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Building for the future in Worcester

While many people in sport sat on their hands and asked what the London Games would do for them, the University of Worcester set out to create their own legacy. Mick Owen went to see it.

It will not have escaped very many people's notice that a year has passed since the London Olympics with some "iconic" events, some hyperbole and quite a few arguments about "legacy". When words like legacy and 'iconic' are bandied about so liberally by politicians and people in the print and broadcast media that they begin to lose their meaning and it becomes hard to use them in conversation without sketching quotation marks in the air or letting your voice betray cynicism and world-weariness it is helpful to reboot the system with a return to the original meaning. When it comes to sporting facilities and their use, a visit to the University of Worcester Arena can do just that.

Worcester is not in the pantheon of great British sporting towns to rank alongside various parts of London, Edinburgh, Leeds and Nottingham, which carry the names of, often not very salubrious, suburbs into sporting conversations around the globe. Botham saved the Ashes in Headingley. Perry, Wade and Murray won Wimbledon. Bill Beaumont's England secured their Grand Slam with a five-try drubbing of Scotland at Murrayfield. Worcester cannot boast names of this calibre but it does have a top-flight rugby union team, a first-class cricket ground and one of the oldest race courses in the country. The last two, along with a broad sweep of the Severn on which Henley Royal Regatta winners have been produced, can be seen from the balcony that runs the width of the town's latest high-end sporting venue, the University of Worcester Arena. It is this building, the working lifespan of which can still be measured in weeks rather than decades, that might yet put the name of Worcester among the greats.

The first thing to say about the Worcester Arena (as it is widely known if not marketed) is that it comprises two buildings not one, with the new-build rising high above a slightly older edifice which looks for all the world like a car dealership. This is what the Riverside building used to be before being transformed into flexible study and exhibition space – the showroom itself – and a home for the university's dance and sports performance courses – housed in what used to be the garage part of the building. It is a conversion that speaks of vision, attention to detail and a focus on the end user, themes which run through the whole Arena complex.

Hidden behind locked doors on the day of our out-of-term-time visit is a real-time performance analysis suite that links remotely to cameras in the playing arena over the road. Students can learn to analyse live action and experience the pressure under which, should the university's ambitious employability forecasts prove accurate, they will be expected to perform when plying their trade as part of elite sporting programmes. Every facet of the new development is geared to students' needs while simultaneously meeting the expectations of a multiplicity of external users, from international sports teams to the business market. Finishes, furniture and fittings all contribute to the understanding that the business of prestige selling did not end when the car salesmen moved out.

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Witty though the Riverside building is, the jewel in the university's crown is the Arena itself and it impresses, from its magnificent front elevation to its beautifully functional loading bay at the rear. What comes across during the whirlwind tour hosted by Glyn Harding of the university's Institute of Sport and Exercise Science is the thought that has gone in at the design stage. The flooring in the main hall, for example, is not specified for international basketball. It is a very high specification and is perfectly acceptable to both running and wheelchair basketball players but by dropping the specification slightly it also suits the long-term needs of the university's teaching staff and the regular users of the centre, who will be playing everything from boccia to badminton.

Harding is a man with infectious enthusiasm and extraordinary drive. Handed the "disability" module of the sports coaching degree a few years ago, he has built it into a separate degree with students offered hands-on experience throughout their course. His commitment to disability sport has led to the university becoming a hot-spot for goalball and wheelchair basketball, and Worcester could soon be as important to disability sport in the UK as Stoke Mandeville once was. One of his current goals is to convince British University and Colleges Sport (BUCS) that its proud boast of organising "4,500 teams and over 100 championships events every year" should include students with disabilities. It is a windmill he has every chance of tilting.

Of course, Harding did not raise the Arena from the ashes of a former fruit and vegetable market single-handedly. His commitment to his students and to the disabled sporting community is shared by the entire university and this, plus their determination to provide a fit-for-purpose facility for students, community users and elite performers alike, has resulted in a remarkably flexible building.

This is not a multi-purpose sports hall with ideas about its station. High over the playing surface at one end of the hall is a gantry designed to take television cameras, while at the other the infinitely flexible corporate boxes and hospitality suites run only part way behind the raked spectator seating. The final few metres are taken up by an open balcony supplied with all the power and communication points needed by print journalists and, in the corner with a perfect view of the centre court, a sound-proofed room for pundits and presenters to pontificate from whenever broadcasters comes to town. And come to town they will. International and premier league netball are already in the diary, top flight basketball is a staple of the programme and wheelchair basketball teams from around the world are already sampling the facilities.

Our visit coincided with a wheelchair basketball tournament in which Great Britain were taking on Germany, Spain and 2012 Paralympic champions Canada in a development event which nevertheless saw "wheelchair's answer to David Beckham" battling away on court. The "house full" notices had been posted long before the Friday evening showdown between the hosts and Canada.

This privileged peek behind the scenes makes it not only clear that international wheelchair basketball is as serious a proposition as any other elite sport, with performance analysts, dieticians and top-level coaches abounding, but also that the University of Worcester Arena is in the front rank of indoor facilities in Europe, and one which will create a legacy of participation as much as excellence. And there is every chance that, as people come to revere it, cherish it and even use it as a source of inspiration for other venues, it will also come to be seen as iconic.

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