

Supporting Champions Conference 2019 – London Olympic Stadium

Follow up summary by Kevin Pickard – Swim England East Region Swimming Talent Officer

Nearly two years since taking on my role with Swim England East Region, this was by far the most exciting event in terms of learning for me. Dr Steve Ingham, the man behind Supporting Champions, had provided me with a lot of guidance and support when putting together the framework behind the region's flagship *Project 2028*. His reputation preceded him, and after reading his book in 2017, I knew this was an organisation that at its core wanted to help move people, teams, athletes and organisations forward. The company had put me in contact with some of the most experienced professionals in the sporting world, ranging from the wonderful Lucy McCrudden (@thedancemama on Twitter) and her fantastic insights into supporting parents on their journeys with their young people, all the way through to Martin McElroy (@mcelroy_mjp), the coach behind the mind blowing achievements of the GB Men's Rowing, with eight gold medals at the Sydney Olympics. I had no doubt the event would be a waterfall of presentations, networking, guidance sharing, ideas and endless takeaways (the knowledge type of course) and it did not disappoint.

Dr Steve Ingham opened the conference with a powerful talk around sustaining high performance. The quote "if you accept it in training, expect it in the arena", was a powerful line that stuck with me. Being the sports scientist behind Sir Steve Redgrave's latter successes at the Olympics and Jessica Ennis-Hill's triumphs at a home Olympics then a return from having a child to win another Olympic medal in Rio, it was hardly surprising to hear how sustaining performance is such a complex beast. For everyone working as part of team, there were a number of elements that were highlighted as being crucial; character, attitude, trust and rapport, initiative and proactivity, adaptability, self-management and most importantly, 'it is not about you' – we are a cog in a machine that is centred around the athlete / team.



Another really interesting thing that stuck with me was the concept of 'fertile exploration'. This relates to the post event lull being turned on its head, which in Steve's world was that post-Olympic period where inevitably everyone is dragging their heels and struggling to get into the next four year cycle. In the swimming world it could be our post-counties blues (if that's even a thing?), the post national qualifying window lull or even perhaps those first few weeks back in September where the season hasn't really got going yet. Using those periods to try new things, being creative as a coach, perhaps mix it up for your athletes and don't be afraid to ask the reflective questions that probe both your successes and failings in the prior cycles/season – Why did that work? Why didn't that work? What can I do differently? How do I get similar outcomes doing smarter workloads? All of these questions bring about a constant evolution that allows us year to year to build upon their successes whilst refining and modifying their development areas.

Ben Ryan (@benjaminryan) – Ben was the head coach for the Fiji seven's rugby team when they stormed to Olympic Gold, winning Fiji's only ever Olympic medal at any Olympics across all sports. It was a talk that certainly highlights the power of social change and inspiration through sport but also zoned in on the concept of working closely with the players as people and understanding their drivers, their lives and them as people in order to truly get the best out of them. As very often when approaching these unusual talks, the cynical 'what does coaching Rugby in a remote idyllic part of the world have to do with swimming in the East of England? The development journey both the players and the coach went on changed them all as people in a positive way – immediately a hook that swimming can relate to – not only do we go on a journey with a group of young people, sometimes over more than a decade, but more so we try and bring about positive development of them as a person, not just athletes (something the new OADF British Swimming framework focusses in on).

Ben spoke extensively about the stark realities on arrival - lack of facilities, kit, staff, an absence of coaching wages. Again we have some more relatable issues facing so many coaches in swimming. The message coming out of this is working with the resources you do have and getting the best out of them, instead of complaining about what you don't have – interestingly a remarkable parallel to something Mel Marshall (coach to Olympic Champion and World Record holder Adam Peaty) spoke about a while ago when describing the mind-set that drove her and the City of Derby from a 3-regional-qualifiers programme in 2008 to Arena League finalists and producing the Olympic gold medal winning young man who has become the role model for so many young swimmers in Britain. Ben is someone I would love to see speak to our coaches on mass and bring to life a really remarkable story.



Ben Ashworth (@benashworth) – Ben is a highly experienced physiotherapist, having worked with GB Judo, GB Boxing and Arsenal FC. He delved into the markers for success across a range of sports and how strategies put in place can bring about positive change in what are often already successful environments. For me I saw a lot of similarities in the way Ben challenged things to bring about change and the battles against the age old ‘well we have always done it that way and we do okay so why change’. Two talks into the day and already again the theme of ‘doing good work with good people’ came across with Ben talking about going on a journey with people. “Keep starting until you finish”, was my favourite takeaway from Ben, demonstrating that resilience that has seen him bring about successful interventions in all of his major roles so far.

