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Growing sport: achievers, activators and a new role for coaches

The Leisure Review went to Manchester to talk to John Mills, British Cycling's director of coaching, education and development, to see what's next on the agenda for one of the UK's most successful governing bodies. Jonathan Ives reports on a discussion that envisaged a new approach on sports development and physical activity promotion.

It is possible to make a case that much, if not all, of British Cycling's modern success can be traced back to the opening of the Manchester velodrome in 1994. The UK's first Olympic-standard indoor velodrome was then a bright metal oval building with only car parks and some distant retail development for company but it immediately began to present opportunities that were seized by a small team of coaches and athletes working within a small and uncelebrated governing body that would go on to achieve unimaginable success.

Or unimaginable for most of us. Even then, with the final nail only just driven into the track, plans had already been drawn up for Great Britain to become number one in the world of track cycling before focusing on road racing and cycling's biggest prize, the Tour de France. For the majority of observers and journalists who attended the opening (among them your correspondent) this sounded like a lot of impressively wishful thinking, particularly for a sport that had won a single track gold medal in the previous 70 years. Twenty years later, with the sport transformed and Great Britain among the most prominent cycling nations in most disciplines of the sport, it seems uncannily prescient.

John Mills, British Cycling's director of coaching, education and development, agrees that it has been quite a journey and recalls that the velodrome had originally been built as part of an Olympic bid. "As part of any bid you have to have certain facilities in place," he explains. "It was virtually the only thing here but it was built as part of that Olympic bid and then it was used for Commonwealth Games. An unsuccessful Olympic bid became a successful Commonwealth Games bid and that became a catalyst for doing more, things like the stadium across the road and various other facilities around Manchester to host the Commonwealth Games; the aquatics centre, for example."

That original velodrome is now part of a much-expanded National Cycling Centre. Alongside and attached is the huge indoor space that is home to the BMX track, while outside and adjacent are the starting points of the mountain bike trails and the skills zone, which offers a level training area for anyone coming to any of these outdoor pursuits for the first time. Where once the main entrance led straight into a warren of corridors below the track banking there is now a spacious, light-filled atrium welcoming visitors to the many facilities available. The large café offers visitors the opportunity to share a cafeteria queue with the world champions and Olympians of the GB squads, while an onsite bike shop completes the picture of a cyclist's ideal destination.

British Cycling now has a home that at least hints at the scale of its success and, given that they have achieved and exceeded so many of their objectives, it feels somewhat impertinent to ask the inevitable question: what next? Mills has been at British Cycling for 16 years and it is likely that he has been asked that question several times a day since

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he arrived but he sets off in response with an enthusiasm and attention to detail that suggests that he is pleased to have the opportunity to think it through one more time.

“As a senior management team we’re not just looking at what happens for the next funding cycle but what happens over the next eight to ten years,” he says. “We want to continue to grow the sport of cycling but also cycling as a form of physical activity. If you look at general strategy around sport, we’re talking about sport and physical activity, and for a lot of sports that’s quite hard to deliver. However, for cycling it is actually deliverable because people can cycle recreationally or as a means of transport, ie utility cycling. It’s an activity that anyone can have a go at. Lots of people have bikes and more and more people seem to be using them. We’re saying it’s OK winning Olympic medals and being successful but we need to use that to turn Britain into a true cycling nation.”

For a national governing body (NGB) of sport to add the promotion and development of non-sporting pursuits to its agenda represents a significant departure and might sound more like corporate social responsibility than the remit of a world-leading elite sports organisation. Is there a danger that entering the realm of traffic policy and urban design might take the organisation too far out of its comfort zone?

“We took the decision in 2009 to say that if you want to grow as an organisation you can’t just rely on the organised sport aspect,” Mills says. “We have made the organised sport a lot stronger but if you are going to expand you have to look at not just sport but at physical activity, recreation, transport – all of those areas. There are two million people cycling and our membership was 25,000 with 15,000 of them racing. Today we have 115,000 members, [which has happened] since we made that decision in 2009. So it’s more about cycling as a whole, about that spectrum. You’re trying to get someone off the sofa on to a bike, then trying to get them to be a more regular cyclist – once a month, once a week – and if they do want to participate it’s about being able to transition them into organised sport. You need to be able to do all of those things and at the top end of organised sport we’re trying to get the most talented young people on the first step of our Olympic pathway.”

