

Section Eight: Schools (Objective 1 - Participation)

The strategy involves assisting the PE Teachers by delivering to them "high quality teaching, delivered by knowledgeable teachers with exciting new resources". Having reached this stage of the report, I am now sufficiently cynical to presume this means shiny folders, with shiny CD's and Norwich Union writ large everywhere, and no tangible long term benefit to the sport.

It is important that the participation within schools is sustainable and motivates many to increase the participation outside the school with the club. The best way to achieve this is to invite the school into the club. Funding which allows for club coaches to deliver weekly athletics classes or competition is a worthwhile aspiration.

Sir Andrew Foster's report appears to want to invest a huge amount of "athletics legacy funding" into providing PE Teachers with the confidence to deliver athletics in schools. The influence of this money will inevitably be diluted because not all PE Teachers will express a passion for the sport, and will fail to translate this spending into a meaningful long term benefit. The report also states "There are discreet plans for reforming school level competition". These words are vying for the prize for being the most unhelpful comment in the document.

When viewing this Schools section, alongside the Clubs section above, one is left with the feeling that the 9 Hubs, English Athletics and UK Athletics are intended to be the sport of athletics, whereas Athletic Clubs and Schools are considered equal partners and separate from the sport. To suggest that Athletic Clubs filled with enthusiasts passionate about the sport are an equal partner with schools is absurd. Unless it is intended to remove all children from athletic clubs and feed the elite school athletes directly into the "Well Oiled Machine".

Section Nine: Supporting the grassroots through membership (Objective 1 - Participation)

The report states "Sufficient legacy funding should be released to conduct market research on membership services and to design and develop a scheme".

The report is very enthusiastic about providing a "strong and compelling package of real added value benefits". The report also identifies these funds generated by a membership scheme as being retained by each home country, "at least for the present".

Their is no indication about the levels of income this scheme will generate, or the cost of the bureaucracy to administer it. It is not clear whether it is intended as being an information gathering resource, or a money gathering resource. Furthermore their is no indication about the priority between the two possibilities.

Section Ten: Competition (Objective 3)

This sorry section talks about the need for change. It appears to dismiss "old" competitions out of hand, and most importantly undermines the very competition structure which allows athletes to funnel themselves to the top of the sport. The report states "some traditionalists feel that, whatever the cost, they have to protect championship events introduced in the 19th century although they are not now relevant to the 21st century, and will be even less so with the introduction of the hubs concept".

The concept of enabling the best local athletes, to progress to the county level championships, then on to regional level championships, so the champions from all the regions can come together in competition to establish the best in the country, is not "old fashioned". It is fairness in competition and it is transparent, which is the basis of our sport.

Any other concept for athletic competition undermines the concept of fair play where every person is given an equal chance to progress. That is the difference between International Grand Prix meetings which are invitation only affairs, and Major Championships which at least in the UK, enable athletes to have an equal opportunity to compete for selection. Just because winners are often predictable does not reduce the need for competition to establish who the winners are.

Sir Andrew Foster feels so strongly about the need for change, he proposes throwing money at UK Athletics in order to make this change happen. Their is no indication about what the change will entail.

Section Eleven: Performance (Objective 2)

Sir Andrew suggests the appointment of a Performance Director. To be more specific, this Performance Director should be the best that money can buy. This job might end up as two jobs with a Head Coach reporting to the Performance Director. This post, or these posts appear to be designed to enable the political paymasters the opportunity to sack people after each Olympic Games, unless the national press are happy with the results.

One very worrying paragraph in this section states:

"There is a tension between those who think pathways of development templates should be adhered to fairly closely and others who hold dear the athlete's discretion to choose the route and the coach they feel are best for them. Our inclination, partly informed by parallels in other fields, is towards the former: there should be a degree of flexibility and customisation, but athlete development must be evidence-based, and the instincts of young people are sometimes not. The flow of funds to support athletes, especially performance awards, presumably imparts some leverage over what they do: several people have suggested to us that greater discipline should be exercised alongside financial support."

Athletics achievement is often about a partnership, built over several years. To impose on this partnership, by bribing an athlete away from a happy and successful environment is scandalous. With the financial incentives available to the athlete, most coaches who are decent people will concede that the athlete who is reaching maturity might benefit from a progressive step into a more disciplined environment. However this generosity of spirit should not mask the fact that the sport is imposing itself in a way which is unacceptable.

