

Sport under pressure: some lessons learned

Despite feeling like Daniel, or possibly Danielle, in the lions' den, Joe Coach spent a day at Birmingham University where the academic elite were discussing the fundamental issues for sport in these times of economic pressure.

The subtitle for the Sport under Pressure conference hosted by the Department of Politics and International Studies of Birmingham University asked the question: "What is the future for sustainable sports development in times of austerity?" Despite being only a coach, my plan was to see which way the inhabitants of the nation's ivory towers thought the wind might be blowing and whether coaching in the UK would feel the chill blast of recession as badly as the rest of the sector. Good coaches always take a keen interest in acquiring technical information but the best coaches go beyond their silos, see what the rest of the world is up to and bring the lessons back. In the words of Gabriella Cilmi, there were lessons to be learned in the West Midlands.

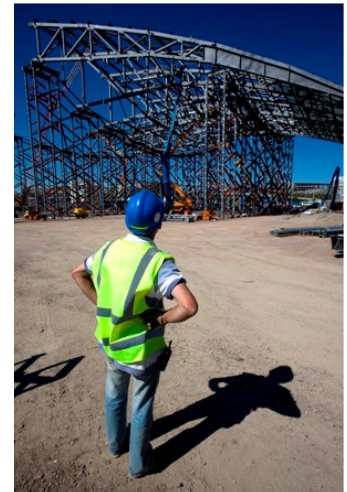
The conference, in the surprisingly leafy environs immortalised – or forever damned – by being thinly disguised as Rumridge University in David Lodge's seminal campus novel *Nice Work*, was just such an opportunity. You do not need to be an overtly political animal to realise that the current financial cut backs will have wide-ranging impacts at the grassroots of sport and where better to divine what they may be than at an event that was doubling up as the 5th Political Studies Association Sport and Politics Specialist Annual Conference. It was a pleasant surprise to find a few familiar faces from front-line sports development and coaching in the room and also to discover the number and wide variety of people working in sport in the higher education sector. From the first informal network session onwards a number of valuable local contacts and relationships were established.

Lesson one: networking at conferences is always a winner!

From the off it was clear that the conference was going to be a bit 'tasty' with erudite, free-thinking individuals having their say about the situation in which sports finds itself. In the welcome and introduction there were scathing references to the spaghetti sports system, target-driven management cultures, monitoring from Whitehall, sustainability, Olympic legacy (both hard and soft), economic "shock and awe" therapy, 'big society', localism, asset transfer and the proliferation of the social enterprise model. The first keynote, on the "London Olympics and the Politics of Austerity", gave the key message that politicians' motives for bidding for and delivering mega-events are very different from those which sport development purists might hope to see. As one contributor put it, "Olympic bids always start with poetry but end in real estate."

Lesson two: sports development purists, and the sports development and coaching profession as a whole, need to embrace and develop innovation and creativity if we are to manage political change, un-sustainability and the survival-at-all-costs mentality.

Next came a series of short presentations and a panel discussion on the theme of sports policy under pressure. The buzz words and messages in the first session on older people and their participation in physical activity were "understanding participant motivations", "barriers and context throughout the life cycle" and "health and wellbeing issues" and there was a call for more longitudinal studies. A presentation on the impact of austerity measures on the sports system as a whole spoke of how, in the recent past, all sectors had benefited from funding (especially the PE and school sport and the high-performance sectors). This has led to many positive developments, although the inability to increase participation and address issues of social exclusion at community sport level were noted. The weakness of the sports lobby as a whole and the fact that some elements, such as high performance, were stronger, or perhaps just luckier, than others was also outlined. The policy shifts of different



London 2012 is coming but what will be the legacy for sport?

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governments and different sports ministers was highlighted as a major impediment to implementing a long-term approach to sustainable sports development plans and comments were made that protecting elite sport up to 2012 could be viewed as “a cheap, feel-good investment”.

The policy shift which led to the dismantling of the school sport system drew highly negative comments often couched as questions, such as: “What is the rationale?” “Do they really care about or value PE and sport in schools?” “Do they not understand the key link between length and quality of education and its links to participation?” “Do they not see the key inter-dependence with health agendas?” Strong words such as “vandalism” and “barbarism” were banded about with delegates outlining their fears about the detrimental impacts of Michael Gove’s decision further down the line, a decision implemented just as the system was beginning to show positive signs of improvement. Being an academics’ event, there were some dissenting voices and it was observed that the school sports partnership (SSP) network should surely have been planned from the beginning to ensure sustainable funding and that it was perhaps naive to existing levels of funding would continue for ever.

Facts, figures and comments outlined the alarming impact of the cuts on local government and community sport, with the challenges facing voluntary clubs being a real cause for concern. The key issues facing clubs were identified from current research projects as: ever-increasing administrative demands; the top-down governing body (NGB) target-driven culture; the dash for pots of funding; and the need to learn from other European countries about bottom-up structures that have the capacity and capability to widen participation and engage harder-to-reach groups in society.

Lesson three: the pattern and impact of cuts are creating a “squeezed middle” within the sports system with the poor relations being community sport and the heartbeat of sport, the voluntary clubs and coaches.

