

On court with Adrian Christy

The Leisure Review spoke to Adrian Christy, the chief executive of Badminton England about running a national governing body, community networks and why he is sick of competing with dogs for court time.

Few people would describe the job of running a national governing body of sport as a simple task. The demands of finding a balance between the performance and participation ends of your game, finding the resources for both in a complex funding system, and being answerable to anyone who has ever played your game as well as the board are just some of the plates to be kept in the air at all times. Adding to the governing body chief executive's burden in recent years has been a significant change in the government's attitude to the delivery of sporting opportunities and, of course, the impact of the London 2012 Olympics. Whether your sport is on the Olympic roster or not, London 2012 looms large for its impact on potential funding streams or for the rather more prosaic reason the clock is ticking down at alarming speed.

Adrian Christy is the chief executive of an Olympic sport's governing body but when he sits down to talk to The Leisure Review at Badminton England's Milton Keynes headquarters he seems calm enough. Having seen the management of sport from a wide variety of angles during his career, he is familiar with most of the challenges, whether potential or actual, within sport. He came to Badminton England in 2007 following six years as director of development and competition at England Squash. This followed time at the Lawn Tennis Association and the National Coaching Foundation, all of which was preceded by sports development posts in Horsham and Lewisham. This makes him well qualified to offer a comment on our first proposition, that these are turbulent times for sport and for national governing bodies in particular and to offer an answer to the first question: in such turbulent times what is the role of a national governing body?

"At Badminton England first and foremost we are very clear that we deliver what our sport needs," he says. "Of course, along the way you have to ride the variances that come with different political motivations. We've gone from being very much focused on "young people" and "sport for all" over the years to then "increasing the physical activity of the nation". We take that responsibility seriously. We're paid a significant amount of money by government partners to deliver that so we see that as being part of our business. However, first and foremost we only do what is right for Badminton England."

What is right for Badminton England is largely contained within their strategy document, A Decade of Delivery, which outlines their aspirations for participation growth and medals. The aim is to be recognised as the number one badminton nation by 2016 and the document sets out the systems, structures and the people that will be required to deliver. It is, as Christy acknowledges, a very ambitious target but the sport starts from a good base. In the past few years participation in badminton has risen by nearly a quarter, meaning some four million people now play badminton and almost one million are playing once a month. The aim now is to increase the regularity of participation. This coincides in many respects with the government's physical activity targets but Christy is clear that external influences will not be allowed to change Badminton England's direction of travel.

"We're clear that it's our strategy," he says. "This is a business for us. We have a significant turnover and we have to deliver our business objectives. If those business objectives are complemented by what government wants us to do we'll embrace that but we don't take on everything because we believe that we have to. We will only take on what we need to because we think we should. We're very clear on that."

But does the development of badminton as a medal sport and as a participation sport result in contradictions within the business plan? Christy agrees that there has to be a balance – the right balance – between these two interests but he insists that it is a balance rather than a tension. With several senior players retiring after the Beijing Games, there was always going to be a period of rebuilding but the mindset of those within the Great Britain badminton squad, which is based at the Milton Keynes HQ, is that only medals, whether in 2012 or 2016, are good enough. There are no Olympic tourists in the GB badminton set up, a fact that became abundantly clear to some last year when 40% of the players were dropped from the squad, but in order to keep the conveyor belt of talent rolling the participation base needs to increase.

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Adrian Christy: holding court at the England Badminton Milton Keynes headquarters

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The Great Britain squad is admirably served by the Milton Keynes centre, a facility that boasts eight of the best courts in the country with a surface that players want to train on. Badminton England manages the Great Britain programme here on behalf of the home nations and the English Institute of Sport has a base, offering the best in sports science support. Accommodation is available on site so that players can live, work and train here if they choose, with nutritionists and coaches on hand. The resident coaching staff covers all specific areas of the game and one of the best singles coaches in the world – a Dane – will be joining the team in July. All aspects of the Great Britain set up, from coaching through to administration, is arranged on site to deliver medals. The participation side of the badminton equation is being served by the community badminton networks (CBN), local partnerships that comprise county badminton associations, clubs, school sports networks, local authorities and county sports partnerships; in fact anyone that has an interest in developing the sport. The target is to have 120 CBNs established by 2012 and 41 are presently in place. It is a collaborative approach to local development but the guidelines about ensuring the buy-in of potential partners to a CBN are quite clear: if there is not the commitment to the process, we will go elsewhere.

Christy makes no apologies for taking something of a ruthless attitude: “We have one very clear focus right the way through the organisation, whether that is in participation terms or elite athletes: it’s about the individual, the player. If we are looking to recruit 10,000 new players this year, we ask, what does the player need: what competition do they need, what coaching do they need, what volunteers do we need to make that happen, what is the environment in the club, the local authority sports centre or the school? It’s all about meeting the needs of the player and if the player’s experience of coming into badminton is a good one then we retain them. If it’s a poor one, there are plenty of other governing bodies out there and we are all trying to get the individual to play our respective sport.”