Squaring the circle of maintaining elite performance while significantly increasing participation is the dream of every NGB and minister of sport but few have got close to turning the dream into reality. Having achieved so many of its objectives, winning medals and hitting targets along the way, how can British Cycling succeed where so many have struggled?

“I think it is a challenge,” Mills agrees, “but it’s interesting because for me a lot of it is about the people who make it happen. Organised sport relies massively on volunteers. We’ve got something like 4,000 organised cycling events every year and we don’t deliver events. British Cycling only delivers major events; the grassroots is delivered by volunteers. With coaching, the grassroots is delivered by volunteers. With clubs, the grassroots is delivered by volunteers. You have to support that workforce to sustain that organised sport. If you’re going to do something new and different, for example get into that new area of physical activity, you really need a whole new workforce because the current workforce are all very busy doing what they do: supporting clubs, coaching, competition, events, etc. If you take them away to do something else what happens to organised sport? We also know from research that this workforce turns over fairly regularly. Every four or five years the people that you trained are no longer doing that job. Some people stay a lot longer but there is generally a turnover of volunteers so in order to keep that going that needs continued support.”

If this much is clear to British Cycling looking to the interests of its own

sport, are there potential problems if national strategies for sport, and the funds that go with them, are not a perfect fit with what an NGB might have identified as its own needs?

Mills considers the question before continuing: “We’re funded by Sport England, which is funding we’re very grateful for, and allows us to do a lot of things we would want to do anyway. We also have a number of commercial partners for our development programmes, such as Sky and the Bicycle Association. However, if we had more of our own revenue we’d be able to diversify or be a little more directive with that funding. There are also inevitably some gaps which appear in government strategy that filter down through sports councils to us. If you look at the current strategy for young people there’s funding through the Primary Premium and then Sport England strategy starts at [the age of] 14, so there’s an obvious gap between 11 and 14. As a governing body we have to continue to look after that age group because they are our members or potential members. I don’t want to be critical but it’s an area which definitely needs joining up to create a pathway that includes primary, lower age secondary and then 14 to 25. You need the strategy to be joined up and that whole spectrum to be covered.”

Any organisation trying to meet expectations across a spectrum that has gold medals at one end and the most junior entry points of participation at the other will have to deal with a great many challenges but Mills argues that the funding distinction between the pursuit of medals and the growth of participation helps to clarify objectives.

“I wouldn’t say it’s easier but there’s a line drawn,” he says. “UK Sport funds medal success and Sport England funds not just the development of a sport but also physical activity. Sport’s the bit that I’m predominantly involved in but it’s not just about developing the sport. We’ve therefore structured it so that we’ve got a separate directorate looking at the development of physical activity. So the Sky Rides, the led rides, the Breeze programme are all about getting people active and getting them started, that traditional sports development model of getting people started and sustaining that participation.”

He explains that making sure that the promotion of cycling as a sport and recreational activity includes young people who are outside the 14-25 national target group is an important part of this agenda. British Cycling puts a lot of effort into working with schools, making the links between schools and clubs, getting young people started and helping them to keep going, perhaps on to the first stage of the talent development pathway. Getting interested or getting better means different things to different people and so plenty of challenges remain, not least the pressure on coaches and coaching that expanded participation creates. And coaching is fundamental to the process.

“I’m very passionate about coaching,” Mills says, “and the key thing for me – and this is a personal view, not necessarily a British Cycling view – is that it’s a different workforce for getting people off a settee and on to a bike compared to improving their performance and helping them develop. I’ve regularly used the word ‘activator’ or ‘activation’ and in essence you need coaches at Levels 1, 2 and 3, arguably performance coaches at Level 4, delivering that performance pathway. Below that you need activators getting people started. There’s probably an overlap between all of those things but our Go-Ride coaches are good at going into schools, doing some coaching and transitioning people into a club. But the led rides, for example, are more about activation, about galvanising people: getting them to a meeting point and giving them a good experience on a route that’s been mapped out and is safe with someone who can help them. This is essential but it’s not actually coaching.”

