development of coaches in every event at every level, both directly with our staff, through contracted agencies and experts, and by enabling coaches to work together on a more frequent and structured basis.” Meanwhile, on another website (which may or may not be that for UK Athletics) British Athletics throws up images of the likes of Mo Farrah, an athlete who was born in Somalia and who trains in America, as evidence that all in the garden, as well as on the track and in the field, is rosy.

For the outsider it is a confused and contradictory picture, and the will to fight a way through to the truth would need to be as strong as the will a beginner coach needs when faced with the sport’s guide to its coaching pathway [see diagram].

Luckily for me – and I suspect for you, gentle reader – a native guide is at hand in the form of the Inside Track blog written by Gwenda Ward, a friend of The Leisure Review and indeed of high-profile luminaries in the sport such as Frank Dick and Tom McNab. She is not a woman to pull her punches and she has brought the blog out of storage in response to a report dated December 2012 emanating from deep within the bowels of the Coachwise bunker on Armley Road in Leeds.

For those not au fait with the geography of Leeds, Armley is known more for its house of correction (Armley Jail) than its houses of learning and the move of the rump of Sportscoach UK from the leafy, academic environs of Headingley (home to Leeds Met’s Carnegie campus) to the harsher, industrial landscape long occupied by their commercial confrères is a metaphor of which the various contributors to Joe Coach’s oeuvre have long been conscious.

The rumour that Coachwise Towers is known to its inmates as the www.theleisurereview.co.uk

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Kremlin is one we are tempted to make up, promulgate and then deny in print but were it true it is a ready allusion to the paranoia exhibited whenever a member of the Chelsea Close team is invited to offer a considered, let alone a critical, comment on the organisation and its operations. There are some lovely people at Coachwise and they do some wonderful work but when errors are made and stupid decisions enacted a mature and confident company would have the courage to hold up a corporate hand, or let its employees hold up theirs, and say, "Sorry."

It is a stone-cold certainty that whoever made the mistake that meant the document titled "Coach Education Delivery by England Athletics: An Independent Review by sports coach UK" (their caps) became common property outwith the very tight circle of its authors and their customers will be saying more than sorry. Expect instead reference to "other challenges", "more time with my family" and "pastures new".

Written by Dr Oliver Holt, a well-meaning, very intelligent man by all accounts but without a Machiavellian bone in his body, the report pulls no punches. Its genesis was a meeting with England Athletics' chief executive Chris Jones and the brief was to review "how EA staff, plan, organise, position, market, promote and budget their coach education courses". It used interviews with 59 people who might be expected to know something about the subject.

The headline finding is that athletics urgently needs coaches but that "not enough coaches are being trained and qualified at present". At board level the frustration is clear, although this seems to be because of "missed financial targets and financial discrepancies" rather than a concern that coaches are the lifeblood of any sport and failure to recruit, train and retain high-quality coaches will very soon impact on everything from grassroots participation to elite medal-winning performance.

In the executive summary Holt lists the areas of concern, using words and phrases such as "disconnected", "poorly planned", "blighted", "plagued" and the catch all "too difficult, too expensive and poorly run". Later he says, "There is an overall lack of leadership and management for coach education delivery" and the final sentence of his paragraph summing up the challenges ends: "the accumulation of multiple issues at every level has placed the system as a whole in the state of 'grid lock'." It really is not a pretty picture but nobody least of all Mr Jones and his board can deny that it is independently drawn and accurate.

Well, when we say, nobody we are forgetting Sport England. According to a second report, this one written by the Association of GB Athletic Clubs (ABAC), "There has been a 50% decline in licensed coaches since 2008" but Sport England have "contrived with UKA to keep this major operating failure secret"

Anyone skilled in reading the entrails of sporting politics, and indeed anyone who reads ABAC Fact File 20, will recognise this particular association as being at the "swivel-eyed loon" end of the spectrum. That the document is not written in green ink is the only surprise for those who have seen fact files 1 to 19. However, even loons have eyes to see and if Sport England let on that in 2008 there were 5,104 coaches and in 2013 their count is 2,496 then, intemperate though ABAC's language may be, they are not that mad if they infer this to be a decline. Quite why Sportscoach UK, the coaching arm of Sport England lest we forget, chose to give its Sport Governing Body of the Year award to UK Athletics in May 2011 is a question best left for now but ABAC might like to ask them if they are looking for a subject for FF21.

A rant from ABAC and a polemic from Inside Track are not evidence in themselves of a serious problem with coach education in athletics. However, add to them what seems like the hurriedly constructed Survey Monkey "Coach Education (Qualifications) Survey" on the UK Athletics

website and, of course, the academic but far from dry report from Sports Coach UK and a picture emerges. How far your governing body is from a similar situation only you know but, in case you were thinking about having a delve, ask yourself which NGB is not guilty of organising courses “costing less per candidate to deliver than the prices charged” and then check on Dr Holt’s other findings.

Joe Coach is the pseudonym employed by a number of highly experienced sports coaches who on the occasion of a forthright article suspect that anonymity might be a useful aid to career longevity. The Leisure Review is pleased to be able to vouch for the coaching bona fides of this issue’s Joe Coach.

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