

[front page](#)

[news](#)

[back issues](#)

[comment](#)

[letters](#)

[advertise](#)

[subscribe](#)

[about us](#)

[contact us](#)

[back page](#)

What did the Olympics do for us?

Despite a dearth of real evidence, Joe Coach decides to draw hard and fast lessons from the Olympic experience and looks to volleyball's Audrey Cooper for some inspiration.

With 26 sports running from early morning till late at night, even the most committed television watcher could not hope to draw any sensible conclusions from the Olympic Games other than, "That looked like fun". However, as someone once nearly said, "The impossible just takes a little chutzpah" and, as Joe Coach is notably risk positive, here we go.

London 2012 has been a breakthrough Games for 50% of the population. Women have never been so prominent, with every country having at least one woman taking part and competitions in every sport, including boxing, for both genders. The most seen but least commented on piece of gender equality was getting attractive young men to carry the medals and flowers into medal ceremonies rather than attractive young women.

Sadly, however, there has been no discernible evidence of equality in the coaching teams on view. Perhaps someone will publish the statistics on gender evenness among support staff – they must have them after all – but in cycling, volleyball, handball, judo, taekwondo, hockey and basketball, sports where the coaches are prominent as the competition actually takes place, there were very few female faces. British Cycling have a female PR person who gets in shot a good deal and in the gymnastic competitions – for women – there are more women visible around the athletes. But are they coaches or something less important? In the equestrian events although there are women sitting on the horses, the backroom staff most in evidence are the grooms. Despite being charged with looking after considerably costly equine talent these women are consistently dismissed as "the girls".

Not all of the people in the top coaching jobs are men, however, and I bet when the statistics are released we will find that the GB numbers are among the better ones. From an in-depth analysis of all things on the red button we do know that Beth Tweddle is coached by a woman, our latest female judo silver medallist was coached by our last female judo silver medallist, Hope Powell has led the line for women coaches for years and the most successful of our make-weight team event teams – the women's volleyball squad – was under the tutelage of Audrey Cooper throughout. But that is not a great return given the amount of volleyball, handball, canoeing and even archery which colleagues in the Joe Coach office were forced to endure, all of which made nil returns in the "female coach" column.

Why is it that, in an otherwise meritocratic environment, a person's gender should preclude them from testing themselves on the biggest stage? In the June/July edition of The Leisure Review there was a report from a debate about a 'glass ceiling' in between grassroots and elite coaching, for both genders. In America they debate a 'glass curtain' which prevents women from taking significant coaching roles in university and college sport. The evidence is that few if any women occupy head coach roles in men's sport and that once something called Title IX had ensured parity of remuneration across gender then men moved in to women's sport and women, as a gender and as individuals, began to lose even more jobs to men.

The explanation? Simple prejudice.

Can women coach as well as men? Olympic evidence suggests that they can and common sense simply shouts it from the roof top. The countless hours studying a variety of sports over the Olympic fortnight highlighted one coaching star, the aforementioned volleyball coach Audrey Cooper, the only coach in any of the "home nation picks" who won a game.

www.theleisurereview.co.uk

"We are taught, if we are lucky, that officials are distractions and should be taken in the same stride as bad weather or opposition sledging; Cooper seemed hardly to notice things that would have sent more than one of her peers into paroxysms of outrage."

The Leisure Review is supported by:



The Leisure Review is written, designed and published by:

In volleyball – the real variety not that performed on sand – the coach is very much part of the team as it performs. This gives the armchair critic an opportunity to watch the interaction between players and coach and between coach and support team. Thanks to the IOC's broadcast partner's commitment to a transatlantic approach, we can also hear what is being said in time-outs.

On the evidence offered, Cooper is calm, collected and clear at all times. When pressure came from superior opponents, close passages of play or on one glorious occasion in a fifth and deciding set, she remained an oasis of composure. Even when calls went against Great Britain at crucial times she gave no hint of dissent or concern. We are taught, if we are lucky, that officials are distractions and should be taken in the same stride as bad weather or opposition sledging; Cooper seemed hardly to notice things that would have sent more than one of her peers into paroxysms of outrage.

I suspect that dissertations have been written about what to say in time-outs and between sets, or at half time or between rounds. Cooper must have read them all. Her instructions were kept to a minimum, two maybe three at most, and they were repeated in different ways. They were almost always technical – "Bring the block in against number 16 as she sets up to hit cross court" – and often backed up by simple gestures. She never railed, often smiled and once, when the team were carrying Algeria before them, she winked. She could do this because she always made good eye contact and her players wanted to listen to her.

Contrast Cooper under pressure with the unfortunate coach of the USA men's team in their losing quarter-final against Italy. In one time-out it looked as if he was talking but nobody was listening; in the next an assistant took charge. Contrast her again with one of the GB basketball coaches who sent the team back on court with the instruction: "Don't make a mistake." Naturally they did.

As UK Sport review the funding they give to governing bodies they will struggle to find reasons to fund volleyball. World-wide the game is second only to football in terms of popularity and all the major powers – which is to say those with large populations and large Olympic budgets – are competitive on the world stage. A medal would be unlikely whatever programmes Volleyball GB put in place but perhaps they could look at the legacy of these Games and reward progress rather than potential. Bear in mind that the women's squad lost its funding in advance of the Games, or perhaps spent it too quickly, and certainly lost world-class coach Lorne Sawulha from the head of the programme. Cooper was promoted, Ian Goswell, a wily old campaigner, was brought in to support her and the rest is history. If the jump in world status from 69 to 20 is not evidence that development is happening and the graph is on the up then nothing is.

This article was supposed to be about the coaching prowess of Audrey Cooper not the vagaries of UK Sport's funding, the coaching gender divide or the failings of coaches who should know better but somehow they have all got mixed up.

Perhaps trying to discuss one without all the others is like saying, "What the country needs in the wake of the best Olympics ever is more competition in schools" and then going to Mallorca for yet another holiday. And who in their right mind would do that?

The Leisure Review, September 2012

© Copyright of all material on this site is retained by *The Leisure Review* or the individual contributors where stated. Contact *The Leisure Review* for details.