British Cycling has a ride leader programme which serves to address this need for activators and this is one of the many strands that needs to

be pursued if our development ambitions are to be met.

“It goes back to the key thing of needing to be able to do all of these things,” Mills continues. “You could say that if we’re going down a physical activity route we need to take resources from coaching and put them into activation. But then when you’ve activated those people, where do they go? Because once they’re activated they want to be coached, they want to get better, they may want to join a club. You need capacity in these new programmes and capacity in the club so they have somewhere to go. It’s no good saying, ‘We’ve found 40 extra people’ if the club says, ‘We’re not ready to take them’, or ‘We don’t have the capacity.’

“I need to stress again that we’re really grateful for the funding and support we receive from Sport England and we couldn’t do what we do without it but there’s been a lot of talk at government level about governing bodies not delivering and that disappoints me. I think we also need to consider what a governing body does and some of these functions are not necessarily being performed by other organisations. [As governing bodies] we are responsible for the governance of the sport, administering the rules, risk management, insurance, safeguarding and anti-doping. We are also responsible for a massive volunteer workforce, providing high-quality training and education programmes, insuring and protecting them against litigation. These aspects of what a governing body does are in the background and often don’t get noticed but without volunteers British sport simply wouldn’t function. Anyone could set themselves up as a governing body for a particular sport – and that’s happened – but what is the level of quality assurance behind that? Across [British Cycling’s] coaching, education and development we continue to train almost 2,500 volunteers per year just to be able to cover the continuing growth of the sport. Within the Go-Ride development programme we’ve grown over the last 10 years from 50 clubs working with young people to over 300 clubs. They are all quality-assured, with trained volunteers fulfilling key roles such as club administration, coaching, volunteer coordination and safeguarding. We work closely with all of these clubs to ensure they are sustainable but there’s still a churn of volunteers in those clubs so we continue to have that regular training need for people coming through the system.”

By way of illustration of the potential scale of the process involved he offers the example of British Cycling’s north-west region, one part of the organisation’s ten-region structure. It is a big area, running from Crewe to the Scottish border, with one development manager supporting 35 clubs. Across those clubs there are, he estimates, in the region of 700 volunteers and around 1,000 coaches. This, Mills argues, is the scale of the support mechanism that is required to develop and sustain a sport.

All this comes at a cost, both in terms of finance and other resources, that not every NGB is going to be able to match. This in turn raises the question, the Leisure Review suggests, of whether the expectations that NGBs would be able to drive a significant and sustainable rise in participation were ever realistic.

“I think you’ve hit the nail on the head,” Mills says. “British Cycling’s chief executive, Ian Drake, has worked out that in order to get an uplift of 125,000 in a four-year period British Cycling needs to be directly influencing in the region of 400,000 new participants every year to start cycling. I’m not sure that other sports have looked at that, at what it takes to get that level of uplift. So some of the figures that other governing bodies have suggested they could achieve are probably not realistic within the level of resources currently available to them and [you have to ask] can they deliver significant physical activity outcomes for a wide range of different age groups? You have examples of programmes that will hit specific target groups but are they going to hit the massive numbers that getting on a bike or going jogging or going swimming could actually deliver? I appreciate swimming is probably not

a particularly good example at the moment following their last set of Active People figures but the reality is that there are only a certain number of sports that can deliver a massive uplift in participation.”

Within the context of the drive for physical activity promotion the long-standing campaign to improve the professional standing of coaches and the professional status of coaching continues. However, given the role of coaching within the process of extending participation and the pressure on all sports to train, retain and improve their coaches, the casual observer might be forgiven for wondering whether much progress has been made in recent years. British Cycling has arguably done as much as anyone to raise awareness of the role of the coach so is there any good news to report on the wider issue of the recognition of coaching?