The young athlete's original support structure will always remain available to pick up the pieces, but to enshrine this procedure into the culture of the sport would be a disgrace.

In addition, the pressure on the professional athletics structure to deliver results will be so huge that all elements would be in place to develop a systematic drugs cheating culture as seen in East Germany in years gone by.

The Sir Andrew Foster Report

http://www.ukssport.gov.uk/images/uploaded/Foster_Report.pdf

A Personal view by C.Zacharides

14 Edward Grove, New Barnet, Herts EN4 8BA

Telephone: 020 8441 6908

<http://www.british-athletics.co.uk/foster>

Developer of the first web site on the internet dedicated to British Athletics

Hertfordshire County Track & Field Team Manager: SM, U20M, U17M

<http://www.cgsystems.co.uk/herts/team>

Coaches at Finsbury Park Athletics Track, North London

Rewards for achievement not incentives for compliance

The Sir Andrew Foster report makes depressing reading for those who were hoping for progress rather than another run around the same old block. It gives new names to old people, and offers financial incentives as a means to impose discipline.

The result will no doubt be downsizing of the sport to 9 very good hubs (or mini-regions) each filled with 8 very good clubs (one for each lane). In Thatcherism terms, it will be a fitter and leaner sport, but in true Thatcherism style those who do not meet the fitter and leaner criteria will become a very large disenfranchised body moaning on the outside.

The old will be washed away or more likely allowed to become derelict, and the new will be shiny and promising, but filled with all the "yes men" pulling in the same direction. Every 4 years, after the Olympic Games the sport will excuse its woeful performance by reminding its paymasters at UK Sport and Sport England how competitive the world has become.

The Foster report has missed a great opportunity to identify the key conflicts within the sport:

Conflict 1 - Ladder versus the Well Oiled Machine

In one corner you have the progressive thinkers and scientists who say lets build up the machine of athletics. The athletes will pass through this machine to the highest level that their enthusiasm and abilities allow. In the opposite corner you have the traditionalists who say lets create a ladder and each year force the athletes to fight tooth and nail to get to the top.

In football the Well Oiled Machine model works very well because it requires 11,12 or 15 individuals to generate the success, and this can be organised by plucking the various components (footballers) from different teams and joining them together to create the success.

In athletics the Well Oiled Machine model appears to fail, because as soon as the athlete is plucked from the roots which first inspired him to achieve success, the passion is distorted, or distracted, or diluted or substituted with science. It is like picking a successful flower, and placing it into a controlled environment where it is expected flourish beyond all expectations.

I believe the best way forward is to let the athletes and coaches scrap it out at grass roots level, and direct the funds to paying for the transport, entry fees and accommodation that allow county champions to travel to regional championships, and for the regional champions to travel to national championships. The athletes must be allowed to funnel themselves to the top by fighting their way up the Ladder. This journey cannot be made in complete comfort. Gold medals in all championships must be rewarded with progress to the next higher level championships. All "athlete support funding" should be directed towards ensuring that athletes near the top of the Ladder, be allowed to remain on the Ladder. The funding should be domestic medals driven, and not have strings attached. Prize money if you prefer.

The "Well Oiled Machine" concept involves talent identification, then applying the best coaching, the best medical backup and generally the best everything.

I believe that if you set the two models against each other in competition, the athletes who progressed through the Well Oiled Machine might be better dressed and possibly even better looking, but I believe the people who have slugged it out all the way to reach the top of the Ladder would have a clear edge in competition.

The Ladder versus the Well Oiled Machine debate is the key to arriving at a consensus about how to take the sport forward.

Conflict 2 - Widely Distributed Freely Available Rankings
"The Shop Window" is a term that has been thrown around the sport for many years. Sir Andrew Foster defines the shop window as "Competition", others have defined it as the athletes themselves and many say it is the Olympic Games specifically. The term could also be applied to the London Marathon and many other mass participation athletic events. All have a fair claim to be a shop window because they market the sport.

