

Another Chance

The lords and masters of Australia's sporting bureaucracy have seen fit to offer a new strategy for discussion – the moving of the now-defunct Australian Institute of Sport from Canberra to Brisbane. Before the media frenzy has settled and political and personal gain strategies have been consolidated, there might be an early opportunity to hold the bureaucracy to account and actually create a worthwhile strategy for the good of the participants. Here I don't just mean the 1% of the population of athletes, coaches and officials who earn their living from sport and who are the primary recipients of the majority of resources, effort and interest, but the other 99%, the participants and volunteer coaches and officials.

Get ready for the tired old argument of 'legacy' as taxpayers money is again poured into the trough around which the same individuals and groups wait in anticipation of a feed. The 'legacy' argument will contain language describing 'participation', 'well-being', 'community facilities' as part of the trinkets being offered to the taxpayer. Government policies will mention these factors as elections are fought by the ruling classes. Remember it is the same bureaucracy that created the AIS in Canberra in the first place; the same bureaucracy that allowed its tragic demise; the same bureaucracy now riding the wave of the Brisbane Olympic bid.

While medal counts, Olympic blazers, world-rankings and results satisfy the vanity of the few so it must be noted that the one-percenters are a product of 'what has gone before'. High-performance success is no accident yet we continue to invest in a 'quick-fix', 'fast-track' series of strategies where the small number of one-percenters are squeezed towards elite performance at each Olympic Games or World Championships. At the same time as this expensive, cyclic, 'fast-tracking' there is an ever-increasing voice trying to tell the truth about the journey to high-performance. Surely we can all see that the vanity driven medal counts and world rankings are the results of a long-term journey by each individual coach and athlete and that any strategy should reflect this complete journey and not just the bit for the ego and personal gain.

To hear daily the cry from all those volunteer coaches (the ones charged with developing all the fundamentals of the journey to high performance) that participation is collapsing; fundamental and foundation movements are at their worst with every layer of the younger generations; that injuries in youth sport are increasing at a 'plague' rate; that the overall 'fitness' of today's youth is nearing catastrophic levels and you just might get an idea of where we might start to invest our energies.

Several decades ago the sporting wordsmiths associated with the bureaucracy came up with the phrase, "athlete centred, coach driven". Every Institute and Academy I consulted at for over 20 years lived off this message and we all fell for it. It is

interesting to note, after nearly 30 years of such bureaucracy, the following statements from a review of coaching:

- *Coaches do not feel valued or respected.*
- *Personal coaches are treated poorly by the administration.*
- *There is little in the way of having complaints dealt with fairly.*
- *There is little or no communication from the NGB to the coaches in the field after the coach is certified. Coach Certification is simply an income stream for the NGB. There is no ongoing quality control or mentoring.*
- *Volunteer coaches are ill-prepared for the responsibility they are given.*

In recent years the bureaucracy has come up with layers of elite coaching stimulus e.g. Elite Coaching Apprenticeship Program; Women Sport Leadership Program; Women in High Performance (NZ); NZ Coach Development Framework; AIS Talent Program (Australia); Team Staff Training (England Athletics); International Coach Developer Framework (ICCE). All perfectly legitimate endeavours – for the one-percenters.

There are also these observations about the plight of the athletes on this journey:

There are 3 distinct periods where young athletes quit sport. Main reasons given are:

- a. No longer enjoying the experience - 'Winning at all costs' attitude from parents, teachers, coaches, national governing bodies*
- b. Lack of improvement due to: Fundamentals are by-passed too quickly on the road to winning; Concentration on Technical and Competition preparation at the expense of Physical and Mental components.*
- c. Injury*

If we have been following an 'athlete-centred, coach driven' strategy for the last 30 years why are things so bad?

If the Brisbane Olympic Games win has made people consider the best steps to take then surely someone, somewhere, must stop repeating the same failing cycle. By all means, employ a layer of Executive Directors earning \$200,000 a year but for goodness sake measure their success by what major, evidence-based improvements are seen in athlete participation and retention; coach education and mentoring; injury reduction; depth of performance; etc. More importantly, measure the effect of this wide and deep trough of resources (currently surrounded by queues of would-be bureaucrats) by the reaction and comments of the thousands of volunteer coaches and officials who glue everything together.

If you are a decision-maker in all this then invest in walking in their shoes so you really know what they need. Stop assuming and guessing what is happening at the stages from which the medals will eventually come. Manage by walking about in the

real and often lonely world of coaching where there are often not enough athletes or sometimes too few coaches and too many athletes; where in some cases it is not coaching but crowd-control; where what you think and hope is being coached is definitely not happening; where the technical, tactical, physical and behavioural limitations that we invariably see as the athlete enters the senior levels are not even recognised let alone eradicated; and where there is a general poor feeling towards the national governing body.

So that this commentary does not get misconstrued as a shallow series of complaints from one of the 'ancient' ones I need to at least offer some semblance of a solution. Far too many complain, but seldom offer alternatives so I will continue to reiterate some ideas for consideration. Whether the journey is to long-term, permanent community health and well-being or to high performance in the international sports arena, the start is the same. Every human being has a basic entitlement to having optimum mechanical and metabolic efficiency. The 'mechanical' starts with all-round physical literacy coupled with movement consistency and resilience so that whatever physical challenge a person faces in their life they have a reservoir of physical answers to utilise. Add to this a cardio-respiratory fitness available at all times so as to have a work capacity to survive the challenges of life, and you have a great start to the journey where everybody wins.

To be able to offer this to all members of the community demands that parents, teachers and coaches are availed of the very best information and delivery skills to pass this 'literacy' on to all recipients. This means that current Coach Education (currently in play) and Coach Development (non-existent) strategies require an overhaul across all sectors including Physical Education, Development level coaching, Talent Development coaching, High-Performance coaching, Sports Medicine and the Sport Sciences. High-Performance will then be able to grow more effectively out of such a powerful foundation. In other words 'what has gone before' will positively affect 'what is yet to come' in the quest for those pesky medals and world rankings. This can be further described as a 'bottom-up' journey that I would suggest would beat the current 'top-down' version.

Create a strategy that encompasses all these elements and maybe you can crow about legacy.

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