Michael Collier (@mikeycollier) – Mike is the Head of Human Performance at McLaren Applied Technologies. This was a real eye opening insight into the world of technology meeting sport and both the hurdles and leaps that have taken place in recent years. In the swimming world, some programmes heavily integrate technology from heart rate monitors through to video analysis and this is only increasing as technology becomes more readily available. Mike talked extensively about the crossover from performance sport to mainstream using FitBit as a great example of something that has hit the mass market in recent years, but came about from the need for mobile activity monitoring technology for its drivers. He did point out that in the modern world it is all too easy to throw *everything* at a situation in terms of technology and what was music to my ears was hearing ‘what is the value added’ question being put to the audience. A great take away for coaches everywhere to consider when using technology within their programmes – what is the benefit to me the coach and to the athlete?

Cath Bishop (@thecathbishop) Athens to Basra – To round off day one of the conference was a fascinating talk from a triple Olympic rower and Olympic medallist turned diplomat. It may not be immediately obvious of the link between sport and a warzone, but once you dig a little bit deeper, there were some incredible parallels in the skill sets of professionals working in these environments. What’s the long win? In sport we often have so many ‘wins’ that we aim for but if we talk headline bigger picture here, it comes down to a few simple things – working effectively, understanding the situation explicitly and the people you are working with and finally, being mindful of the bigger picture throughout will lead to you being more successful in your endeavours. In a warzone this is no different, however the stakes are much higher with mistakes or breakdowns of effective working leading to the loss of life.

What struck me was the simplicity with which Cath approached what we would deem a hugely complicated issue. Her ability to break down interweaving issues into some simple areas and questions that would increase the likelihood of success. Get to know the person, listen more than you speak and find out what you have in common – if this can work between rival militia trying to kill one another, why not so between two clubs looking to do something special for their town or city. “To collaborate effectively remains a matter of personal choice” – this is the phrase that resonated with me more than anything. In my relatively minor world of swimming, the barriers that prevent athletes, coaches,

parents, clubs and even whole local club networks moving forwards remains a matter of personal choice. “We don’t like that club”, “We have bad history there”, “oh we’ve always done it that way” – just a few of the phrases that summarise some of the barriers in the swimming world and yet a phrase emerges that has been mentioned a number of times at various events I’ve been to – **success is a choice**. I think I came away from this talk thinking, “wow, there’s so many opportunities we have to move things forward in our sport, but it requires some of the things mentioned already and people to stop looking backwards and instead, look to the future, as that is all we can influence.

Anthony Bennett (@IAmAntBennett) – Motivational talk on teamwork - Anthony was a complete unknown for me, other than what I had read in the conference pre-event brochure. Day two got off to a hugely emotional start with a story from a young man who had gone from being a normal teenage boy on a school trip to laying in a hospital, given roughly a 10% chance of survival. He rallied and following being resuscitated multiple times, he went on to inspire so many others to be brave, fight the odds and go on to do amazing things. At the time of writing this, I have already booked Anthony to speak at our next event as his message was that powerful that I couldn’t just leave it at that. Follow Anthony on Twitter and check out his YouTube videos for some really inspiring stuff.



Tim Harper – @HarperPerform – This talk was a great insight into Tim, his story and how he has quite literally, taken his message and programme across the globe. Tim’s background was working in professional sport in the UK, but after a period of time, it came across that Tim’s values were far bigger and ambitions were much further reaching than some scorelines and league competitions in professional sport in the developed world. Harper Performance was formed and through his collective network of sports professionals across the world, Tim set about bringing expertise and performance support to areas of the world where it was almost non-existent. It wasn’t simply a parachute in and solve approach though as that is not a viable way to allow remote areas to sustain their programmes once the initial performance guidance is removed. So going one step further, Tim and his team endeavoured to support areas to develop their own expertise so the team could pull back and allow the local programmes to become self-sustaining. A truly valiant mission. Find out more here: <https://www.harperperformance.co.uk/about-us.html>

“Problem solving for the underdog” was the title of his talk and we immediately ended the formal talk, almost as quickly as he started. Breaking off into groups of 10-15 delegates we took some of the challenges that Harper Performance have encountered and we started brainstorming, drawing upon our different experiences and then passing back collectively suggestions on how to move forwards. It was a really interesting approach to a team that work globally and encounter a whole host of challenges but it was also entirely obvious – if you have a room full of over 100 of the most curious coaches, scientists, managers and other professionals, why wouldn’t you collectively pool that knowledge and bring some new ideas to the table. Due to the nature of Harper Performance’s mission, it was a privilege to contribute and share ideas with such a diverse group of professionals and you came away feeling very humbled.