When one considers football, the "Shop Window" might be David Beckham or the FA Cup or the World Cup. The truth is that football has a culture which is reinforced by information in the form of league tables. The football league tables are freely available in all the local press and national press each week. These league tables educate the masses about the current standing and structure of the sport. The constant exposure to football league tables also motivates involvement and passion.

In our sport the rankings are our league tables, and they are invisible. It is a marketing catastrophe. The NUTS claim copyright over the rankings and have a vested interest in keeping them hidden in order to sell books. The sport conspires by accepting that rankings are difficult to compile and leaves the anoraks to get on with it.

The NUTS are meticulous as regards the accuracy of their rankings, but the sport has never questioned the true cost of this conscientiousness. Of course accuracy is important, especially at the top where world and national records are at stake. But in the UK at domestic level we must set our priorities. Medals at championships are what counts. Unlike football league tables, the athletics rankings are an informative list which can be turned upside down by the championships, when athletes meet head to head. At the end of each season they are cast in stone and become an important historical document of the sport. Old rankings must remain readily available to the new enthusiasts.

Athletic rankings must be funded properly, and distributed freely and regularly through-out the season. If necessary only selected competitions should be included within the national rankings. The NUTS will recoil in horror, and the sport will flinch when its most loyal, enthusiastic and knowledgeable servants express dismay at the inaccuracy of rankings compiled by others with apparently lower standards. We must stand firm against this criticism, and insist that rankings become freely, widely and regularly distributed throughout each season.

Sir Andrew Foster's report

Moving On

On the face of it, terms like "pump priming" and "A new compact" appear to be designed to induce sufficient apathy so that most would be beyond caring that the 125 year old AAA of England would in future become known as "English Athletics". It is the work of the politician who creates a futile problem such as a name change. If the name change sticks, they have asserted some authority, and if the name change is not allowed to stick, then they concede defeat, showing flexibility and wisdom, and all other aspects of policy are carried because nobody wishes to continue fighting once the name change fiasco has been settled.

Section One: Making a start

On reading the report my heart started to sink in section one when reference to the 4 minute mile, and the Athens Olympic Games were separated by "The Great North Run". This festival for the North East has done wonders for the North East, and the BBC can be congratulated for allowing Brendan Foster to use all his available athletics air time to promote this private and profitable enterprise. The Great North Run is very beneficial for our society as a whole but has about as much to do with athletics as going to the seaside has to do with the sport of swimming.

Section Two: Change in the wind

In section 2 of the report it is said "*Since 1996 senior UK athletes have won 61 medals at major international championships*". One is given the impression that the administrators of our sport were left scrambling through their children's discarded encyclopedia's in an effort to provide Sir Andrew's team with some meaningful information. In the same section under the sub-heading of "*What stands in the way*", Sir Andrew uses familiar athletics administration phrases such as "*backbiting, prejudice and blindness to the facts, disturbing resistance to change, self interest*". Because we will never know the context in which these phrases were expressed to Sir Andrew, it can only be guessed that people were seeking to have the Ladder versus The Well Oiled Machine, debate.

Section Three: A Sense of purpose

The report defines three objectives for the sport which can be summarised as Participation, Fulfilling Potential and Promoting Competition. These are good clear objectives, although the reference to "*promoting public health*" under the objective called participation is a political imperative. As a sport we can join together with other sports to promote public health, but it is not one of our core objectives.

Furthermore these 3 objectives should not have been prioritised as 1, 2 and 3. The priorities should be viewed as the points on a triangle, and each point needs the other 2 points in order to thrive. They are equal objectives.

Section Four: Organisation and Management

This issue of Organisation and Management cannot be settled without a clear resolution to the Ladder versus Well Oiled Machine debate. Under the sub-heading of *Pluralism and Diversity* is the bullet point comment of "*The whole system should be underpinned by respect for diversity in all its senses - age, race, nationality, ability/disability, gender, sexual preference, religion.....*"

I support these principles but clearly the necessity for UK Sport and Sport England to pander to the political classes have touched this document.

Section Five: The English Issue

Sir Andrew points out how UK Athletics have blurred out the AAA of England's role in the sport. This development has left the North, Midlands and Southern regions leaderless and has encouraged a level of rivalry which Sir Andrew has wrongly identified as inherent in the sport. Although rivalry exists between athletes, it is a rivalry built on respect and often friendship which can often lead to team work whereby athletes seek to train together. The same potential exists between administrators, once the Ladder versus Well Oiled Machine debate has been had.