A new initiative launched this year with a number of local authority partners will attempt to ensure that the experience of the casual player or the player returning to the game is as positive as possible. Titled No Strings Badminton, the initiative is piloting regular drop-in sessions for those who want to play socially with no pressure to join a club or start playing for a team. Discussions with a number of the big leisure operators about how a branded No Strings franchise might be established nationally are bearing fruit and some 5,000 people have signed up already. It is a reminder that badminton still has strong connections with local authority sports centres, unlike some other sports, such as squash and tennis, that have a tradition of clubs providing facilities for their members. It is a point not lost on Christy.

“My experience of tennis and squash is that they are developed around its club structure,” he says. “They are largely asset-owning sports and badminton is largely a non-asset-owning sport. We are very lucky to have a national centre and we have some equivalents to private clubs around the country but not that many. However, we have badminton courts on every street corner because they are in schools or local authority centres. Our approach has to be different because we don’t own those facilities so we are always fighting very hard for the court space that is out there.”

Getting access to these sports halls is an obvious requirement for badminton but it is a continuing source of irritation for Christy. “I don’t have a problem about pitching our sport against basketball or another sport,” he says. “I have a real problem about pitching our sport against non-sporting activities. I think it’s outrageous that you’ve got leisure operators opening their doors for wedding fairs or dog shows, particularly when most of those facilities have been funded by the sports lottery fund and sport can’t get in. In order for us to meet our government targets and our business objectives we’re going after 70,000 new, once-a-week participants between now and 2013. We need 29,000 more court hours to satisfy that. We have four million people – a number that’s growing – playing our sport and we will get to the point where there is literally nowhere for these people to play. We have clubs where there are waiting lists of people wanting to get on their courts and can’t get on because non-sport activities are blocking the courts.

“It’s a fundamental issue and we are putting enormous pressure on the government, both through the DCMS [Department for Culture, Media and Sport] and the Department for Education. There is no evidence that suggests to me we need new facilities to be built. I’m not saying to government that we need more courts built. I’m saying that we need more access to the courts that are there. Open the schools, get the dog shows off the courts in local authority centres and let sport get on those courts, whether that’s volleyball, badminton or basketball. It’s then about our sport, our product and us as an organisation being well structured and well positioned to take advantage of that court space.”

From the operators’ perspective the world of the sports hall probably looks a little different, something that Christy acknowledges: “If I were a leisure operator and one of my KPIs [key performance indicators] was about generating revenue – and not developing sport – then I can understand exactly where they are, but then don’t take the lottery sports fund [money] to invest in those facilities. Build it as more of a commercial operation but don’t take lottery money.”

However, he is not afraid of issuing the challenge to the sports that use the facilities to step up their efforts to demonstrate that they can be part of the revenue solution: "There's got to be something in it for the operator. Sport shouldn't be arrogant and my comments around the facilities issue can come across as a bit arrogant but they aren't. What sport has to do is show that it can come to the table and show that it can be part of the solution of filling sports halls – or squash courts or tennis courts – by delivering that footfall." Clubs that are worried about losing access to their court space should, Christy suggests, begin by asking what they can do to protect their space. "If there is pressure on space in a school what can a club do to help? It comes back to this idea of a partnership approach. An adult club could easily go to a school and say, 'We'll take care of your third hour [of physical activity]. We've got qualified, police-checked coaches but in the evening we'll take responsibility for your courts from 7pm to 10pm.' This would protect their time but invest something back into the school. Until clubs do that properly we are always going to have this problem of people being unsure of whether they should be opening their facility."

In partnership with a number of other governing bodies, Badminton England has helped establish a sports hall group under the auspices of Sport England to promote the interests of sports dependent upon sports halls for their playing spaces. The group is hoping that by devising a coherent and cohesive facility strategy and offering it to facility operators the problems of scheduling the various groups that want access to a sports hall can be solved, with sports such as badminton benefiting from increased access. The aim is to emphasise the use of community facilities by community members, rather than filling sports hall time with clubs. It is, Christy suggests, another example of putting the requirement of the individual player at the centre of the strategy, a strategy that in this case is receiving a positive response.

While the job of a governing body chief executive may be far from simple, it seems that some of the thinking involved is, by necessity, far from complex. For the sports hall group initiative, as for the development of community badminton networks, the No Strings Badminton brand and the challenge of dog shows on court, the thinking is essentially quite simple. Adrian Christy is able to sum it up succinctly: "It's about getting the key in the door and opening it up to let people who want to play badminton play badminton."

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