How does that relate to swimming I can hear you ask? Interestingly I felt that actually there was some huge parallels albeit not to the extremes that Tim and the team face. I can only speak within my area which is six counties, but I cover everything from city clubs with multiple paid full time staff and performance support in house, through to remote area local clubs with perhaps one or two volunteer coaches who have very little to no support. With more than 125 clubs to support and limited resources, how do I go about making sure that any support given is making clubs more self-sustaining? How does a once or twice a year visit bring about changes that allow a club to move thing forwards under their own steam? How can resources be created that will allow club coaches wherever they are based, to access information at any time through a variety of platforms that is easy to digest and apply? Some real food for thought.



Eva Carneiro (@evacarneiro) – A true champion of sports medicine, athlete centred practice and equality, Eva shot into the headlines in 2015 for famously locking horns with Jose Mourinho whilst at Chelsea football club as the first team doctor. That event was the final moment in a six year stint at the club under four managers, and Eva did not have an easy time of things at the club. Receiving chanting abuse from a number of clubs fans prompted some high level discussions within the F.A. and a number of promises to stamp out “the scourge of bigotry and discrimination”. As well her time in a number of football clubs, Eva was part

of the Olympic Medical Institute which prepared athletes for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. Eva spoke passionately about her path to where she is now, the highs and lows along the way and called upon everyone in the room to maintain integrity, honesty and equality in their various fields – “The truth is like a lion, set it free and will defend itself.” Eva’s talk has certainly gave me plenty to reflect upon.

Expert Panel – With an open offer for the delegates to bring questions to the panel, it was an outstanding opportunity to gain insights from coaching academic Chris Cushion, Tottenham first team Sports Scientist James Redden, Saracen’s first team Physiotherapist Laura Tulloch and Olympic medalling gymnast Kristian Thomas. The questions were hugely varied, with some interesting insights on cultural systems and how valued need to be more than words or quotes and actually be lived and embedded. Why are we doing/saying this? Who is it for? There were some interesting discussions around athletes being treated as people and not being defined as simply an athlete. How do we ensure we give athletes professional support without making them docile and losing their creativity and flare? The resurgence of UCLA gymnastics with their levels of performance, namely the incredibly lively Katelyn Ohashi is testament to this being done well. Coach qualifications was an area that was touched upon, and whether the current coaching qualification landscape mirrors that of the professional qualification system. What could be looked at going forwards? How do we truly make coaching more professional? Some intriguing questions and again some great ideas to go away and explore further.



Dr Kevin Dutton (@TheRealDrKev) and the Wisdom of Psychopaths. The research Psychologist from the University of Oxford was the final speaker and it was certainly an interesting talk. Kevin talked extensively about the traits that are deemed ‘psychopathic’ and interestingly a large number of them pertain to those possessed by highly successful athletes; narcissism, ruthlessness, fearlessness, calm under pressure, focus, charisma and emotional attachment. What was most interesting was the notion of dialling these traits up and down, similar to that of a mixing deck, depending on the context and what is required. This is something that serial winning performance athletes are known to do extremely well. For coaches there was even some advice for athletes that demonstrate some of these traits in a team environment, some of which of course could be destructive in this setting. Convincing self-centred athletes that their fate and prestige is tied to that of the team actually dials up their drive for team success all the way to 11! A hugely fascinating talk and another interesting Twitter person to follow for sure.

In summary it was a truly outstanding event and one I learned a huge amount from. I hope the notes above and the links helped you get an insight from the event. The supporting champion’s team have a great website with links to heaps of resources, podcasts and insights that really do help coaches develop: www.supportingchampions.co.uk

Feel free to get in touch if you require any further information – kevin.pickard@swimming.org