For the three existing regions to insert a tier between themselves and the Counties should not be an insurmountable problem. All that is required is for the Counties to be united into 9 hubs, and for County Committees to develop joint meetings as often as is deemed necessary.

Counties can then choose to retain team selection responsibilities, and local championships, or they can surrender this role to their hub. As a sport we must not lose sight of the fact that the County is a geographical reality, and the Hub is a political fashion that will either wither away, once the political paymasters have become bored with the idea, or it will become a new geographical reality long after this report has been forgotten. It would be irresponsible for the Counties and the existing three regions to close themselves down on the basis of what might be a short term political whim.

Section 6: Roles and Relationships

This section has got to be another lap around the same old block. UK Athletics is seen as taking the role of UK Sport by securing funds, and "*tasking the four home country delivery organisations and holding them to account.*" Terms such as "*difficult choices*" and "*difficult decisions*" are sprinkled about. UK Athletics is described as having "*broad accountability to the athletics community*". How the "athletics community" is able to require UK Athletics to be accountable is very unclear. Indeed the term "athletics community" is so catch-all that UK Athletics effectively are only accountable to UK Sport / Sport England.

The new look UK Athletics can veto appointments made by AAA of England - sorry "English Athletics" and the nine hubs. As a business model UK Athletics are designed to be a very proactive company President. The AAA of England become a Chairman of the board who appoints 9 Managing Directors to run the sport as they wish, but broadly along the UK Athletics agenda. The money will flow from UK Athletics downwards, and will serve as the leverage by which to instill discipline over the 9 Managing Directors.

In a real business where the shop floor workers aspire to become the Managing Director of their hub, or Chairman or the President, this model will do fine. In a sport where the shop floor is manned by voluntary workers, several of whom have surpassed the achievements of the President (in the real world of work), this system re-creates the same old dynamics which leads to feuds, which then result in people and committees "doing their own thing". A volunteer does not need the money, although this does not mean a volunteer doesn't want the money, or believe he can spend it better.

This entire structure suggests that the "Well Oiled Machine" has won the argument without ever having had the debate. Sir Andrew Foster has been exposed to the people who have a vested interest in the "Well Oiled Machine" because their salaries and status are represented by the oil.

The Ladder structure relegates the administrators to organising the competition structure and imposing the rules of competition. The Ladder structure pays no respect to athletes past achievements and coaches ego's. It is transparent.

Under the sub heading "*The Sports Councils and Home Country Bodies*" on page 23, the report stated "*Our view is that athletics has benefited from the guidance and investment it has received from all the sports councils*".

I was taken by the feeling that this report was written in part by the sports councils themselves. This belief was reinforced by the bullet point entitled "*Discretion: all three parties [UK Sport, Sport England and UK Athletics] should respect the reputation of their partners and work towards a 'no surprises' approach to public communications.*"

Obviously with so much money involved this report has a political dimension. The document is called "moving on", but clearly it is looking back.

Section Seven: Clubs (Objective 1 - Participation)

This section starts with "*Clubs are the heart of athletics, some say*". By implying that clubs play a negative role in the sport, this report again misses the point. Clubs are many different things to many different people.

The phrase "*The sport systematically supports and develops clubs, responding to their local agenda where it can; in exchange clubs allow themselves to be influenced so that they make the best contribution to a wider strategic agenda*".

This phrase defines the clubs as being separate from "the sport". One is left to presume that Sir Andrew considers the sport to be the hubs and UK Athletics etc. All clubs take pride in the fact that their athletes have achieved great success. The very phraseology suggests that these successful young adults, who will still be widely regarded within their club, as children must now be given over to "the sport" who will take over responsibility for their development. It is an unusual group of people who will give over the responsibility of their children for the sake of a few pennies.

Club members and administrators are people with differing priorities and values. Some clubs will manage to qualify for money from the "Club Development Fund" and some will not. If the Club Development Funds are distributed relative to the number of athletes succeeding in competition at regional and national level, that is fine. However if the funds become a means of rewarding compliance with rules from above, that show no value to the sport as a whole, the complaining will continue.