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Heard it on the grapevine

With the sun shining and positive messages coming from the governing body of athletics about the future of the sport, Gwenda Ward issues a challenge to those in charge of the sport to address a number of the rumours that continue to undermine the governing body's image of a bright and trouble-free future.

I'm lolling in my sun-drenched garden absorbed in the lazy luxury of the Sunday paper. Sudoku attempted (difficult bits saved for later), headlines scanned, favourite columnists nodded over, magazine recipes frowned on, (Fried courgette flowers? Tempura flour? Top of the shopping lists down Cockermouth Main Street, I don't think) when I stumble into the sports pages. "One last chance to reignite our Olympic love affair", runs the headline; a thoughtful piece by Owen Gibson on the upcoming Anniversary Games, reflecting on the changing place of athletics in the national psyche.

Threaded through the piece are points of concern, such as Peter Eriksson's hasty retreat back to the top coaching job in Canada, the failure of UK Athletics' (UKA) new sponsorship strategy and reports that clubs have not been able to cope with additional numbers generated by London 2012, interspersed with the "relentlessly upbeat" comments by UKA chief executive Neils de Vos: that the public response to the Olympics was "a huge vote of confidence in the sport" and "the bigger the event, the bigger the appetite". UKA's strategies, goes the message, are focused on building towards Rio 2016 and London 2017, with the centralisation of coaching at Loughborough "a success" and with recreational running one of the few sports to be expanding; the Olympic Stadium is both emblematic of that success and a further opportunity as a top-class home for track and field for the next 50 years. Clearly your correspondent does not swallow de Vos's message whole and while I'm regretting that he seems to be missing a lot of debate going on inside the sport the phone jangles loudly, interrupting my thoughts.

The familiar voice of an old friend: "I can't swear it's true, but I've heard a rumour that de Vos is leaving. ----- (the name of mutual friend) just called. He heard it on the grapevine." And off we go, a good half-hour of electronic over-the-garden-fence yak about what we've heard from whom and what it all might mean for our beloved sport.

After the call I return to the garden fully awake and reflective. I think of some of the issues and concerns that people have raised with me this summer, a rumour mill driven by able people with achievement and whole-life commitment to track and field behind them. In a sport not noted for cohesion it is surprising how particular concerns arise time and time again, and how speakers project anger, sadness, frustration and fear for the sport's future, not the enjoyment of tittle-tattle. It is a type of communication that flourishes as a direct result of planned-in disempowerment of the voluntary sector. (Did I hear someone mutter about Members' Council? Have a look at the minutes, if you can find them, on the British Athletics website; about as challenging as my cat Sid after a large meal.) The ad-speak gloss emanating from the British Athletics website and the public utterances of Messrs Warner and de Vos fool only UK Sport, it seems.

Persistent rumours are best addressed, aren't they, Chief Executive? So, let's call a spade a spade. Here are the four most consistent rumours I have heard this summer. They could not be more

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"Smoke and mirrors cannot create a legacy, so how about knuckling down to the real issues"

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fundamental to the sport's health and wellbeing. If Messrs de Vos and Warner really have a deep concern for the long-term future of track and field (contrary to rumour) they will surely want to tackle these issues head-on. I have added some questions to help guide their responses.

Rumour 1: It is the view of Neils de Vos and Ed Warner (chair, UKA) that British athletics coaches are “no good”.

As so many of the top coaching jobs have been filled by foreign coaches, you could be forgiven for drawing this conclusion even without the benefit of rumour regarding top post holders' expressed views.

QUESTION: Who, ultimately, is responsible for the state of coaching in the UK? Is it not you, Mr de Vos and Mr Warner? Other than tinkering with coach education, what strategies have UKA introduced to make coaching more attractive for volunteers and to assist the transition by talented voluntary coaches into paid work, thereby providing incentive for coaches under pensionable age? What plans do you have to give top British voluntary coaches the experience they need to be among the best in the world?

Rumour 2: Racist views influence decision-making, consequently black coaches have been sidelined. The withdrawal of funding from Lee Valley was influenced by the perception that black coaches are “difficult”.

Quite apart from the fact that ANY ethically sound organisation should work hard to ensure that diversity policies are clearly in place and effective, the black contribution to athletics has been and remains of incalculable value to the sport itself and to society.

QUESTION: Does UKA recognise the alleged distress of black coaches who feel they are disadvantaged because of their skin colour, and what is it doing to improve communication with minority groups within coaching and ensure that equal access to progress and achievement is seen to be possible by all?

Rumour 3: The nature of the coach/athlete relationship is so poorly understood in UKA, and so overridden by commercial interest, that coaches have been offered ‘incentives’ to induce athletes into competing in particular televised meetings.

There is and always will be a tension between an athlete's competition plan and wider needs, whether at international or club level.

QUESTION: Is it UKA practice to offer ‘incentives’ coaches for the sake of viewing figures? What is the current code of conduct for coaches, and does this code operate from elite to club level? What sanctions are exerted on anyone who contravenes the code or pressurises others to contravene it?

Rumour 4: Top British Athletics posts are held by careerists earning huge salaries but devoid of concern or even interest in the sport in Britain as a whole.

Kevin Tyler, three years in post (left October 2012) as UKA's strategic head of coaching and development, reputedly earned £169,000 per annum but made few significant changes to the coaching structure and did not complete his contract. The chief executive's pay package is in the region of £200,000, with other top posts on a similar scale. Coaches such as Dan Pfaff were/are employed via consultancies worth in the region of \$200,000. Charles Van Commenee earned £250,000 per annum. Sport England figures show that coaching numbers (Levels 2,3 and 4) decreased by 25% in the period 2008 to 2012. The total number of licensed coaches, not necessarily practising, was 3,923 in 2012 (see ABAC website). A recent review of coach education delivery was highly

critical and another review is under way. There are now three top coaching and performance posts, all earning salary packages in the region of £200,000 or more, doing the job that Frank Dick, as a single director of coaching, did up until 1994 for a total package of £50,000. Even with an adjustment for basic inflation, this represents additional wage inflation of 600% in this role with questionable benefit.

QUESTION: These and other related statistics prompts numerous questions. Are these salary figures correct? In what forum in the sport can stakeholders question this use of taxpayers' money and, given that global medal hauls have remained static or even declined rather than improved by 600% since 1994, what measurable and sustainable benefit has the sport as a whole gained from this and other massive spending in recent Olympic cycles?

Clearly UKA sees it as vital to attempt to influence the public view of athletics and pass it off as highly successful sport. Yet it doesn't appear to care a damn about the concerns of its own people – those within the sport who give their time, energy and expertise and on whom its real success or failure ultimately depends. Smoke and mirrors cannot create a legacy, so how about knuckling down to the real issues – or are you really just going to move on, Mr de Vos, before the smoke clears?

Gwenda Ward has a lifetime of experience of, and involvement in, athletics. This article was first published in The Inside Track, which you can find at www.theinsidetrack.org.uk

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