“I think there are examples of positive work that has been done,” Mills says. “It feels like I’m blowing our own trumpet but we’ve worked really hard on the coaching side here and we now have UKCC [UK Coaching Certificate] programmes from Levels 1 through to 3. That’s been a challenge because we’re a multi-discipline sport, so it’s Level 1 and six Level 2s, or rather Level 2 and six discipline-specific awards that go with that. Then when we go to Level 3 and because we join up those qualifications, they are much bigger. We’ve got four of those covering all of the Olympic disciplines. So I think we’ve got a pretty robust programme but our challenge, like everyone else, is to keep those qualifications up to date.

“Sport England has invested in coaching and continues to invest in governing bodies to support coaching and to underpin the development of programmes but I think coaching as a whole could really do with some further support because all of the research tells us that people have a better experience if they are coached. So if you want more people to come into sport and to be developed through sport you really do need more coaches. The big challenge for us as a sport is that we need coaches more than coaches need us. The cost of governing body qualifications can be quite restrictive so I think the least we can do is try to keep the qualifications current and fit for purpose. However, there’s a balance to be had in that how do you do this without charging people lots more money for coaching qualifications?

“Originally we had money to develop the coaching qualifications and then we had to do the delivery on a cost-neutral basis. We’ve been doing that for ten years and now it’s a question of how we develop those qualifications again and how we move them on. When you have a strategy that’s leaning more towards physical activity than organised sport, what happens to coaching? For me coaching sits within organised sport, while activation is about getting people off the settee and getting them started. In our coach education programme we’ve got something like 100 days of delivery and continuing professional development workshops. If you want to update this information you’ve got to update 100 days of tutor notes, the tutor workforce who deliver the programme, together with the resources that support the programme, which is a big job. If you’re looking to update a one-day course for an activator, updating this is a relatively small by comparison. At the moment we try to keep an element of the programme up to date each year. It’s a rolling programme so it should never go more than ten years without being updated but we don’t have the resources [to do more]. There’s not really been that scale of investment in coaching since the recommendations of the government’s coaching task force were implemented some ten years ago. Sportscoach UK supports governing bodies but there’s no specific ring-fenced investment for coaching so I don’t know if coaching has fallen off the radar or whether it is now about coaching being something different. What I do know is that it’s hard to develop talented athletes without high-quality coaches and coaching.”

More funding is a familiar refrain for any sector looking to implement change but if a pot of money for coaching were to become available how many problems would it solve and on whose desk would it have to land to make a real difference?

“There needs to be a long-term strategy for coaching,” he says. “Sport England has appointed a head of coaching, which is welcome and we’re trying to support that appointment with our thoughts and where we are as a governing body, but we do need to be looking at it across the spectrum. We have had investment in coaching and the coaching has underpinned the delivery programmes, which I think is right. We’ve done OK but again I go back to the point that you need to be able to fund a workforce to deliver activation, a workforce to deliver organised sport and a workforce to deliver talent and high performance. I think the performance bit is OK. With talent, it relies on both UK Sport and home country investment for it to be successful with a focus on continued investment in the coaching work around organised sport. The danger is that we have all of these governing bodies with UKCC qualifications but people begin to ask whether that is the future or whether there other ways of delivering it cheaper. And when you do that, what happens to the UKCC framework?”

We pause for a moment to reflect. In another part of the building not far from where we are sat the GB squad are deep into an Olympic cycle, putting in the work that will take them to Rio 2016 and, they hope, on to the podium. Further afield others, among them politicians, clinicians and leisure management professionals, will be discussing the implications and opportunities of the increased prominence of physical activity as part of a coherent national health strategy. While the role of cycling may get a mention, how many policy-makers will have the contribution of coaching on their agenda?

We have already offered numerous reasons why more should be done to secure the future of cycling as a sport and physical activity but our discussion has not even touched on facilities and what role they might play in the growth of cycling. That will have to wait for next time.

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