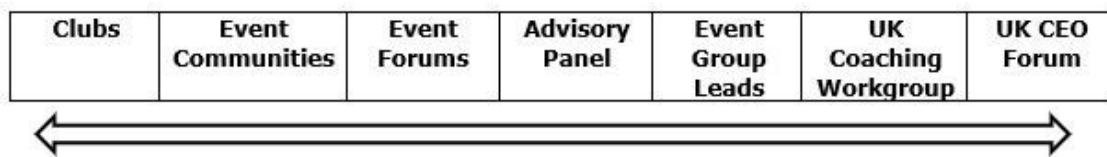


Throw Away Your Coloured Pencils

There is a fresh discussion opening up on the British Athletics Coaches Association (BACA) Facebook page as I write this about the journey of athletes in the 8-18 years age range. On January 29th Malcolm Wallace (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/2480810632177410/user/684426216>) started the thread with comments about how Norway has approached the development sector of sport. Such debate is vital if we as coaches are going to be able to find the solutions to the major elements of the discussion.

Forgive the repetition here, I have sent many such articles to governing bodies including to the authors of the latest Coaching and Coach Development initiative at UK Athletics, and I have shared them all in the BACA Resources Library. I always hope that the discussion will lead to changes at the coal-face where the coach and athlete reside and work in their relationship. Going on the many previous cycles I have experienced since the late 1960's, I have my doubts.

With UKA 's latest strategy now unfolding – the new Event Leader Group should be close to their first meeting by now – it is expected that the input pathway may hold the key to joining in with this discussion. The new strategy is illustrated by a pathway of sharing information as follows:



As disappointing as previous plans and promises have been and how disillusioned and tired many coaches have become, this is a chance for coaches to make a contribution to the discussion. This is a chance for those at the 'top' to listen, officially, to us coaches here at the 'bottom'.

Now jump back to the 1980's through to the early 2000's when people like Beunen, Malina, Bompá and István Balyi presented the world with an overview of the journey the young athlete takes from their first steps through to adulthood. Those of us who spoke to István all those years ago heard that his intention was to try to help overcome the difficulties sports in Canada (and the community) were facing in terms of the falling participation numbers (injury increases, burn-out, loss of 'fun', adult pressure, winning at all costs, winning at all ages, etc.) and community health elements. His work with Hamilton in 2004 gave us our first look at a diagram showing the journey from "*FUNdamentals - Learning to Train - Training to Train - Training to Compete - Training to Win*".

What did the bureaucracy of sport do with this stimulant to make us all re-address the journey from engagement through to high performance? This was about the

time that many organisations turned to their wordsmiths (often recruited from the world of academia) and marketing and promotions agencies to create the new 'breakthrough' strategy of Long-Term Athlete Development and out came to coloured pencils.

Nearly every sport in every country blindly followed suit and hundreds of copies of Balyi and Hamilton's diagram were created with some changes in wording and colour. It had become a test of technical drawing and little else. Each organisation then sat back with much self-promotion and gratification thinking that they had created something for the good of all coaches and athletes. A new vocabulary was born but little or nothing ever changed in terms of the central pillars of Balyi's work – reducing the participation problem, reducing the injury problem, reducing the community health problem.

It is mentioned in some of the replies to Malcolm Wallace that perhaps the Balyi model has failed. Far from it. The main features of the model remain a very reasonable position to consider especially those elements that highlight the poor practices that lead to a dangerous interpretation of 'winning at all ages', burn-out, early/over-specialisation, and all the other adult-satisfying behaviours that exist. Certainly there have been some research projects that offer a different interpretation of some of Balyi's recommendations – e.g.

*Ford, Paul & De Ste Croix, Mark & Lloyd, Rhodri & Meyers, Robert & Moosavi, Marjan & Oliver, Jon & Till, Kevin & Williams, Craig. (2011). **The Long-Term Athlete Development model: Physiological evidence and application.** Journal of sports sciences. 29. 389-402. 10.1080/02640414.2010.536849.*

.....but the fact remains that we have done very little apart from colouring in some diagrams. I know people are sick and tired of this next phrase, but if all we ever get is this superficial 'top-down' nonsense then nothing will ever improve. If organisations continue to see the bureaucracy as having all the answers and only creating a one-way dialogue (from them down to the masses) then we will continue to see the aforementioned problems persisting. The bureaucracy has proven, generation after generation, that it is not competent to govern in such matters.

If, and it is a very big 'if', the decision-makers create user-friendly information and resources that directly and positively influence all four pillars of athletic performance (Technical, Tactical (Arena Skills), Physical and Mental (Behavioural) appropriate across all layers of the learning/maturation continuum, then there is a chance to arrest the decline. If, at the same time, there is a shift from the one-off certification courses to a lifetime rhythm of in-situ mentoring and support then perhaps such a strategy might, at last, be classified as being 'bottom-up'.

It seems so strange that no one has ever created a strategy that starts at the inner workings of the progressive learning/training session (the heartbeat of the sport) and grows from there into ever-progressing quality support and control of teaching

and coaching. Why do we always see all the effort and resources being poured into new, and very expensive, bureaucrats, new administrators, new policies, new governance protocols and new statistical abuse. By the time anyone refers to the coal-face of the operation (the coach-athlete interface) all the energy and money has disappeared.

What appears to be a new opportunity is for coaches to look at the promised pathways and processes listed in the latest UK Coaching Strategy and realise that things like the *Club Community*, the *Discipline Specific Communities* and the *Group Coaching Forums* are probably the last chance to get a voice heard. If these are real platforms for the placement of coaches at the centre of the decision-making process (as promised) then no-one can afford not to take part in the pathway. This is your chance. Start at Club level with all your peers and invest a little time in assembling your collective voice on matters of deep concern. Then test out the reality of the promises in the new strategy. Add to this the chance to create an even louder voice by supporting the growth of the BACA and things might take a step forward.

In the meantime, staying on the LTAD topic, start to make decisions that, while specifically appropriate to the individual in front of you, are also strategically significant to the major problems that we all face:

1. Decline in participation
2. Poor physical efficiency, consistency and resilience within the community
3. Cultural and behavioural changes in the community
4. The conveyance of these problems along the pathway and into High Performance

This will mean that the triumvirate of *Club–Coach–Parent* or *School-Teacher-Parent* will need to be recognised as important and significant structures for communication.

Kelvin B. Giles MA, CertEd, AS
February 2022