The next session came from golf and painted a much brighter picture of what one NGB is doing to develop its shared vision for developing and supporting golfers of all ages and abilities within the context of tough financial times. Using the strap line “right coach – right place – right time”, a strong and coherent vision and a long-term approach to a golf strategy has produced a sports development plan underpinned by a strong evidence base, realistic business development objectives and a comprehensive approach to coaching. While there are challenges involved in delivering this strategy (most notably the complex internal structure of the sport and the need to engage with private clubs and other providers) the mood at this point is positive and upbeat.

Lesson four: stick with the optimists. It's going to be tough enough even if they're right.

The session immediately after lunch can be a conference graveyard but a hard-hitting keynote called “Power plays in sport and physical education” kept the post-prandial audience awake and engaged with the contention that current sports policy planning and its delivery process are not fully grounded in a knowledge base informed by clear evidence and backed up by experience and practice. In fact, it argued, fragmented interest groups and individuals have had strong influences on sports policy and at times it has been questionable whether robust and coherent evidence for decisions existed. The lack of political will to act on key issues and the need to allocate resources to sustained change and improvement programmes which are embedded in the delivery system were also identified as a strong theme. Allied to this there is little evidence of proper mechanisms of objective scrutiny, tracking and monitoring of various policies and projects. There were some key buzz words used in this session, namely the prevalence of “fragmented self-interest groups”, “political entrepreneurship” and the tendency for “crowded policy spaces”, which conveyed very well the key message that in this country we seem to be faced with a very messy and opportunistic approach to sports policy and building sustainable sports structures and systems. This session ended with a call for a move away from the current tendency for “policy entrepreneurship” towards solutions that are owned and driven by all relevant stakeholders; that is to say less tribal.

Lesson five: there are many competing interests vying for influence, power and money resulting in sporting turf wars. We need less inter-organisational rivalry and politicking, a more collaborative climate and a focus on the delivery of common goals. But who is going to lead this process on behalf of sports development and coaching?

The keynote was followed by short presentations and discussions on a range of
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related topics. There is research that indicates the likely negative effects on participation trends in schools of the current government's policy of emphasising the competitive elements of sport in schools and this was presented. There was a passionate and eloquent presentation showing clear evidence that the same government's sport policies will lead to women's and girls' sport becoming even more marginalised; and there was a talk on the legacy for youth sport from London 2012, from which delegates were left with the stark conclusion that, while there were some low-level efforts being made to impact on soft legacy issues, compared to the potential for growth and to the public's expectation there was a major credibility gap. Efforts to date can best be described as a token gesture towards a sustainable legacy programme. It is interesting to note that there is some recent research evidence that indicates that an Olympic Games can have negative effects on sports participation because people think Olympic standards impossible to attain and are therefore not inspired to emulate them.

Lesson six: we know too little about the effect of mega-events on sports participation. What will be left and to whom by London 2012?

A number of contributors looked at the local effects of austerity measures on school sport and youth participation in the community and suggested that as areas of the country dismantled current systems of planning and support to primary schools there will be an increase in the employment and deployment of private organisations to deliver sports coaching. These linked to a presentation that followed on the impact of local government and sport where it is clear that since sport is not a statutory service there is strong early evidence that dedicated leisure departments are being dismantled. On average budgets are being cut by 10-30%; the local authority role is now more about enabling and facilitating rather than direct provision; out-sourcing to the voluntary and private sector to manage sports facilities, projects and programmes is endemic; and the effectiveness of sports development partnerships' working has become a casualty.

Lesson seven: the increasing 'marketisation' of coaching needs to be handled carefully. Compulsory competitive tendering (CCT) showed that commissioners of services should be clear about the standards of sport service provision required and what quality measures must be delivered.

In the final series of presentations it was argued that sport, in common with the arts and humanities sectors, is now in a precarious position. There was a call for a better understanding of how to build objective (and not politically motivated) evidence bases to ensure more legitimate forms of knowledge to under-pin sports policy and practice. There was also a call for community action groups to lead the way in highlighting key issues with local politicians. The notion of the privatisation of sports development was mentioned and there were question marks raised about the future for county sports partnerships.

The day reached a climax with a well-argued and passionate speech that was highly critical of the coalition government's sports policies. Under the title "Good intentions but going backwards", an array of facts, figures and trends were put forward, leaving delegates in no doubt that present cuts would hit sport hard and disproportionately with the most disadvantaged groups suffering the most. It was argued that the changes had not been thought through or planned properly and there was little understanding of both short- and longer-term consequences. It was argued that the negative effects of this ideologically driven approach would be exacerbated by Sport England's strategy for improving sports participation, which is chasing the wrong targets and relying too heavily on a national governing body approach, which traditionally and in the main only has expertise in performance-based sport.

Lesson eight: the call for community action is spot on but who is leading this on behalf of sports development? And most importantly how does coaching fit in and where is the collective voice of coaching and coaches?

Being positive, and all coaches should be positive, perhaps lesson nine should be "When we long for life without difficulties, remind us that oaks grow strong in contrary winds and diamonds are made under pressure" but in all honesty with jobs being lost, services being dismantled and progress being stalled, the disarray at the top of sports development and coaching makes positive thinking look a little like burying your head in the sand.

Joe Coach is the nom de plume of a highly experienced and impressively qualified sports coach.

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